

The Process That Is the World: Cage/Deleuze/Events/Performances

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy
in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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2012

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Abstract

Although the music and philosophy of John Cage (1912-92) exert extraordinary influence on both the art world and popular culture, few scholars have examined the composer's views on musical performance and its potential for the cultivation of a more just and non-hierarchical society. Cage's experiments with chance operations and open-ended indeterminate scores present significant challenges to conventional methods of performance analysis and evaluation. His compositional process represents a shift from the creation of musical objects (stable texts with which performances achieve greater or lesser degrees of fidelity) to the creation of musical events (open-ended activities that propose no authoritative relationship to the performances generated), and thus requires new interpretive and evaluative approaches. These new approaches offer exemplars of a mode of ethical judgment that forgoes the prescriptions provided by models, rules, moral injunctions, and habit. In their place, Cage calls for an evaluative practice attuned to the specificities of each open-ended process and the material situations in which they are enacted – a practice that has profound practical, philosophical, and political implications not only for the performance of music, but for life in a complex and constantly changing world.

This project addresses these performance issues and their far-reaching ramifications by staging a rapprochement between Cage and contemporary thinkers

pursuing similar lines of inquiry. Chief amongst these is Gilles Deleuze (1925-95), a philosopher with whom Cage shares an insistence on the primacy of difference over stability, the privileging of process over product, and resistance to restrictive applications of power at the individual level (through habit and enculturation) and at the level of the collective (through rule-bound authority). By viewing Cage's music and writing through the prism of his likeminded contemporaries, this study aims to demonstrate the resonance between his unique perspective on the ontological status of the musical work, on the ethical demands assumed by performers, and on his broader aspirations for a sustainable, leaderless future. As the world grows more Cagean in its complexity, this study should provide theoretical and practical support to Cage scholars, performers, and to all interested in the intersection between art and politics at the dawn of the twenty-first century.

For Wendy and Joseph.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Arved Ashby for years of guidance, support, and encouragement. For their careful reading and thoughtful questioning, I am grateful to Barry Shank, Ryan Skinner, and Gregory Jusdanis.

I am extremely grateful to The Ohio State University for their generous support of this project and particularly for the bestowal of the Presidential Fellowship in the 2010-11 academic year. It is difficult to imagine the completion of this project without it. I am also thankful for the careful consideration and gracious recommendations provided to me by recommenders Rob Haskins, David Nicholls, Marjorie Perloff, and Barry Shank. Their kind words provided considerable support, both material and spiritual, throughout the research and writing process.

For her invaluable assistance to my family, I am thankful for Collette Peugeot. For their patience, love, and generosity, I thank Wendy Panzner, Joseph Elliott Panzner, and my parents, Drs. Joseph and Margaret Panzner. I thank Kate and Eric Panzner for years of inspiration. I am also particularly thankful for the encouragement and example of my friends: Michael Shiflet, Greg Stuart, Nick Hennies, Michael Pisaro, B.W. Diederich, Jesse Kudler, Jason Toynbee, and many, many more.

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Chapter One: The Process That Is The World

The business of the great things from the past is a question of preservation and the use of things that have been preserved. I don't quarrel with that activity, and I know that it will continue. But there is another activity, one to which I am devoted, and it is the bringing of new things into being.¹

I have always felt that I am an empiricist, that is, a pluralist. But what does this equivalence between empiricism and pluralism mean? It derives from the two characteristics by which Whitehead defined empiricism: the abstract does not explain, but must itself be explained; and the aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced (creativity).²

The story is familiar. In 1951, John Cage visits the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. For years, he has been deeply concerned with the opposition of sound and silence, whose sole shared parameter is duration. In the anechoic chamber, Cage expects to hear silence, an absolute silence, a silence with only duration. Cage hears something else – “two sounds: one high, one low.” The former, according to the engineer at Harvard, is the sound of Cage’s nervous system in operation. The latter is the sound of blood coursing through his veins. The famous lesson, as mythologized by Cage himself,

¹ Cage in conversation with Stuart Kaufmann (1966). Quoted in *Conversing with Cage*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Routledge, 2003), 221.

² Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II* (New York: Columbia, 2002), p. vii.

is that there is “no such thing as silence,” and that what we commonly accept as silence is actually the presence of unintended sound. The experience of the anechoic chamber is an important turning point for Cage – arguably *the* turning point in Cage’s compositional life – and it marks the transition toward his experiments with chance and indeterminacy.

This telling of the story is classic biography, and much has been made of its significance for Cage as a composer. But there is an inexhaustible richness to the tale of the anechoic chamber, one that far exceeds Cage’s own telling or the recent attempts to challenge the veracity of his account. Cage’s recounting of the anechoic chamber experience is a parable, a parable about *events* – the appearances of difference. After the anechoic chamber, Cage is a new man. The events of the chamber have changed him, they have refashioned the way in which he can approach the world. Two sounds, insistent and agitating: a surprise. Something that could only be sensed, not recognized, not recollected. Something that provoked a thought. *An encounter*.

The scene is far more complicated than it first seems. A man establishes a plan. There is nothing unintentional or absent-minded about the plan. He has carefully chosen his location, carefully chosen his approach. It is sober and considered – it requires planning and discipline, it requires being in the right place at the right time. Moreover, it involves much more than just his will. There’s a room that makes the event possible. There’s hints of expectation and shards of memory surrounding the action, circuits of anticipation and reaction that borrow from countless previous encounters made possible by a vast array of people, places, and things. There’s a body in continuous and un-thought motion, filled with fluctuations and constant variations (blood expanding and contracting veins, nerves in vibration). No longer just a man entering a room, but a complex situation

that enfolds complex material and immaterial factors. A situation deliberately rigged but exceeding any individual intention. The man doesn't cause the event himself, though from his perspective it may seem that way. He occupies the event, he is a part of it, both materially and experientially – a component, not an exclusive actor. Viewed from a certain perspective, we could say the room was the “subject” of the encounter – without this special room, this special encounter couldn't have happened. And yet, without the man's actions, the special encounter couldn't have happened. Or perhaps it's best to split the difference – neither man nor room was the subject of the encounter. The situation in its unfolding is its own subject, making possible an encounter only by the mutual interaction of its components.

Two sounds emerge, unexpected and unrecognized. Involuntary. Something present but previously unaccounted for within the situation, something to which the senses could not be attuned under any other circumstance. The room forces the ears to become attuned to a sound that couldn't be heard without them, a sensation that emerges *between* the listener and the room. Before any conscious act, the man's mind goes to racing – *what was that?* A stall in the cycle of anticipation and reaction. The unconscious spur to thought when sensation grapples with memory. In their discord, a thought *is produced*. The thought isn't a recognition, not yet, at least. It's a problem – a violent reorientation of anticipation and reaction. The problem isn't simply a failure of recognition (though it is that at first), but instead requires a new way of acting to accommodate it. Moreover, it doesn't go away, even after it's temporarily domesticated with the palliative of recognition (“it's just your ears ringing”). The emergence of the

problem is an event, and a powerful one – it changes the man’s entire approach to the world.

If he had heard what he intended, there would still be an event. It would be of an entirely different order. The event as we know it was *special*, singular even. The event that would have occurred if all went according to plan would have been thoroughly ordinary. The difference that would have emerged would have been an added degree of similarity to previous experiences, a reinforcement of the loop between anticipation and reaction. A confirmation of habit. A cliché. An intention carried through to its logical tested end, a new barely-noticed memory stacked alongside others before it. Dull surprise, or no surprise at all.

Cage’s famous story isn’t just self-mythologizing or an attempt at aesthetic valorization (the moral of the story isn’t “just” that there is no such thing as silence). It’s a parable for how to will a singular event – how to coax something new from the closed loop of intentionality. It’s a story about impersonal creativity, or the creativity proper to situations themselves. It’s a story about rigging processes such that they create accidents, gaps in intentions, even affirmations of stupidity. Most importantly, it’s a parable about performance as *creation* rather than *reproduction*. The anechoic chamber story is a compact, resonant example of Cagean performance practice. It isn’t a model – returning to the anechoic chamber and hearing the functions of our bodies will result in little more than a boring, lifeless event of the confirmation variety, as all copies from models tend to do. It’s an example proper, as Brian Massumi would say, and is therefore “neither general

(as a system of concepts) nor particular (as is the material to which a system is applied).”³

The story of the anechoic chamber details the willing of an event, the process of incarnating a new experience, the leap beyond imagination and the limits of intentional action. We are called not to imitate Cage’s actions, but to extend this process into a new context, to force a connection between the process diagramed in this story and new contexts. To follow up on the example is not a matter of imitation. It’s a matter of *invention*. We are called to discover new ways of creating difference and new ways of willing this event.

* * *

The story of the anechoic chamber is a story about Cagean performance – a story about the cooperation of the material and the immaterial, the natural and the technical, the intentional and the unintentional. It is an unusual approach to performance, one that decenters the familiar sources of agency (human intentions) and affirms something altogether stranger: the impersonal activity of *things coming together*, acting together with a will greater than any single individual can contain. It is a story of chance encounters, unthought actors, and unconscious creativity. The tale is a far cry from our usual humanistic views of musical production, and its resonance has shaped the development of all music in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond.

³ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2002), 17. Massumi draws from Giorgio Agamben in his discussion of the example: “It holds for all cases of the same type, and at the same time is included in these. It is one singularity among others, which, however stands for each of them and serves for all.”

While the music of John Cage has attracted considerable attention in recent decades, few scholars have examined the implications that his work and philosophy have for musical performance. The present project approaches Cagean performance issues from a practical, philosophical, and political perspective. Musicologists have overlooked Cage's contribution to our understanding of what "performance" means – in relation to ideas of the work, in relation to the performer's role musically and socially, and in relation to a greater ethical project based in the affirmation of life and the cultivation of a leaderless future. This oversight has occurred in no small part because such a project demands engagement with unconventional theoretical material and perspectives that challenge musicology's usual interpretive and representational frameworks.

Part of the project will involve a rapprochement between Cage and a contemporary thinker with whom he has only occasionally been linked – Gilles Deleuze, a philosopher whose individually authored works and collaborations with Félix Guattari and Claire Parnet can be read in productive counterpoint to Cage's own. While Cage never mentions Deleuze or his collaborators, their approach to a materialist ontology of difference, their insistence on the explication and understanding of individuating processes, and especially their assertions about micropolitics and power (both institutional and habitual) provide a powerful toolkit for understanding and expanding on crucial Cagean concepts. In addition to understanding Cage's demands and expectations for performers, this project aspires to flesh out a Cagean conception of music via a speculative construction of his world. The similarities between the composer and the philosopher on the subject of *affirming life* (a phrase commonly employed by both men), the non-hierarchical and non-teleological production of variation, will provide a

foundation for understanding performance as the creation of the new rather than the reproduction of the predetermined and pre-existent. Alongside Cage, Deleuze offers a philosophy that is adequate to the world as understood in our present time, a world that physics has shown to be continually inflected by chance, a world not of determinism and seamless communication but of constant variation, productive misunderstanding, and fundamental dynamism – a world that often doesn't accord with conventional categories and seems contrary to the linearity of our commonsense instincts.

For his part, Cage had already aligned himself with many of Deleuze's predecessors, other philosophers of difference, becoming, and open-ended futures – some of which he discussed directly, others with which he has an uncanny resonance. Nietzsche, with his insistence on the aleatoric “throw of the dice” underpinning the eternal return, is a recurring Cage favorite. Henri Bergson, a favorite philosopher among many of the New York School, receives mention in Cage's book *Silence*, and his world of ceaseless invention and variation seems to be perfectly in accord with Cage's insistence on imitating “nature in the manner of her operation.” In this light, it is possible to see Cage as the music-world equivalent of a traumatic figure like Charles Darwin, whose theory of evolution revealed a world in revolt against stable categories, continually driven by a productive motor of chance. In place of stable types and essences, the apparent stability of species (or musical works) was merely a product of the restriction of this variation – and that even the most stable of structures would eventually submit to the flow of chance. With Cage, the ongoing demotion of the self and rational humanism enters into the realm of musical composition and performance.

Within their writings, Cage and Deleuze make little direct reference to one another. Cage never makes explicit reference to Deleuze, and Deleuze makes scattered and passing references to Cage (in *A Thousand Plateaus*⁴, in *Dialogues II*⁵, in a footnote to *Anti-Oedipus*⁶). However, there is an extraordinary *resonance* between the two figures, a resonance that produces some extraordinary intensification when the two are read together. The resonance, in typically Deleuzian and Cagean fashion, requires no immediate correspondence, but instead operates because both men embody similar abstract principles, approach similar abstract problems, and emerged under similar conditions.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002), 267-69: “It is undoubtedly John Cage who first and most perfectly deployed this fixed sound plane, which affirms a process against all structure and genesis, a floating time against pulsed time or tempo, experimentation against any kind of interpretation, and in which silence as sonorous rest also marks the absolute state of movement.” Page 344: “A material that is too rich remains too ‘territorialized:’ on noise sources, on the nature of objects... (this even applies to Cage’s prepared piano)... As Cage says, it is the nature of the plan(e) that it fail.”

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 94: “And Cage speaks of a clock that would give variable speeds. Some contemporary musicians have pushed to the limit the practical idea of an immanent plane which no longer has a hidden principle of organization, but where the process must be heard no less than what comes out of it; where forms are only retained to set free variations of speed between particles or molecules of sound; where themes, motifs, and subjects are retained only to set free floating affects.”

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005). In a footnote on page 371, Deleuze and Guattari make special reference to Cage as an exemplar of “art as ‘experimentation,’” citing especially the following passage from page 13 of *Silence*: “The word *experimental* is apt, providing it is understood not as a descriptive of an act to be later judged in terms of success and failure, but simply as an act the outcome of which is unknown.”

Indeed, they share a particular set of problems: difference versus repetition, the conditions required for the emergence of novelty, becoming versus being, the tenuous linkage between cause and effect, the habit-constriction of the organism versus the dynamism of systems. At the core of these similarities is an insistence on the primacy of difference over identity, or, put another way, the unshackling of difference from its reliance on the mediation by the identical. Both thinkers are concerned with how we might think difference in itself – how to think, as Cage would state in *For the Birds*, of a principle of variation that would not require reliance on something identical.⁷ Not difference “from” one sound to another, or from work to another, but the principle of *internal difference* that would convert an “object” to an “event,” that would replace static identity with internal dynamism and self-variation.

The greatest point of connection, however, is the number of ontological premises they share. Cage’s musical and philosophical perspective is as much a claim about the nature of reality as it is a set of compositional or performative strategies. Indeed, the copious writings and interviews Cage provided regarding his own work are filled with arguments about the structure of reality, as much or more than they are catalogs of his approach to the limited domain of art. This study begins with a key point of overlap between the philosophies of Gilles Deleuze and John Cage – their shared belief in the world as process, as a process of *self-differing*. Difference, rather than identity, provides the (non-)foundation for both worldviews.

Life preoccupies both thinkers. Not personal life or organic life, but a greater and

⁷ John Cage, *For the Birds* (Boston: M. Boyars, 1981), 45.

more impersonal life that is the world's power for self-variation. Invention and creativity are not the exclusive domains of the vital or organic – certainly not the exclusive preserve of the human – but are an operation of being itself. *The world is becoming*, becoming-other than what it is. Life is an impersonal and an-organic power exceeding any capacity for lived experience or any logical restrictions placed upon it – an ontological Life in keeping with Nietzsche's will to power, Bergson's *élan vital*, and the evolutionary biologist's view of life as an ongoing process of variation and selection. Consequently, both Cage and Deleuze view thought as that which approaches the world as a capacity for variance or as an infinite reserve of change and novelty, as that which searches for something other than *identity* in the world. Rather than searching for eternal truths, Cage and Deleuze palpate the contours of the world's capacity for change. Because such a capacity exceeds the limits of the intelligible concept, it has to be glimpsed sidelong, felt at the edges of our experience.

For both philosophers, this abstract, impersonal greater Life serves as an ethical principle as well as an ontological one. Deleuze draws a sharp distinction between “morality” and “ethics,” a contrast re-echoed throughout John Cage's writings and interviews. For Deleuze, morality operates as a constraint on Life, closing its capacity to produce the alien and unanticipated by judging actions according to supposedly universal or transcendent principles. Bodies and acts are measured by their resemblance to a standard that stands outside the world – good and evil. By contrast, “ethics” provides a set of immanent judgments for actions, evaluating them according to what potentials they express – what modes of life they render possible, what modes of life they foreclose. The question for such an ethics is not, “How should I act?” It is, “How is it possible to live?”

Judgments of better and worse are preserved in ethics, provided they are not extended beyond their immanent bounds – provided they are not extended to judgments of good and evil. A suspension of transcendent judgment doesn't imply a suspension of all judgment. It requires us to think what a particular action in a particular context makes possible, what it allows us to hear, see, think, and do, how it could be extended and repeated in continuous variation across a variety of contexts.

The mode of evaluation for an artwork, therefore, is not “what does it mean?” but “how does it work?” or “what does it do?” What Deleuze provides for Cage is a philosophy adequate to understanding his work as a positive production: not against meaning or against convention, but productive of new effects, new ways of hearing, new ways of seeing, new ways of being. Cage, for instance, insists that a Duchamp is not simply a static form but that which gives rise to a new form of experience: “A Duchamp is the object and the way of looking at it.” Great artists do not produce “meaningful” objects but instead generate new ways of looking at the world, new perceptual or affective technologies with which to engage the world's processual unfurling. Cage and Deleuze both make use of Wittgenstein's maxim, “A thing's meaning is its use,” to describe this approach to artistic practice. Art's function is not to embody an eternal standard of beauty or rational organization, nor is it a tool for communication, but instead to develop new techniques of being, new styles of seeing and acting within a busy and complex world.

Therefore both offer an open-ended logic of multiplicities – a connection of elements that form a unity but not a Whole. The works are unities of their parts but do not unify them; they yoke together potentials in a style of variation. Philosophy and art are

two modes of exploring styles of variation; philosophy creates concepts that allow potential for variations to be thought in their abstraction, and art provides bodies of sensation that allow potentials for variation to be felt. Both are combinatorial practices that take discrete elements of and combine them into styles of variation – a separation-connection of elements, “a power of abstraction capable of extracting or producing singularities and placing them in constant variation, and a power of creation capable of inventing new relations and conjugations between these singularities.”⁸

Cage and Deleuze develop an important critique of a standard antagonism – determinacy and indeterminacy. The problem is critical for both the ontological and the ethical register of their work. Slavish adherence to identity carries an unspoken moral dictate – be recognizable, or be lost to the void. That which escapes category is a product of error, an abomination, or simply an act of misrecognition. Precluded from this schema is the dimension of qualitative change: the new can emerge, but only as an already-recognized reconfiguration of the old. On one hand, there is the stasis of absolute determination – a world with only repetition. On the other, there is the world of indeterminacy – chaos, a free-for-all, “the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved.”⁹ If it’s not recognizable, it’s wrong, or perhaps not even real at all (as Nelson Goodman, whose argument appears in Chapter Two, would argue). Cage’s supposed “indeterminate” works become an occasion for anarchy and the suspension of all assessment, for example, when placed in the hands

⁸ Daniel Smith, “Foreword,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2005), xxiii-xxiv.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia, 1994), 28.

of unsympathetic performers. But the indeterminate works need not be thought of as such anarchic spaces – they have a consistency, they mark a particular *space of possibility* that can be determined without invoking limitative resemblance and its moral imperatives.

Thinking in terms of difference helps slip us from the bind.

Above all, there's an important philosophical/ethical shift that is registered in both thinkers – a move away from the consideration of creativity as the work of an individual who exerts a measure of authorial control, and a move toward an event-based view of creativity. For Cage and Deleuze, creativity is a property of the world itself, not a property of individuals. The creation of works is therefore not a matter of authorial control, but the creation of a kind of dynamism, a multiplicity that opens onto divergent realizations exceeding any kind of prefiguration. Thus music becomes a cosmic project, drawing from and opening on to the very processes that constitute reality itself: not just a part of our individual or cultural lives, but a particularly intense and potent component of the greater, impersonal, and abstract Life that is the world.

What does it mean to think? Who thinks? How does thought occur? Both Cage and Deleuze start from the same counterintuitive position – thought does not belong to the subject. Instead, the subject belongs to thought; that is to say, the subject emerges in and through the world's own creative unfolding. If it is not the subject who thinks or has sovereign agency, then what does? *The event*. The event exceeds intention, it gathers together the potentials inherent in a specific material situation, implicates and complicates them in one another, and individuates subjects and objects through its unfolding. Events are dynamic becomings – self-differentiating structures, multiplicities,

having agency and creative potential without having a “subject.”¹⁰ Thought and creativity belong not to subjects, but to these singular aggregates that move between and distribute what will later be considered as subjects and objects. Events individuate our experiences and shape our field of choice within them – we never operate as the sole master of an event, but instead must be open to the potentials and consequences that emerge within their self-differentiation. The event exceeds any individual intention, though individual intention participates – it informs and is formed in the incarnation of an event. Intention and non-intention coincide as two aspects of events in their development.

Event and process are related, but not necessarily in the manner that we might think. Conventionally, we think of ourselves and of objects as entering into processes. The Cagean/Deleuzian inversion, however, insists that it is processes – the unfolding of abstract events – that individuate objects, subjects, and experiences. Objects and experiences don’t enter into events, but are instead produced by them. Events are ontogenetic: they produce the actualized objects of the world. Events are the ongoing

¹⁰ In Deleuze’s collaborations with Félix Guattari, such singular self-individuating collectives are referred to as *haecceities* or *assemblages* (a term famously in vogue with Cage and his contemporaries). “We must avoid an oversimplified conciliation, as if there were on one hand formed subjects, of the thing or person type, and on the other hand spatiotemporal coordinates of the haecceity type. For you will yield nothing to haecceities unless you realize that is what you are, and that you are nothing but that... You are longitude and latitude, a set of speeds and slownesses between unformed particles, a set of nonsubjectified affects. You have the individuality of a day, a season, a year, *a life* (regardless of its duration)—a climate, a fog, a swarm, a pack (regardless of its regularity)... It should not be thought that a haecceity consists simply of a décor or backdrop that situates subjects, or of appendages that hold things and people to the ground. It is the entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate that is a haecceity; it is this assemblage that is defined by a longitude and latitude, by speeds and affects, independently of forms and subjects, which belong to another plane.” *A Thousand Plateaus*, 262.

production of the world as an “open-ended whole” – processes unfixed from specific objects of production, self-modifying and difference-producing, repetition and difference. The actual is composed only of the intermeshing and unfolding of these events which in no way resemble the objects which they produce – they are not isomorphic with any individuation, but are instead the particular conditions which allow the things of the world to emerge. Events are potentials without pre-determined ends: the productive components of the world as an open-ended totality. The event of all events is the world itself as a teeming, productive, self-mutating, fractal unfolding: “the process that is the world.”¹¹

Therefore, we can only be open to the consequences of events and we can steer, but not control, their unfolding; in Cage’s words, “What is does not depend on us, we depend on it.”¹² For Cage and Deleuze, creativity is not introduced by the artist or the philosopher, but channeled and intensified by her – the role of the artist is to be conductive rather than creative in any conventional sense. An artist selects a set of potentials and sets them in motion. She renders them sensible – and therefore connectable – but stops short of prescribing how such connections must be made. Above all, the artist-philosopher is an experimentalist, not a moralist. Art is not the transmission of meanings or a vehicle of personal expression – it doesn’t convey a message. It conveys potential itself, it renders palpable the potentials in sensation, and it gives an occasion for

¹¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 80-81.

¹² Cage, *For the Birds*, 80.

experience or the “conditions for a complex action” – and thus an occasion for possible mutation.

What, then, is subjectivity for Cage and Deleuze? Rather than being the source of creativity and dynamism, the subject is an inherently conservative being. The subject is a bundle of habits, a bounded organism that resists the flows and currents of the world. Intention, rather than being the source of innovation, is a limitation upon it. It conserves the individual life (“my life”) by regulating its connection to an abstract, super-individual, impersonal Life. The kind of life that both Cage and Deleuze celebrate is the power of difference: the capacity (or rather, the imperative) for all things to constantly differ, whether these things are mountains, men, species of animals, musical works, or anything else. Impersonal, abstract Life is precisely this capacity to *become other than what it is*. This doesn’t mean clinging to our bounded organism-ness, but becoming open to the ability to become other – and this could very well mean other-than-human, other-than-“living,” and other than recognizable. Life conceived as such is inclusive of life and death of the organism, prior to individual lives and deaths. In a way, this is what makes Cage so terrifying: his work aspires to give us what Deleuze would call a “taste for dying,” a means to open up to the flows outside of our bundle of contracted habits, even if they threaten our stability as organisms. When Cage and Deleuze insist on difference and *affirmation of life* they are not simply celebrating the experience of everyday life (the banal, uniform acceptance of all sounds as “musical,” for instance), but instead insisting on the leap into chaos and unpredictable becoming.

Thus all creativity is *impersonal creativity*. Because organisms are by nature conservative, we cannot think of novelty as emerging from inside the organism, but only

through a traumatic contact with that which lies outside of it. All thought, from artistic to philosophical, can only arise when the brain is wracked by that which it cannot recognize, when it opens on to something which forces it to a function that exceeds the exercises of habit. It is, as Claire Colebrook writes, “only in confronting the *unthought*, the *accidental*, and the *unthinking* do we begin to think... Only when the human encounters the inhuman do we know what the human body can do, and only when life opens itself up to violence, destruction, death, and zero intensity will we be able to discern what counts as ‘a’ single life.”¹³ Or, as Cage succinctly phrases it in *Composition in Retrospect*, “THE MEANS OF THINKING ARE EXTERIOR TO THE MIND.”¹⁴

Reading Cage and Deleuze together does more than just intensify the resonance between these thinkers – reading the two together permits certain clarifications of Cage’s positions. Deleuze provides a useful toolkit for prying into more obscure or contradictory passages in Cage’s writings and interviews, for untangling some of the logical knots that remain taut when subjected to more conventional musicological approaches. In no place is this more pressing than in the realm of performance, a perennial problem for those approaching Cage’s work. Deleuze provides us a means of creating concepts useful to understanding the musical and political implications of Cage’s project. A reformulation of the ontological status of objects in a world of change opens onto a new ethical vista, and musical performance becomes an exemplar of an ethical interaction with the world at large. Such an approach constitutes a properly *experimental* ethics that forgoes affective,

¹³ Claire Colebrook, *Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2004), 4.

¹⁴ John Cage, *Composition in Retrospect* (Boston: Exact Change, 2008), 61.

perceptual, moral cliché and universal prescription. An important distinction between ethics and morality unfurls at all levels of the Cagean performance process, from the most intimate inner workings of generating performing scores to its macro-scale political potentials. Morality proposes the correct action by stripping a situation of its particulars – it extracts a *general* essence from a situation by cropping out the *particularities* of any given encounter. By contrast, a Cagean-Deleuzian ethics aspires to trace the *singular* potentials given in an event’s unfolding, the degrees of freedom and potential effects that are specific to that material incarnation. Morality demands fidelity, reproduction, filial loyalty. Ethics demands experimentation, risk, and ongoing practices of evaluation. Morality assures safety, the comfort of standards and categories. Ethics insists on courting humor and joy, but also discomfort, irritation, even violence – all indices of an escape from routine and exhausted modes of engaging with sound and the world.

Performance is the prime site for investigating this divide, and it is certain that Cage saw it as such a site of potential. Against reproduction of established forms with established effects and toward experimentation with the intent of reaching the new, performance is less a metaphor for engagement with the world than an exemplary practice for such engagement. Thus it also issues a call for a new brand of politics, a properly experimental politics. How might a politics without determinate content act? Can Cage point us to a new kind of politics, apart from the conventional clichés of identification, recognition, and representation? What does it mean to will something in the event without dictating the form of that event? Importantly, these questions do not demand forgoing a practice of evaluation or judgment, as is often presumed to be the case. It does mean forgoing “good” and “bad.” It does mean forgoing ideas of “error” and

“fidelity to the source.” It does not mean forgoing questions of what modes of life an action enables, nor does it mean foregoing questions of faithfulness to the event. Beyond good and evil, but not beyond “better” and “worse.” It is not a study in the art of moral judgment, but in ethical discernment and sensitivity. One can still judge the effects of one’s actions amidst the event. One can judge one’s openness to the degrees of freedom, to these new potentials, without reliance on an abstract or transcendent model or moral imperative.

We do ourselves a disservice to fall into the easy traps – there is no element of “anything goes” in Cage, all performances of Cage’s music are not uniform in their effectiveness, there are better and worse performances of Cage’s music. These differences, however, are not so easily parsed. The score holds only partial authority, and its authority is readily usurped by other contingent factors. Nor should we map the success of a performance on to Cage’s collection of personal likes and dislikes. While archiving Cage’s responses to performances can be useful, it is by no means an exhaustive mechanism for understanding what is at stake in Cage’s approach to performance. A performance is an event, not a recreation – it is the creation of a certain kind of novelty, a properly Deleuzian *encounter*. It is the construction, in conjunction with the world’s own powers of becoming, with the will of objects, with the urgings and impulses of a swarm of teeming impulses and disruptions, of a sensory experience that forces us to thought. The encounter is not a representation of thought or a product of thought – it is the occasion for it, the spur and the genesis of thought. Above all, performance is a place for cultivating the habit of transforming habits, a place to invent new ways of engaging with the world that allow us to feel at home with its continual

transformation and its ability to exceed our capacity for recognition. Musical performance, as incarnation or embodiment of an incorporeal event, offers a window into the difficult dichotomy of intention and non-intention: arguably the most crucial dichotomy explored in all of Cage's oeuvre. It is intimately linked with all aspects of Cagean and Deleuzian thought and contributes to that intense resonance between the two thinkers.

* * *

Why adopt this approach? First, it is a test of Cage's philosophy to see if it can be reconstructed or reaffirmed coherently by opening it to other lines of interpretation. Cage, by his own words, was "no philosopher," or, rather, he was under no obligation to provide a complete, closed, systematic account of his worldview. This by no means suggests that a coherent, well-considered, and often provocative philosophy was missing from Cage's approach to art, life, and politics – quite the contrary. Cage's primary mode of expressing his philosophy was necessarily, for reasons this volume will elucidate, exemplary in nature. Cage's music was not a statement "about" a worldview, but an exemplar of it, a means of rendering his concepts sensible or providing a thinking-feeling of how the Cagean world operates. It was, as his friend Christian Wolff aptly summarized, propaganda music for not just a political or aesthetic approach, but for an entire ontology and its implicated way of being in the world.¹⁵ Cage's distinctive

¹⁵ "I mean, any piece of music expresses something, even those pieces that deliberately try to express nothing, sort of like certain pieces of John Cage's. That nothing is

rhetorical approach operates along similar tactical lines. Throughout the volume of writing and interviews Cage provided, his crucial insights themselves are subject to an ongoing process of difference and repetition – a handful of complex themes are presented and returned to again and again, subtly reworked or recontextualized, tested for variations, extensions, and sometimes mutations. Again, the rhetorical form is more an exemplar of a way of working and a way of being and less an elucidation of its manifest content, though it often serves that function with resolute clarity and insight.

The hope for the constructive exercise is threefold. First, by constructing a fuller version of Cage's philosophy, we hope to provide a focused account of the worldview hinted at in Cage's music, writings, and interviews. Second, we aspire to ally Cage with a sympathetic figure that worked through common problems, followed similar lines of influence, and ultimately created concepts that serve comparable goals. The aim is both elucidation of crucial Cage concepts – hopefully beyond the common tropes surrounding Cage's philosophical aspirations – and an affirmation of the legitimacy and usefulness of Cagean philosophy. The meeting of Deleuze and Cage is not an attempt to legitimize Cage by association with a philosopher of importance, but to demonstrate that the features of Cage's music and thought are not simply expressions of Cage's particular

something. There is no such thing as nothing. And I don't see at the moment why that should be any less a kind of propaganda, even when it's unconscious. Although in a sense, I mean in the case of Cage it's quite conscious, because he knows exactly what, you know, he has a whole philosophy of life which he means to express by his music. And his music is a perfect example of propaganda music. It expresses a way of understanding the world, which implies a whole way of living and acting in the world. Most composers don't get that far.” Christian Wolff, Gisela Gronemeyer, and Reinhard Oehlschlägel. *Cues: Writings & Conversations* (Köln: MusikTexte, 1998), 114. Thanks to Kevin Parks, University of Virginia, for this passage.

quirks, preferences, or reflections of his contingent encounters – they are concepts emerging from deeper currents of thought, expressions that were finding voice in other fields testing similar problems. It is the hope that Deleuze might serve to *depersonalize* Cage's thought, to render it separate from the Cagean character and perhaps more distilled, potent, and contagious in its separation from a familiar ground.

It is also the aim of this dissertation to restore a sense of discomfort – maybe even terror – to the Cage legacy and the aesthetic and ethical demands it makes on both performers and listeners. Cage's warm demeanor and good humor worked to soften the blow of music and philosophy that requires us to abandon familiar attachments to mastery, understanding, and stability in favor of self-deconstruction, productive chaos, and continual rebirth. This project takes seriously Cage's imperatives that our minds and bodies be reworked in the hopes of a less-hierarchical and sustainable future. Taking Cage at his words about performance and putting them into practice means experimenting with the very texture of life, and the truly experimental character of this pursuit makes no assurances about our gains and losses as musicians and as human beings.

At present, we seem to be at the cusp of a new generation of Cage studies. The works of scholars in the preceding generation of Cage scholarship – James Pritchett, Richard Kostelanetz, et al. – served the purpose of advocacy and explication. It was their role to legitimize Cage for the scholarly community, expand the audience for his music, and do some of the preliminary grappling with Cage's conceptual legacy. While they rarely fall into the traps that mar lesser Cage scholarship, such as treating him as a religious reactionary because of his engagement with Zen or as a sort of “holy fool” based on his engagement with chance techniques, they also offer little to supplement our

understanding of Cage and his world beyond the composer's own words. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, in a world that seems at least superficially (for better and worse) increasingly Cagean in its free-form combinatoriality and openness to non-musical sound, there is a need to create a more divergent, more use-oriented version of Cage, to find allies in other corners of the artistic and philosophical universe, and to speculate and extend and recontextualize Cage within the broader field of thought.

Several writers have placed Cage in contact with Deleuzian-style philosophical approaches. Among the earliest to draw a connection between Cage and event-based thinking was Daniel Charles, who also conducted the interviews collected in *For the Birds*. Charles' two contributions to *Writings about John Cage*, "De-Linearizing Musical Continuity" (1990) and "Figuration and Prefiguration: Notes on Some New Graphic Notions" (1991), pointed the way toward understanding Cage's orientation toward the possible as *positive entity* rather than a figure of lack – an overfull realm of potential rather than an empty figure in need of "realization."¹⁶ "Figuration and Prefiguration" makes the connection explicit; in one of its final paragraphs, Charles alludes to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "map" and the "tracing" in addressing Cage's *Variations II*. Scores that provide a negative image of the work to be fleshed out in the real are tracings, according to Charles, while scores that help induce the *becomings* of imageless works and scores that "demand performance" constitute the positive or productive map.

Unfortunately, Charles never managed to publish a fuller examination of the distinction

¹⁶ Daniel Charles, "De-Linearizing Musical Continuity" (1990) and "Figuration and Prefiguration: Notes on Some New Graphic Notions" (1991), in *Writings about John Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 107-16 and 248-63.

before his death; the present project, inspired by the problem posed at the end of Charles' article, takes the distinction between the possible and the virtual as its starting point.

Among the most important contemporary thinkers about Cage and Cagean issues is Branden Joseph, whose work on Cage has served as both inspiration and model to this project. In articles such as "John Cage and the Architecture of Silence"¹⁷ and "White on White,"¹⁸ Joseph has engaged in interesting speculative work on Cage's philosophical underpinnings and his connection to non-musical arts. The former article offers a productive merger of Deleuze and Cage in the service of understanding the distinction between the intentional and non-intentional in Cage's music, while the latter develops the connections between Cage, Rauschenberg, and the early twentieth-century philosopher Henri Bergson (a chief inspiration for Gilles Deleuze in his formulation of the *virtual*). "White on White" inspired several of the problems addressed by the present project by recasting the supposedly empty *White Paintings* and *4'33"* as positive productions that absorb and reflect their environment, rather than simple negative provocations.

Of similar importance is Branden Joseph's most recent work, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*.¹⁹ While the book's central focus is Conrad rather than Cage, the Cage that Joseph constructs is a Cage very near to this project's heart. Joseph carefully defines Cage's link between form and power as well as

¹⁷ Branden Joseph, "John Cage and the Architecture of Silence," *October* 81 (Summer 1997), 80-104.

¹⁸ Branden Joseph, "White on White," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Autumn, 2000), 90-121.

¹⁹ Branden Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

Cage's efforts to construct an art of immanence, where the "higher ontological figures" of the composer's intention or the work-object would be replaced by a close connection to materials and emergent forms. Most importantly, Branden Joseph's familiarity with Deleuze and his parallels with Cage allows him to construct an effective *immanent* critique of Cage's own claims about institutional power and the more invasive, habitually acquired forms of power.

Another important work dealing in "post-Cagean" ethics and aesthetics is Liz Kotz's "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," the only scholarly treatment to establish a formal connection between the Deleuzian *event* and Cage's body of work.²⁰ Kotz performs an important genealogy of the first emergence of the term "event" in Cage's lexicon and differentiates between Cage's complex, multivalent events and the intensely focused singularities preferred by Fluxus artists. As with Branden Joseph's monograph, Kotz primarily errs on the side of the "post-" in post-Cagean and emphasizes responses to Cage's legacy, but the application of the event-concept warrants a more thorough investigation and expansion than the limited scope of the article can provide.

On the analytical front, Thomas DeLio's *Circumscribing the Open Universe* displays an understanding of "open-form" works supplemented by rigorous structural analysis of their spaces of possibility.²¹ DeLio demonstrates a strong understanding of some of the aspects of virtuality and emergent structures that this project will touch upon,

²⁰ Liz Kotz "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the 'Event' Score," *October* Vol. 95. (Winter 2001), pp. 54-89.

²¹ Thomas DeLio, *Circumscribing the Open Universe* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).

but he rarely has the opportunity to expand on their significance for Cage's performers. Regardless of the limitations posed by its perspective, DeLio's analysis of works like Cage's *Variations II*, Morton Feldman's *Durations III*, #3, and Christian Wolff's *For I, 2, or 3* offer invaluable insight into the unfolding of open-form works from a differentiated space of possibility to a determinate structure. *Circumscribing the Open Universe* is important because it attempts to answer the question of what is and is not possible to produce from open-form works, and because it addresses some important ontological issues concerning the nature of the work as an intersection between object and process.

Two essays from *John Cage: Composed in America* suggested further connections between Cage and the world of chaos-theory-inspired science and philosophy. Cybernetician and literary critic N. Katherine Hayles frequently employs Cage as an example of an "abstract engineer" who devised rigorous systems for creating contingency, and her "Chance Operations, Cagean Paradox, and Contemporary Science" presents an anti-humanist view of Cage-as-chaos-theorist whose use of chance operations mirrors the unfolding of time in chaotic systems by opening and closing virtual fields of possibility.²² More poetic and less explicitly scientific, Joan Retallack's "Poethics of a Complex Realism" poses a connection between Cage's philosophical realism (his insistence on the ontological priority of a complex external reality which is secondarily

²² N. Katherine Hayles, "Chance Operations, Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science," in *John Cage: Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 226-241.

reduced by subjectivity) and his artistic practice and illustrates this claim with pertinent examples from chaos theory fields.²³

A handful of articles dealing with issues of Cage and “performance practice” have also made their way into Cage scholarship. One of the earlier examples is Tom Johnson’s “Intentionality and Nonintentionality in the Performance of Music by John Cage,” an expository piece that raises some difficult questions concerning overly-theatrical or demonstrative performances embodying an “anything goes” spirit and the more rigorous interpretations offered by Cage’s close associates as well as the paradoxes of intentional and non-intentional actions in the performance of the indeterminate works.²⁴ This project will also greatly benefit from forthcoming publications by Rob Haskins, who has delivered a series of lectures dealing with practical and philosophical concerns in the realization of Cage’s music. Abstracts for recent lectures such as “Living Within Discipline: John Cage’s Music in the Context of Anarchism” and “Playing in the Brothel: Problems of Performance Practice in John Cage’s *Song Books*” point the way toward useful materials that will be included in forthcoming journal publications and a book entitled *John Cage* (slated for 2012 publication by Reaktion Books).

A host of books either unrelated to or indirectly related to Cage provide useful philosophical connections to our understanding of Cage and his musical world. Art critic

²³ Joan Retallack, “Poethics of a Complex Realism,” in *John Cage: Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 242-274.

²⁴ Tom Johnson, “Intentionality and Nonintentionality in the Performance of Music by John Cage,” in *John Cage at Seventy-Five*, ed. Richard Fleming and William Duckworth (Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1989), pp. 262-269.

and philosopher Brian Massumi provides clear and practical applications of Deleuzian ontology in *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia*²⁵ and *Parables for the Virtual*,²⁶ which have been instrumental in translating Deleuzian approaches into workable models for Cage studies. Manuel DeLanda's *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*²⁷ and *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*²⁸ provide brilliant critiques of typological and essentialist thinking and flesh out a dimension of production and process not unlike that explored by Cage. Deleuze's early works – particularly *Difference and Repetition*²⁹ and *The Logic of Sense*³⁰ – and his works in collaboration with Félix Guattari provide an opportunity to explore new perspectives on the interplay of being and becoming in the world. The far-reaching sprawl of materials and perspectives explored in each volume, ranging from art to physics to ecology and ethology, are reminiscent of Cage's own omnivorous intellectual appetite and helped to cement the solidarity of philosophy and perspective between these thinkers.

²⁵ Brian Massumi, *A User's Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992).

²⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

²⁷ Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

²⁸ Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London, Continuum, 2002).

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

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Recent years have seen several books devoted to Deleuze and music. Ian Buchanan and Marcel Swiboda's collection *Deleuze and Music* is an important precursor to this dissertation and an interesting early experiment in developing Deleuzian approaches to the study of music.³¹ While the essays included in this volume provide considerable expansion and explication of Deleuze's philosophy in general and his musical philosophy in particular, they often approach music as a way of illuminating aspects of the philosophical framework rather than bringing the tools of Deleuze's philosophy to bear on music per se. Similarly, Ronald Bogue's excellent *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts* provides exemplary clarification of Deleuze's own remarks on art and its relation to philosophy, politics, ethology, and more – but it remains close to Deleuze's own corpus of musical examples (Messiaen, Boulez, and other European composers).³² More recently, Brian Hulse and Nick Nesbitt (a contributor to the Buchanan/Swiboda *Deleuze and Music*) compiled an important collection of essays that marks a shift in Deleuzian music studies. Unlike previous efforts, which largely consisted of known Deleuze scholars dipping into musical studies, *Sounding the Virtual: Gilles Deleuze and the Theory and Philosophy of Music* offers a survey of music scholars adopting Deleuzian approaches and presenting confident, incisive critiques of

³¹ Buchanan, Ian and Marcel Swiboda, ed. *Deleuze and Music* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2004).

³² Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

musicological paradigms from within the confines of musicology.³³ Many of the scholars are young and hail from disparate locales, but the combined effect of their work is a coherent, invigorating glimpse at the potential that Deleuze's thought offers the field of music studies.

Sounding the Virtual provides an exciting counterpart to the present study, alongside which it would fit comfortably. There is little reference made to John Cage, however, in this volume. Sean Higgins mentions Cage briefly in his contribution, "A Deleuzian Noise/Excavating the Body of Abstract Sound," but only as a prelude to dismissing Cage's potential contributions to the study of noise *qua* noise: "Even John Cage's work with "Silence" has not raised [the distinction between noise as interference and noise as the ground of sensation], developing the unintentional or indeterminate rather than the unrecognizable."³⁴ Such dismissal not only fails to recognize Cage's place in Deleuze's own work, but the vast potential Cage offers us for understanding a Deleuzian world. It is the goal of the present volume to provide a corrective to this oversight – to develop and explicate Cage's work through the lens of a sympathetic thinker, and to render Cage's work alive and vigorous in the world of potentials that Deleuze rendered thinkable.

The tone of this study is consistently affirmative – it is not intended as a critique of Cagean or Deleuzian philosophy or its practical applications. Instead, it aspires to

³³ Brian Hulse and Nick Nesbitt, ed. *Sounding the Virtual* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

³⁴ Sean Higgins, "A Deleuzian Noise/Excavating the Body of Abstract Sound," in *Sounding the Virtual*, 52.

derive distinct and useful concepts from their bodies of work, to establish and affirm the resonance between them, and to render them both intelligible and affectively engaging. In doing so, we hope that neither Cage nor Deleuze will be seen as messianic or taken for a “one size fits all” solution to every performance problem. Cage and Deleuze preferred to provide tools and tactics rather than preformed answers; they preferred the power of productive problems to the assurance of tested solutions. Both presented their philosophies with force and uncompromising clarity, but they held few illusions about the difficulties that their injunctions would face in contact with the knots of actually-existing circumstances. Such knots were not viewed as impediments, but occasions for celebration – the opportunity to see productive abstractions repeat and self-vary in series of actualizations, to encourage the proliferation of difference. Distill conceptually, complicate practically – this slogan envelopes the Cagean and Deleuzian spirit in which the present volume was conceived.

Before moving directly into the issues of performance, it is important to situate the role of performance in relation to Cage’s concept of “the musical work.” Chapter Two of this volume begins by comparing a Cagean-Deleuzian concept of the work as a type of *event* to the common-sense view of the work as a type of *object* (a view espoused, to greater and lesser degrees, by ontologists such as Roman Ingarden and Nelson Goodman). In other words, with Cage the musical work shifts from being a means of typing and classification (and hence a means of evaluation, of sorting “greater” and “lesser” degrees of resemblance) to being a productive field of potentials different in kind from the beings they generate. In order to further differentiate these concepts, it will be necessary to develop the difference between the *virtual* and the *possible*, a tenet central to

Deleuzian philosophy. The object-form of the work is the possibility of its concretion: it is an “image” of the work to which performances and perceptions will agree or disagree, or any other relation by which a common form or correspondence is presumed between the potential and the actual. The event-form, however, is *imageless* and *open-ended*: it structures the processes by which an actualization of the work will be generated but assumes no homology between process and product. In the object-form, there is no account of the translation between the work as transcendent object and the work in concrete form. In the event-form, there is nothing *but* a process of translation, a becoming-other of the work in each of its forms of actualization. The event is the dynamic unity that links them across forms of non-resemblance.

Cage’s indeterminate works make this process of translation explicit. Cage retains the notion of the musical work without the requirement for resemblance by diagramming events (conceived of as relations-in-information) rather than by diagramming objects. From the time of “Composition as Process” and the beginning of the *Variations* series, Cage will occupy himself with this problem, the problem of diagramming the conditions for events without prescribing their actualized image. Similarly, he will do away with the model/copy hierarchy that characterizes the work as a higher ontological class and hence as a means of determining “good” or “bad” copies thereof – effectively eliminating the traditional grounds on which judgments are based.

Without a higher ontological category to judge them against, it becomes impossible to evaluate performances according to a transcendent moral category of “good” or “bad,” as gauged by correspondence to this transcendent object. Chapter Three therefore assesses what arises in place of this kind of moral evaluation – a Cagean *ethics*

of performance. Ethics replace the categorization of “good” and “bad” with functional assessments of “better” and “worse.” It is an *immanent* judgment shaped by concrete conditions. These concrete conditions actively participate in the performance, obscuring distinctions about choice in the performance situation and rendering decision conditional and tactical rather than absolute.

As each performance results in a simulacrum (a member of a series without origin, a copy without a model, overturning the very concept of concept/model in a stream of non-hierarchical variation), we cannot judge by degree of correspondence or, in many cases, by the correspondence between the process indicated by the score and the process of performance. Instead, judgments have to be made according to whether performances *affirm difference* or *restrict difference*. The former would seem a Cagean goal, to judge from his statements about “art imitating nature in her manner of operation”: affirming difference means affirming the non-hierarchical, non-teleological processes that constitute the world’s impersonal creativity, and stressing the need to harness the singularity of the event. The latter goal, by contrast, coincides with the aims of “power” in its most general sense, both institutional and habitual -- and aligns functionally with typological, classificatory, or representational thought.

Chapter Four shifts the focus to the relationship between performance and listening in order to explore what Cage would call *pure listening*, or listening uninformed by practical or utility-driven demands. It is in these confrontations with “the sounds themselves” that we affirm the internal difference that constitutes our senses. Deleuze refers to the trauma we face in a pure audio-visual situation as an encounter – a moment of shock induced when we are placed in the presence of that which defies recognition or

that which can only be sensed. These moments are the genesis of true thought, understood not as the recognition of a sensible intuition but as that which experimentally grasps at new forms of sensing and thus new forms of living. In the encounter, the suspension of meaning and signification or habit and association is revealed as a positive moment rather than a negative one: encounters place us in the presence of meaning-in-becoming without predetermining what that meaning might be. Encounters testify to the malleability of our patterns of engagement with the world, and it is through these moments of pure listening that we bend back to our subjectivity's point of emergence within the ongoing process that is the world.

Chapter Five is a collection of case studies selected to illuminate important, exemplary instances of Cagean performance and evaluations thereof. Against perceptions of Cage as an all-accepting anarchist, he often pronounced judgment on performances of his work – and some judgments were as harsh as others were effusive. On what grounds could Cage make such pronouncements, and to what ends? How are we to assess Cage's claims toward the success or failure of certain works in performance? Do they reflect contradictions in his own philosophy, or do they point toward productive possibilities for future realizations of his works? The stakes are particularly high for understanding Cage's approach to judgment now that the composer has passed on and his works are enjoying more performances than ever. What would it mean to be faithful to the "Cage event" in the present day or in the future?

Here we pass from more abstract considerations of ontology, performance, and evaluation and into some concrete cases in which Cage famously passed judgment on performances. On the positive side, Cage's approval of David Tudor's performance of

Variations II for amplified piano provides an exemplary study in successful Cagean performance. Similarly, Cage's praise for the eighteen-hour-long performance of *Vexations* and its 840 repetitions of a single phrase provide an opportunity to explore the dissolution of resemblance, model/copy distinctions, and the rise of the simulacrum. On the negative side, one can consider Julius Eastman's disastrous 1975 performance of the *Song Books* – a performance littered with camp and “subversive” gestures – and Cage's accompanying reactions. Similarly, the famous incidents of orchestral mutiny accompanying performances of *Atlas Eclipticalis* and *Cheap Imitation* provide concrete details on the role of rehearsal in preparation for Cage performance as well as Cage's distinctive recourse to ecological metaphors when addressing failed performances. We will examine performances of *4'33"* in an effort to discover how one might perform in such a way as to heighten receptivity without reverting to communication within Cage's most fragile and misunderstood event-work. The distance between a conceptual gesture and a performance that is active *for nothing* – that opens a problem without prescribing its solution – offers a parable for Cage's politics, which become the subject of Chapter Six.

This final chapter examines the connections between Cage's performance concepts and his political ideals, particularly his critiques of representational democracy and his support of anarchist politics. While Cage's emphasis on singularity borders on a kind of liberal individualism (and is sometimes even mistaken for a brand of libertarianism), his process-oriented ontology undercuts the conventional assumption that self-directed individuals constitute the fundamental unit of politics. Instead, Cage's politics are at times closely aligned with those of Deleuze – both affirm and experiment

with the processes by which subjects and subject groups are individuated rather than assuming individuals to be stable and preformed, having desires and needs separate from those events into which they enter. For both Cage and Deleuze, the aims of politics are not the establishment of justice or the equitable distribution of material resources, but the production of new modes of sensibility and new modes of engaging with the world. As such, they are relatively unconcerned with participating in the established realm of political practice. Instead, they look to foster the conditions that might undermine and transform the current systems of identity and representation in order to allow difference to proliferate. The ultimate goal of Cagean and Deleuzian politics is not utopia but *permanent revolution* – a fluid, fluent world open to continual experimentation and renovation, and a new people and a new earth attuned to the world's perpetual capacity to become other than what it already is.

Chapter Two: “It Is Not, It Becomes” – Cage, Deleuze, and the World-as-Process

*The world, the real, is not an object. It is a process.*¹

*Abstractions explain nothing, they themselves have to be explained: there are no such things as universals, there's nothing transcendent, no Unity, subject (or object), Reason; there are only processes, sometimes unifying, subjectifying, rationalizing, but just processes all the same.*²

A Cagean-Deleuzian World

According to one of Cage's most frequently reiterated aphorisms, the function of art is to “imitate Nature in her manner of operation.” Cage himself was particularly fond of the phrase, and it recurs throughout decades of interviews, lectures, and writings. And while the general tenor of the phrase is correctly surmised—art should reflect the purposeful purposelessness of the “natural” world—the full ramifications of such a statement are rarely examined. Its intuitive clarity notwithstanding, the phrase actually raises a multitude of challenges. It requires that we situate Cage's music in the world and that we grasp just how that “purposeful purposelessness” might operate. It is a call to grasp the fit between Cage's distinctive approach to music-making and the world which

¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 80.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia, 1995), 145.

we inhabit, to understand how exactly “natural” creativity might operate, what sorts of beings inhabit this world, and how we might grow attentive enough to its being to participate more effectively “in its manner of operation.”

Fortunately, Cage seems to have held rigorous beliefs about how the world functions and what entities exist therein. Despite his insistence to the contrary, Cage’s approach to music-making, his views on the manner in which musical works exist, and the manner in which they should be expressed in performance are intimately connected to his ontological positions. Take, for example, the following exchange from a 1968 interview with Daniel Charles. Worth quoting in total, Cage’s response to Charles’ admittedly leading questions constitutes about as concise and clear an ontological statement as you will wrest from a composer:

D.C. Then art as you define it is a discipline of adaptation to the real as it is. It doesn’t propose to change the world, it accepts it as it presents itself. By dint of breaking our habits, it habituates us more effectively.

J.C. I don’t think so. There is one term of the problem which you are not taking into account: precisely, the world. The real. You say: the world as it is. But it is not, it becomes! It moves, it changes. It doesn’t wait for us to change... It is more mobile than you can imagine. You are getting closer to this reality when you say as it “presents itself,” that it is not there, existing as an object. It is a process.

D.C. I cannot help but believe that logos, logic, has only the slightest hold in the world as you define it.

J.C. It’s simply that I am not a philosopher... at least, not a Greek one! Before, we wished for logical experiences; nothing was more important to us than stability. Today, we admit instability alongside stability. What we hope for is the experience of that which is. But “what is” is not necessarily the stable, the immutable. We do know quite clearly, in any case, that it is we who bring logic into the picture. It is not laid out before us, waiting for us to discover it. “What is” is not dependent on us, we are dependent on it. And we have to draw nearer to it. And unfortunately for logic, everything we understand under the rubric “logic” represents such a simplification with regard to the event and what really happens

that we must learn to keep away from it. The function of art at the present time is to preserve us from all logical minimizations that we are at each instant tempted to apply to the flux of events. To draw us nearer to the process which is the world we live in.³

Cage's ontological statement leaves us with an imperative – to construct a model of musical works and musical performance in accord with this vision of the world. For if the world *is* process, and *is* change and dynamism, we can no longer simply presume that the objects within it are stable, self-identical, whole, and unified. In fact, a world that *is* process requires us to re-think the object-character of its constitutive elements entirely. Or rather, it requires us to think about both stability and instability together, to consider how the apparently static and self-identical objects of the world emerge from, recede into, and often mask the current of constant dynamism underneath. Cage's insistence that the world is process – and not that there are objects that enter into processes – forces us to think of a world populated by *events* rather than objects. Cage's ontology requires us to think of the actualized objects of our world as *expressions* of processes that have their own ontological status apart from, and bearing no resemblance to, the objects that incarnate them. For Cage, it meant a lifelong project of generating scores that would provide a glimpse of this dynamism, scores that would allow us to develop a sense or a thinking-feeling for the processes that construct reality. He would create works that would give us a sense of this current of change *as such* and the undercurrent of *difference* fringing our world of apparently stable and readily reproducible objects.

³ Cage, *For the Birds*, 80-1.

We might be tempted to jettison the notion of a “work” under such circumstances of variability or to surrender to a strict nominalism – the notion that each work or each performance is so individual that it has no relation to any other and hence cannot be compared to anything but itself. But Cage himself doesn’t take this route. His scores still bear titles, signatures, and all other trappings of “the work” – many even hearkening to oddly traditional practices of titling: *Atlas Eclipticalis*, *Assemblage*, *Etudes Australes*, *Renga*, *Branches*, *Freeman Etudes*, *Ryoanji*, *Wishing Well*, and so forth. Something work-like remains in Cage’s version of composition – an element of specificity, distinction, differentiation – even as he drastically renovates the concept of the musical work:

D.C.: Christian Wolff wrote in a text on you that even when your works are extremely ‘pared-down,’ that is, as ‘open’ as possible, they are still works. They subsist, even if only as pure transparencies.

J.C.: That’s certainly true. I imagine myself to be composing processes and I end up with objects. Actually, if my works are superimposed, if they are, then ‘furnished’ or filled by each other, they nonetheless retain their individuality – at least for me.⁴

Cage insists that the works have an element of identity – they are distinct, individual – yet are capable of producing wildly varying performances. If they have an identity, they have a special kind of identity, different from the commonplace notion of identity built on the resemblance of forms or a model/copy relationship. If they are repeated, they invoke another kind of repetition apart from the “bare repetition” of similar forms – an essence without resemblance, but an essence all the same. Above all, an essence in which

⁴ Cage, *For the Birds*, 135.

difference is not rendered subordinate to the primacy of identity: in other words, a stream of continuous variation in which no term, no original, no model, has an ontological superiority to other members of the series. Cage contrasts the repetition of his works with the repetition envisioned by Schoenberg, for whom all repetition was founded on the rock-like solidity of identity and the hierarchy of models and copies.

For [Schoenberg] there was only repetition; he used to say that the principle of variation represented only the repetitions of something identical... If there is variation, you can change an element – you can always change something – and the rest stays as it is. And that cancels out the variation. But introduced into this opposition... or, beside this Schoenbergian idea of a repetition-variation double, another notion, that of something *other* which cannot be canceled out... That term is chance... If you accept this point of view, then you are no longer involved with either repetition or variation.⁵

Schoenberg's insistence on the primacy of identity left him with *diversity* in repetition and variation: varied copies derived from a common model, differing from one another but linked by an order of internal resemblance to the essence from which they were derived. Behind all Schoenberg's differences was the figure of the Same. By contrast, Cage sought not just diversity but difference *qua* difference – difference without subordination to identity and resemblance, but rather as singular power of variation behind which there would be nothing more. Rather than seeking the unchanging Same behind the diversity of appearances, Cage wanted to grasp something of the structure of

⁵ Cage, *For the Birds*, 45. Cage's description of the Schoenbergian *Grundgestalt* appropriately highlights its emphasis on identity throughout variation, in that the sense of totality is provided by referencing all variation to a common set of ontologically superior foundational elements – that is to say, differences in motive, harmony, and tonality are recognized by reference to “originary” or thematic elements. By contrast, the Cagean-Deleuzian series of infinite variation has no original term or concluding term – one always enters *in media res*, regardless of the first actualized term in the series.

difference itself, a structure of process different from the infinite series of singular, chance-inflected variations but generative of them – not just diversity, but that from which diversity springs. Cage hoped to construct structures of *internal difference* that could give rise to series of actualizations linked not by a model, but by the manner in which they differed from themselves. Such a structure of difference wouldn't be a model, a transcendent yardstick against which diverse productions were gauged, but a generative structure of continuous variation guiding the emergence of new forms without prefiguring them.⁶

Cage likens this approach to the emergence of continuous variation within the mushrooms sharing similar genetic materials – in other words, each mushroom is an expression of a genetic field of potential *which it does not resemble* but which guides its formation. A mushroom's genes do not constitute a blueprint for the construction of a mushroom; they are not a prefiguration of a form, but a coding of potentials that co-function with an environment containing its own potentials. In the presence of certain environmental factors, such as soil moisture or nutrient availability, certain potentials will be expressed in a mushroom's features. Under other conditions, the same genetic code could yield a dramatically different set of features unlike those of its genetically-identical peer. Between the two mushrooms, the coded potentials in its DNA remain the same – a multiplicity of future expressions and traces of past expressions, a unity of differences, a distinct bundle of potentials enmeshed in and modulated by a broader field of potentials,

⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 222. "Difference is not diversity. Diversity is given, but difference is that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse. Difference is not the phenomenon but the noumenon closest to the phenomenon."

a bounded set of tendencies from which an infinite variety of mushrooms can emerge and into which they recede.⁷

It is inappropriate to say that a genetic code or a Cagean score allows anything to happen in any given instance. If this were the case, the world would not be a world of continual variation, but a world of complete *undifferentiation* – the uniform presence of all possibilities in all of time and space would amount to a cancellation of difference itself. Instead, a genetic code or a Cagean score marks out a particular *differentiation* within difference itself: it is a specific potential for variability marked out within a continuous heterogeneous field of potentials. Such a region is not arbitrary, and the expression of its potentials in the emergence of an actuality is not completely unpredictable. Rather, it is better to say that every region of potential contains more ways of being actualized than any particular actualization can express: a bounded region of boundless variance, vague but completely structured as potential. Potential, though exceeding our abilities to think or experience it, retains an element of complete determinacy. It is a specific capacity for the determination of entities in the actual, but always open-ended with regard to what can emerge. It is a structure of indeterminacy. In Deleuze's terms, such structures are completely *differentiated* as modes of possibility,

⁷ Allusions to plant growth and its relationship to a genetic backdrop abound in Cage's writings and interviews – perhaps little surprise, as Cage was famously both a mycologist and avid gardener. Take, for example, the following from a 1980 interview with Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras: “The mechanism by means of which the I Ching works is, I think, the same as that by means of which the DNA—or one of those things in the chemistry of our body—works. It's a dealing with the number sixty-four, with a binary situation with all of its variations in six lines. I think it's a rather basic life mechanism. I prefer it to other chance operations. I began using it nearly thirty years ago, and I haven't stopped” (Cage in conversation with Cole Gagnes and Tracy Caras (1980), *Conversing with Cage*, 233).

marking out a specific collection of tendencies and inflection points. These modes of possibility are then *differentiated* by specific processes of actualization that constitute the solution to their virtual problems. A mushroom's genome is its virtual space of differentiation – the set of potentials dictating the emergence of an actual mushroom – while the mushroom itself would be the differentiation of the genome as an instance of a species marked by determinate qualities. Similarly, a Cagean score like those of the *Variations* series carves out a space of potential organizations for sounds, a uniquely differentiated region, while a specific performance provides a differentiation of that potential in an actual collection of sounded elements. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze describes the relationship between these two orders – a relationship of linkage without resemblance – in precisely these genetic terms:

[G]enes express differential elements which also characterize an organism in a global manner, and play the role of distinctive points in a double process of reciprocal and complete determination; the doubling aspect of genes involves commanding several characteristics at once, and acting only in relation to other genes; the whole constitutes a virtuality, a potentiality; and this structure is incarnated in actual organisms, as much from the point of view of the determination of species as from that of the differentiation of their parts, according to rhythms that are precisely called 'differential,' according to comparative speeds or slownesses which measure the movement of actualization.⁸

For Cage, as for Deleuze, the only way out of the double-bind of representation and the stranglehold of identity-thinking is to conceive of this different kind of essence, a kind of multiple-unity that would replace the formal essence and its model-copy distinction. In place of the bare repetition of resemblance, they propose an essence that

⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 184-85.

would be *the repetition of difference*, a particular mode of differing. In place of external difference and its relation to the primacy of identity – *this differs from that* – they propose the concept of internal difference, wherein all actual occurrences *express* specific tendencies for variation and deformation without resembling them. Real objects, real performances, are not incarnations of an ideal form, but singular expressions of a singular technique of being or style of becoming. Like Cage, Deleuze inverts the standard metaphysical prioritization of identity over difference, stability over change, and being over becoming. For both thinkers, the appearance of logical and typological unity and persistent self-similarity (for both objects and subjects) masks a flourishing of difference-producing processes that generate endless, directionless change. Against the logical, Newtonian world of being without becoming, Deleuze and Cage propose a world of becoming without being. As Deleuze commentator Manuel DeLanda describes it, such a world is a “universe where individual beings do exist but only as the outcome of becomings, that is, of irreversible processes of individuation.”⁹ In a world of constant flux and total difference, what requires explanation is not the appearance of change and deviation, but the production of seemingly stable and transcendent types – what Cage deems the “simplification with regard to the event and what really happens.”

This reality of constant change demands that we think of the independent reality of the event – the event not as an interaction between already-formed objects, but as that

⁹ DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* 106. DeLanda’s explanations of Deleuzian philosophy pertain, by and large, to the domains of biology and physics (and more recently, sociology), but one of the virtues of Deleuzian philosophy is its insistence on the universality of processes underpinning the material foundation of all activity, both “natural” and “cultural.” Therefore observations from one realm can be effectively translated to the other without resorting to metaphor.

which produces the apparently stable things of the world. The world is an expression of events, or, rather, the world is the event-of-all-events: the world itself as a becoming, a network of interlinked, interpenetrating processes. Above all, it is a world without *things*, without objects, except as the products of onto-genetic primary processes. “I have, it’s true, spent a lot of time writing about this notion of event,” Deleuze states, because “I don’t believe in things”¹⁰ – that is, that the essence of an entity lies not in its actualized features, but in the virtual multiplicity which it incarnates.

All of this stands in stark contrast to most attempts at constructing an ontology of the musical work, ontologies that attempt to define the identity conditions of a musical work or the links that would bind together a unitary work and its disparate incarnations under a common concept. Such a concept would link the work and its manifestations by an order of resemblance, by determining what they held in common: a collection of features, a common form of expression, a capacity for reproduction, resemblance, reference. The composer’s “intention” becomes fixed as a thing, a solidity, a model; a particular notable performance becomes the object of reproduction by future generations. Variations from this model are dismissed as *external differences* – products of error, happenstance, the gap between pure and transcendent concept and muddled reality – rather than productions from some sort of *internal difference* in the work itself. The dissimilarities between concept and reality appear at worst as faults or mere contingencies, at best as the additions of a particularly virtuous artist whose tolerated indiscretions are permitted because she retains some order of resemblance to the model. It

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 182.

is this vision of production, with its constant reference to a higher term that would discipline variance into similarity, to which both Cage and Deleuze so rigorously object.

In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Félix Guattari assign a name to the principle of production that references the buzzing diversity of reality to a place of fixed, eternal models: tracing.¹¹ The logic of tracing is the logic of the possible, the belief that all that can exist can be contained within an intelligible concept. “A tracing overlays the product onto the process, on the assumption that they must be structurally homologous,” thus creating an indissoluble link between process – for every repetition of the process, the emergence of an identical product. “The assumption is that you can conceptually superimpose them to bring out a common logical outline,”¹² that the “saying” and the “said” of any particular communicative exchange are sufficiently similar to yield a direct transfer of information. What is excluded in the exchange is any sense of the dynamism of process, the potential for a process to produce something other than a copy. All production guided by the logic of tracing becomes a process of reproduction, suppressing any autonomy of the process itself in favor of the authority of the abstract model. The potential for a product to mutate beyond the boundaries of resemblance is stifled by the power of what supposedly pre-exists, even if just in “empty,” conceptual form. In tracing, there is no potential in the process of emergence that is not contained in the sensible form of the product. The emergence of difference is

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 11-14.

¹² Brian Massumi, “Like a Thought,” in *A Shock to Thought: Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, ed. Brian Massumi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 8.

not treated as the consequence of the differing power of process, but as the emergence of subjective error—a failure of competence:

A genetic axis is like an objective pivotal unity upon which successive stages are organized; a deep structure is more like a base sequence that can be broken down into another, transformational and subjective, dimension... A variation on the oldest form of thought. It is our view that genetic axis and profound structure are above all infinitely reproducible principles of *tracing*... Its goal is to describe a de facto state, to maintain balance in intersubjective relations... It consists of tracing, on the basis of an overcoding structure or supporting axis, something that comes ready-made... [T]he tracing always involves an alleged “competence.”¹³

In other words, what poses as logical unity between process and product – a logical unity so strong that many ontologies of musical works need not discuss any process of production whatsoever – is not merely a representation of how a work retains its identity throughout time and space. It is the defining element in the machinery for producing identity, a framework for making performances and reception into copies of the work itself. In the case of art music, the unity between process and product begins by announcing the concept of a univocal, particular work that is stable throughout time – it was even forged in a single stroke, so any degree of internal difference can be chalked up to imperfections of notation or a defect of imagination. The work becomes a “schema,” a “blueprint,” with the implicit order that one not deviate too far from the conceptual outline contained therein. The schema, despite patches of inconsequential indeterminacy, is clear from the beginning—its qualitative particularity is assured from the onset. The performer suppresses the accidents of his historical and cultural position so as not to over-inflect the work in the process of its concretion. Tolerable modifications are

¹³ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12.

retroactively determined to be new “possibilities” discovered within the pre-existent model, not a facet of any dynamism inherent in the model itself. The listeners are also enlisted in the policing process that assures the logical unity. They are the executors of “intersubjective verification,” a project whose appeal to universality works to inhibit the spread of difference that emerges in each translation of the work into performance or thought. Lydia Goehr is correct to describe this work-concept as “regulative” in character.¹⁴ What this work-concept lacks in capacity for mutability it makes up for in its capacity for preservation, for better and worse. It provides for a stable transmission of an event-object across contexts and it restrains variation within “universally acceptable” bounds; it casts a net over the potential for divergent realizations and erects a standard by which true and false copies can be distinguished.

There is another, coexistent way to think of production, however, that would not rely on the logic of endless static reproduction. Against the tracing, with its conflation of process and product, there are processes that roam wild, unfettered by prescribed objects. Viewed from within the confines of work-object logic, they are strange and elusive machines that defy sense. They are an affront to the transcendental dignity of the model/copy relation and reject the sometimes whispered, sometimes shouted demands of the tracing and its logic of representation and reproduction. An encounter between one of these monstrosity-making machines and the logic of reproduction can be found in Nelson

¹⁴ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 102-03.

Goodman's *Languages of Art*, where the esteemed logician and art ontologist takes on Figure BB from the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* by John Cage.¹⁵

Goodman's assessment begins with an assessment of the material evidence of Cage's concerto: on a page, one rectangle, containing twelve randomly placed dots, five intersecting straight lines for frequency, duration, timbre, amplitude, and succession. Per the instructions provided, the performer is to determine the sounds indicated by dots by measuring the perpendicular distance to each "parameter line." With no minimal unit of measure, however, there is no way to determine with any precision the coordinates of any individual dot with respect to the five parameter lines. Furthermore, the composer's instructions fail to prescribe any distinct extensive boundaries for the parameters themselves – nor would any listener in the audience be able to reconstruct the score from any performance of the work! All potential "realizations" of the work are so strictly bound to the materiality of the score that a change so "musically" mundane as an alteration of the score's dimensions (expanded on a Xerox machine, shrunk in desert air) could potentially result in radically different performances, even if the performer adopted the same measuring procedure. All the criteria for establishing a "compliance class" are so immanent in the materials and methods used to realize the performance that they cannot enjoy the stability of life amongst the transcendent – and the enforcement power that comes with such transcendence.

With coyness, Goodman declares that he is "neither qualified nor called upon to make a judgment" about whether the creation of and performance from such a mobile,

¹⁵ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 187-90.

variable score is a worthwhile endeavor. However, he betrays an anxiety about the propagation of unidentifiable performances that could surge from this so-called work. Parentless performances, no less – the performances would have no unity of concept between themselves and their work-father. The traditional unity of product and process – an order of filial resemblance – has collapsed. “What does matter is that the system in question furnishes no means of identifying a work from performance to performance,” he laments. “Nothing can be determined to be a true copy of Cage’s autograph diagram or to be a performance of it.”¹⁶ All we devise, therefore, are copies of copies. Or perhaps worse – copies with *no model at all*. Something other than a “possibility” precedes these performances, something other than a clear and distinct conceptual mold.

What Nelson Goodman misses is the surplus of potential that exists above and beyond the actual, the insensible, abstract field of coming-into-being that becomes thought-felt when the score is left in this objectively-underdetermined state. Nelson Goodman decries the object’s underdetermined appearance, but he seems most concerned with the fact that there are more potential performances lurking beneath this excerpt from the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* than could be bound by any single essence. Rather than being buffered from the variances of the world, this work would be uncommonly sensitive to them – it would enfold the potentials of any reader, any instrument, and produce a series of differences in any context. Unfixed from any denotative mooring, differences would proliferate wildly and the piece itself would undergo a becoming with each new incarnation. Every performance is a modulation of the work, a divergence, a

¹⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 190.

mutation. The musical work is no longer a transcendent essence hovering above and beyond any of its lesser material incarnations, but an immanent operator within a busy world of processes always-already underway. It is no longer an object, but a mode of intervention – an intervention whose unfolding can never be fully predicted.

In contradistinction to Goodman’s notion of the transcendent work, we could place Daniel Charles’s sense of the score as a vehicle for musical process. Daniel Charles, in his assessment of Goodman’s critique of Cage, reframes the undetermined nature of Cage’s score as a positive production, not a failure to provide a denotative frame that would convey a stable object. Charles recognizes that Cage’s score is not a stable object of communication, but rather a vehicle for a process, a contraction of the past of creative process with the future of its reenactment in another time and place. The score contains a quantum of pure *becoming* coded within in the materials and instructions of the score. Most importantly, it is a transmission of creative process without the presumed homology between product and process that marks the tracing. Cage’s score for his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra is a map of process, to use Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation from *A Thousand Plateaus*: “What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real... The map has to do with performance[.]”¹⁷ Only by comparison to the tracing-model does the composer “open” a field of possibilities; by generalizing a creative process, the composer actually delimits a field of potentials from which a form can be individuated. It is broader than a mere collection of foreseeable, traceable possibilities, but not so broad as to

¹⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12-13.

constitute a field from which anything can emerge. The process can be applied to an infinite field of unique historical and geographical situations while retaining its abstract, dynamic unity. Even before the score is assembled for performance, this field of potentials can be felt in action, the possibilities-almost-formed detected at the fringes of the actual materials. “To compose is to prefigure the figurations not yet in existence, not yet available,” writes Charles. “Nothing has been decided, and yet everything is taking shape.”¹⁸ The score conveys not a pre-formation, but the germ of possible forms, the potential from which forms may arise. It renders a quanta of creative potential mobile and transmissible, gives it a potential to act in a variety of new contexts, to produce new and divergent actualization. Importantly, it is *completely determinate as potential* – as “objective” and concrete and as any preformed tracing-work, but operating on a different plane, a plane of immanent potential rather than a plane of transcendent form.

* * *

The Instability Alongside Stability: A Pure Capacity for Change

In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, his second collaborative work with Félix Guattari, Deleuze asserts that music and musical works have a special relationship with this “being of the event” – that is, they provide us with a sense of becomings-in-themselves as determinate ontological entities. In fact, the very first image to appear in *A Thousand Plateaus*, prior to any text, is Sylvano Bussoti’s Cage-inspired score for *Piano*

¹⁸ Daniel Charles, “Figuration and Pre-Figuration: Notes on Some New Graphic Notions (1991),” in *Writings about John Cage*, 258.

Piece for David Tudor 4. A dense tangle of stave lines and suggestive instructions for the combination of sonic parameters such as frequency, timbre, duration, and intensity, Bussoti's score is used as an exemplar for the shared Cagean-Deleuzian notion of *multiplicity*. Here multiplicity refers not simply to a compounding of possible forms, but to a singular and determinate style of becoming, a way of producing individuated forms, a collection of forces and tendencies and sensitive points, and a distribution of critical moments of expression. "Music has always sent out lines of flight, like so many 'transformational multiplicities,'" Deleuze and Guattari insist, adding that the multiplicity's power for divergent products succeeds "even [in] overturning the very codes that structure or arborify it."¹⁹ In musical works, even the most rigidly codified, there is a productive principle or a capacity for change fraying their supposed unity, pushing out from the codes that give them a sensible form and an apparent formal essence. There is, as Cage would have it, "instability alongside stability." For Cage and for Deleuze, the grasping of both the actual form and its virtual, creative complement constitutes the full "experience of that which is." Reality is thus composed of two complementary orders – the order of stability and the order of variance. On one hand, there is a sense of relative solidity and identity to the things of the world. And yet within them or beneath them, a sense of turmoil or potential chaos, the feeling of a capacity to diverge from what they presently are. In order to grasp the nature of the Cagean-Deleuzian world-as-process, it is necessary to investigate both the appearance of stability and identity *and* the capacity for change.

¹⁹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 11-12.

Considered from this vantage point, composition is not, therefore, simply the construction an object or prefiguration of a form, but the gathering of potentials, forces, and the production of a style of variation. It is not to erect a model to be imitated, but to assemble and capture a multiplicity of forces that can give rise to a stream of continuous variation, constant deformation, all linked by a unity of becoming that allows for no hierarchy of actualized forms – no primary or privileged theme which is subject to variation, but variation as its own theme. It is “drawing the virtual lines of an infinite variation,” constructing a body that suggests an ongoing space of progressive differentiation, the unfolding of a series without beginning or ending. It is also the art of rendering this assemblage of forces sensible, giving it a body where the semblance of pure potentiality can be felt. Composition is the means by which a pure event – that is, an event independent of the actual material that gives it a body, an ideal event, a virtual event – can be made sensible, transmissible, and re-individuated in an infinite number of divergent actualizations. Even the most rigorously notated, most thoroughly conceived and coded musical work is fringed by this *something more*, its own capacity to unleash a divergent series of dissimilar actualizations – even if most of them will die quiet deaths in a rehearsal space. All composition is the isolation and conjunction of potentials for the product of a series of variation, an infinite chain of dissimilar difference-repetitions.

To admit the persistence of change in the world requires an ontology that systematically accounts for the modification and emergence of forms in the world. Deleuze, in collaboration with Guattari and in his own work, developed a theory of the *virtual* that would provide definition and causal explanations about the capacity for change. The virtual is “the mode of reality implicated in the emergence of new

potentials,” the part of an object or system that is its pure capacity for change.²⁰ It is opposed not to the real, but to the *actual* – the actual represents one aspect of reality, the aspect possessing determinate qualities and extension, forms and stabilities, while the virtual is the realm of pure becomings, tendencies, and potentials for interaction. The virtual is *real insofar as it is virtual*: it is an excess over every determinate being that contains past ways of affecting and being affected as well as yet-uncharted ways of changing and relating.²¹ Unlike the possible, which is marked by its degree of “unreality,” the virtual is a fully positive entity that is *real but abstract*. Different in kind than the actual, it is inaccessible to the senses – no one has ever seen a process as such, one has only seen the effects of its production, yet something of the structure a process can be intuited sidelong in the formation of its products. The virtual “leaves its traces in the folds of formed and forming matter,” it can be felt in the unfolding of the processes that give rise to stable forms.²²

Deleuze’s distinction between the virtual and the actual marks the distinction between empirical (actual) things in the “concrete” world and (virtual) flux of pre-individual, impersonal differences, becomings, forces, and affects that constitute these subjects and objects while also preceding and exceeding them. Unlike transcendent essences, the virtual is “transcendental” in that it shapes the forces and processes that give rise to the actual objects of experience while remaining outside of immediate

²⁰ Brian Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible,” in *Hypersurface Architecture*, ed. Stephen Perrella, *Architectural Design* 68, no. 5/6 (May-June 1998), 16.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 148-152.

²² Brian Massumi, “Sensing the Virtual, Building the Insensible,” 16.

experience—a dynamic reframing of the Kantian transcendental. It is transcendental (generating the conditions of emergence), but not transcendent, as it participates directly in the real as experienced—it inheres in matter without separation, it is the aspect of matter that is its potential for self-differing. For Deleuze, there is only, therefore, a single plane of being that incorporates the actual as well as the virtual components that actualize or differentiate it in actual forms, rather than a plane of eternal transcendent essences and the lesser beings that imperfectly incarnate them. This unitary plane of being is called the “plane of immanence,” a circuitous relation between the actual and the virtual populated by tendencies and forces in tension that produce distinct entities through “temporary condensations or contractions of forces and materials.”²³ The appearance of being is an *effect* of the unfolding of virtual tendencies in the actual—it is the event of the actualization of virtual multiplicities.

The real, therefore, consists of the circuit between the actual and the virtual. The virtual guides processes by abstract points of attraction that shape the flux of real objects, their formation and disintegration. Conversely, the structures of the actual feed back upon the virtual, drawing tendencies and relations into regions of clarity and obscurity. The virtual composes a *space of potentials* for individuals in the actual, and its reality is felt through the *event*: the emergence of change. The insensibility of the virtual is related to its difference in kind from the actual; unlike objects in the actual, the virtual is the space

²³ Here, Christoph Cox is discussing the Nietzschean strand in Deleuze’s ontology and its relation to music. If music is particularly near to the Deleuzian event, it is because it produces a particularly acute sense of these condensations and contractions in their dynamic unfolding. Christoph Cox, “Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music,” in *A Companion To Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 505.

of change *as such*, or a field of pure potentials, independent of particular terms to which they are attached. They are the pre-conditions of processes, the tensions that shape the interactions of forces and tendencies. The potential of any situation exceeds its actuality: the not-here and the not-now is overfull, crowded with incipient forms, teeming with embryonic actuality. “Possibilities” are a limited subset of virtual potentials, those that are familiar and tested and ready for use. A possibility fed-forward into action is a tracing, a domestication of the productive power of the virtual to practical ends.

Unlike the possible, which is supposedly granted full reality by the addition of substance, the virtual becomes actual by means of a differential process, the extraction of a single actuality from a teeming mass of potential actualities. The virtual is an insensible void that generates the processes of coming-into-being – a parallel to Cage’s Zen formulation of potential as the “Nothing” (no-thing) that stands in ontological precedence to the actualized things of the world²⁴. Moreover, because the potentials in the virtual are fundamentally different in kind than the objects that they generate, every process of actualization poses precisely the kind of copy-without-a-model problems that Nelson Goodman observed in the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*. This process of actualization avoids the redundancy of the realization of the possible, in which the possible and its products are different not in kind of reality, but in degree of reality. Deleuze comments upon the creative power, map-like power of the virtual versus the redundant, tracing-like impulse displayed by the possible:

²⁴ Cage, *For the Birds*, 234. “...it is not a kind of ‘subjectivity,’ but a reference to something which comes before that and which – beyond that – allows that ‘subjectivity’ to be produced. It is a reference to the Nothingness that is in all things, and thus also in me.”

What difference can there be between the existent and the non-existent if the non-existent is already possible, already included in the concept and having all the characteristics that the concept confers upon it as a possibility?... The possible and the virtual are... distinguished by the fact that one refers to the form of identity in the concept, whereas the other designates a pure multiplicity... which radically excludes the identical as a prior condition... to the extent that the possible is open to 'realization' it is understood as an image of the real, while the real is supposed to resemble the possible. That is why it is difficult to understand what existence adds to the concept when all it does is double like with like... Actualization breaks with resemblance as a process no less than it does with identity as a principle. In this sense, actualization or differentiation is always a genuine creation. Actual terms never resemble the singularities they incarnate... For a potential or virtual object to be actualized is to create divergent lines which correspond to – without resembling – a virtual multiplicity.²⁵

Unlike formal essences – or essence-like concepts, such as "possibilities" – those particular bundles of forces and tensions called virtual multiplicities are not *clear and distinct* ideas. They are *obscure but distinct*, differentiated from other fields of potential but not directly sensible. Though they cannot be directly experienced, they are still subject to a kind of empirical investigation – their outlines can be indirectly sensed in the unfolding of processes. The actualization of Cage's post-1958 indeterminate scores are exemplary models for the unfolding of these tendencies and the way in which spaces of potential can be simultaneously impossible to image and yet distinctive in their boundaries.

And unlike formal essences, the ideal component of every actualized event is completely immanent to it. The score for *Variations II* constitutes one actualization of the multiplicity of which it is a sign – it is a product and sign of a set of isolated potentials, it

²⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 211-212. Quoted in Manuel DeLanda, "Deleuzian Ontology: A Sketch," presented at "New Ontologies: Transdisciplinary Objects," University of Illinois, March 30, 2002.

contracts the process of its creation and the capacity for future difference-repetitions into a material form which renders them palpable, felt as potential. It doesn't represent the ideal event as much as it gives it a body, or a means by which the dynamic unity of an event can be made sensible. The ideal event *inheres* in the score's markings, which point to its virtual nature but cannot represent it – it makes felt the contours of the productive principle it embodies. The score constitutes not an object of representation, but what Brian Massumi (putting a Deleuzian spin on Susan Langer's concept) calls a *semblance*: the “experiential reality of the virtual,” or “the manner in which the virtual actually appears,” or “the being of the virtual as lived abstraction.”²⁶ What scores like those in the *Variations* series make palpable is the twofold nature of all objects. Every actual thing is doubled by its virtual complement, or, rather, the virtual component inheres in what is given to the senses in actuality. Every actual thing – a score, a performance, a person, an instrument – is fringed by a perfectly determinate indeterminacy, a set of potentials for variation and mutation. A well-formed semblance, like one of Cage's transparency-scores, provides a heightened sensation of the virtual Idea or ideal event that it incarnates. Deleuze emphasizes the open-ended nature of virtual determinacy and describes this twofold nature of things in a passage from “The Method of Dramatization:”

[T]he Idea is completely undifferentiated. However, it is not at all indeterminate... The Idea in itself, or the thing in the Idea, is not at all *differentiated* since it lacks necessary qualities and parts. But it is fully and completely *differentiated*, since it has at its disposal, since it has at its disposal the relations and singularities that will be actualized, without resemblance, in the qualities and parts. It seems, then, that each thing has two ‘halves’ – uneven, dissimilar, and unsymmetrical – each of which is divided itself into two: an *ideal*

²⁶ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event* (Boston: MIT, 2011), 15.

half, which reaches into the virtual and is constituted by both differential relations and by concomitant singularities; and an actual half, constituted by the qualities that incarnate these relations and by the parts that incarnate those singularities.

Even the most heavily abstracted scores in Cage's catalog are only different in degree of the sensation of virtual-actual asymmetry than more conventionally-conceived works, which presume an equilibrium between the productive power and its actualized result. Conventional notational practices diminish our feeling for the something-more haunting every score. They mask the potential for divergence lurking within even the most rigid codes and schemas, a potential that can only ever be dampened but not extinguished by convention. By carefully under-determining his scores, Cage renders this excess palpable—not with the clarity of a concept traced from an already-actualized form, but with the specific-vagueness of intuition, an oblique glance at a power of formation whose capacity for production exceeds the mind's capacity to imagine the form of its products.

In his analysis of *Variations II*, Thomas DeLio offers an illuminating view of that work's virtual dimension by providing a means of imagining this something-more inhering in the score's materials and instructions. Like Figure BB from the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, *Variations II* relies on measurements between randomly placed points and intersecting lines. In *Variations II*, however, the points and lines are mobile, placed on transparencies that are to be overlapped before the measurements concerning sonic parameters are made. As with BB, there is no tracing-object presented, but the semblance of an ideal event, a potential for emergent form conditioned by the tendencies inhering in the score-process. No essence, no link of resemblance, can bind all the sonic

actualizations produced from the score, but the score does delimit a space of potential, a range of tensions that can produce a wealth of forms from a common abstract process. As DeLio advises us:

It is, however, important to recognize that [Cage's] score does not fix any one configuration. Rather, the composer presents the materials by which any such configuration may be fashioned. Thus, the score contains within it the full range of all possible configurations of six lines and five dots and, consequently, the full range of statistical structures to which these configurations give rise. As such, it cannot really be said that any one specific statistical structure is the structure of *Variations II*. Rather, the structure of *Variations II* is the complete range of all such statistical complexes made available by the composer through the score.²⁷

DeLio's description is clear, indeed. Perhaps too clear, however, as it relies heavily on the notion of statistical arrays. In an effort to cleave the productive power of the virtual from the redundancy of possibility, it is necessary to interrogate the relationship between probability and possibility. Cage himself was extraordinarily careful to separate the pure productivity of virtual forces from probability, a mode of imagining potential which traces the contours of the possible from empirical reality rather than grasping it as such. For Cage, probabilities and stochastic methods were still tethered to the schema-like possibility because they were dependent on pre-existent distributions of possibilities. As Brian Massumi asserts probabilities still obey the logic of the possible, as they "are weightings of possibilities according to the regularity with which they might be expected to appear."²⁸ While they share some of the vagueness and indistinction of the virtual, they still rely on the forward-projection of already-conceived forms conceived

²⁷ Thomas DeLio, *Circumscribing the Open Universe*, 19.

²⁸ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 135.

generally, whereas the virtual relies on the differential extraction of a particular event from the open-ended field of potentials.

Therefore one should see the virtual component of *Variations II* as the conditions of possibility for the sum of the statistical arrays. The virtual component is the space of possibility for the arrangement and translation the six lines and five dots – an abstract interrelation of all their potential relations. Or perhaps it is better to think of all the states of the system “complicated,” “perplexed,” and infinitely superimposed, into an abstract space marked by tendencies and various points of attraction. Cage perhaps would have liked this formation best—another “central principle” listed in *Composition in Retrospect* is “IMPORTANCE OF BEING PERPLEXED – UNPREDICTABILITY.”²⁹ “Perplexed” here should not be interpreted as the state of confusion resulting from too little information, but rather embraced in its fullest original sense of intensely intertwined, confusingly bundled and overfull. Deleuze explicitly cautions readers against assuming that the “corresponding connotation of ‘perplexity’ signifies a coefficient of doubt, hesitation or astonishment, or anything whatsoever incomplete about the Ideas themselves.”³⁰ Instead, this feeling of formal multiplicity or an overabundance of possible forms characterizes the experience of the virtual as viewed from the side of actuality – it is virtuality experienced as multiple possibilities, which can help to trace the virtual tendencies but can never completely exhaust them. DeLio comes close to grasping the virtual half of *Variations II*, but is restricted by his insistence on likening of the

²⁹ Cage, *Composition in Retrospect*, 60.

³⁰ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 187.

virtual to the actual. Rather than sensing the virtual on its own terms, as an abstract principle of variation, DeLio remains all too concrete – complicated and varied, but still tethered to thinking in the form of the already-actualized.

Cage provides us with an enlightening example of his own encounter with the semblance and its corresponding virtual perplexity in relation to a most surprising source: Mozart. In hearing *Don Giovanni*, Cage experienced the two-sided nature of being, the coexistence of the virtual and the actual or the “instability alongside stability.” Speaking to Anne Gibson in 1985, Cage attributes his own fixation on making the virtual felt to this peculiar encounter:

And later, fortunately, I had two experiences: one of listening to Mozart and another time a kind of study of Mozart that led me to a view of music that was different than the view that the music of Bach gave. The difference is the difference between everything fitting together, as it does in Bach, and coming out to reassure us about the existence of order. Mozart does another thing. He provides us with a music which is characterized by multiplicity. And you have the feeling that if there were something, if he had been able to give us some other thing than he did in *Don Giovanni*, that he would have willingly given it. That he left the doors open to the unknown and the excitement and the affirmation of life, rather than the affirmation of order, is what I love in Mozart.³¹

Whereas Bach’s music buried its capacity to become-other beneath the fixity of complex counterpoint, Mozart’s music provided Cage with the semblance of other possibilities, a felt sense of potentials not-realized but still inherent.³² It provided Cage with a sense of

³¹ Cage in conversation with Anne Gibson (1985), in *Conversing with Cage*, 39-40.

³² Mozart’s penchant for creating semblances of the virtual is a recurring theme in Cage’s discussions of what he called “open wholes.” Cage elaborates on Mozart’s techniques for semblance-production during a 1972 symposium entitled *Biology and the History of the Future*: “If one compares, for instance, the music of Bach and Mozart, you can take a small section of Bach and all the voices in the music will be observing the same kind of

the ideal event underlying its construction, a sign of a form-of-process that the music expressed but did not exhaust. It produced in Cage an awareness of the way in which the forms in the actual could be stretched, pulled, and recombined – it pointed toward an underlying principle of production that was at once singular and infinitely open-ended.

The mathematical field of topology, intimately related to the calculus from which Deleuze partially constructed his theory of multiplicity, provides us with a useful way of thinking the dynamic unity of differences that DeLio stops just short of grasping and toward which Cage strove. Unlike Euclidian geometry, which develops types and kinds according to categories of resemblance, topology studies the manner in which forms can be set into deformational variation by processes of twisting, pulling, and folding.

Consider a square composed of four critical points (the corners and their *function* as corners, as places where lines “break” and form angles) and four relations (the lines between sides). A Euclidean geometer would emphasize the static form of the figure and categorize it by determining its formal essence – four sides of equal length and corners forming ninety-degree angles. A topological geometer, however, would emphasize “the dynamisms or adventures the relations between these similarities are able to undergo.”³³

While the Euclidean geometer would classify the diamond, the rectangle, and the square

movement... This brings about a state of ‘wholeness’ or ‘unity.’ Which is in great contrast to Mozart. In Mozart, taking just a small section of the music, you are very apt to see not one scale, but I would myself see three. You would see one of the large steps made by arpeggiation of the chords... then you would see diatonic scales... and you would see chromatic passages, all within a small area sequence. They would generally be going together so that you have differences working together, in Mozart’s case, to produce what you might call harmonious wholeness.” (*Biology and the History of the Future*, 29.)

³³ Levi Bryant, *Difference and Givenness* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2008), 68-9.

as unique figures, the topologist sees them as expressions of the same topological structure – the diamond re-folds the corners, the rectangle stretches the sides, all while retaining the same set of structural features. The topologist attempts to grasp the manner in which shapes can be transformed into one another through operations of stretching, pulling, and twisting – *without privileging any particular ideal form*. For the topologist, there is a structural identity between the diamond, the rectangle, the square, and the infinite variety of intermediary forms between them.

The topological essence is not the total of figures that can be constructed from a given structural configuration, nor does it have a privileged existence in any particular individuation. Instead, it has a properly *virtual* being that exists alongside and in-between any of its incarnations. The potential deformations have a perfectly objective, determinate being but bear no resemblance to their products; as such, they cannot be experienced directly, but *cannot but be felt* in their effects. The only way to sense the virtual contours of this space of deformation is by experimentation and by selecting, sampling, reordering, and reconstructing the actualized figures that stem from them. For Deleuze and for Cage, thought was not a process of achieving a unity between a concept-possibility and an object, but the process of accessing this dynamic multiplicity through experimentation and *intuition*. Such intuition is not subjective, but is thoroughly rational method for grasping these objective structures, to understand not only the object before us (itself a passing expression of the virtual) but its potentials for change, its capacity for becoming other than what it is, and the capacity for the same topological relation to be expressed by other terms in other settings. Intuition is the method by which one grasps a *style of*

variation expressed by a thing, a style of variation that inheres in and exceeds any particular actualization.³⁴

In a sense, Nelson Goodman's critique contains a kernel of truth. Cage's score is under-determined from a certain perspective – it fails to demarcate any particular resemblance-essence, an actualized form to be traced in performance. It is not, however, imprecise or under-determined at the level of the virtual. Rather, its indetermination allows for a precise sense of the virtual multiplicity's constitutive vagueness. Though it is “objectively” under-determined, the indeterminate score is an expression of this perfectly determinate dynamic essence – the connective or productive principle guiding future actualizations in other forms, a reservoir of germinal forms, the identity of difference linking things coming-into-formation. Daniel Charles is also right in that one can sense the coming-into-form, the virtual multiplicity, but it gathers definition only through the “paring-down” of its potentials with each overlay of transparencies and each measurement. Each transparency placement brings it closer to actualization, through potential (there will be a point in time when one can sense what the multiple states of the system might appear as before they are officially decided), and eventually into possibility – the back-tracking that identifies conditions of emergence that could not be seen during assembly but can now be clearly recognized.

Cage's preference for the more-indeterminate dimension of chance techniques, therefore, is not simply a matter of personal preference, but a necessary component toward unchaining process from product. Rather than reproducing an existing statistical

³⁴ For further discussion of topological deformations and their virtual centers, see Brian Massumi's “On the Superiority of the Analog” in *Parables for The Virtual*, 133-43.

array, Cage opts to work at the level that gives rise to statistical arrays and structures the processes that generate a consistent range of outcomes. The actualization of the virtual allows for the rise of new states of a system with their own rules of interaction; probabilities rely on the statistical arrays already present in the actual. Probabilities adhere to preexistent rules of interaction; the actualization of virtualities allow for new rules of interaction to emerge. Cage expressed an implicit preference for true chance distributions over probability distributions as early as “Composition as Process,” where he preferred chance operations to scientific probabilities for inducing willingness for “identifying with no matter what eventuality.” A further clarification of the position came ten years later in 1968, again from the interviews with Daniel Charles:

D.C. If I compare your position to Xenakis', for example, I see that you begin in much the same as he. Xenakis uses probability formulae to describe and to make his music describe, in the graphic sense, the movement of a crowd, or the tapping of hail on the window pane. But he controls these movements by collecting them into a rule which controls the direction of the general, statistical tendency. You, yourself, do not attempt to control or orient these movements.

J.C. What I hope for is the ability of seeing anything whatsoever arise. No matter what, that is, everything, and not such and such a thing in particular. The problem is that something occurs. But the law governing that something is *not yet* there. Now, if there were a tendency that controlled the appearance of one particular thing as opposed to some other thing, then that tendency – as statistical tendency – would not itself be immobile. It would not be a law. It would be in a state of mutation which would prohibit describing it as a law. If you are in that state of mutation, you are situated in change and immerse in process. While, if you are dealing with a statistic, the your return to the world of objects, and the presence of emotions as linked to those objects can again come to constrain us.³⁵

³⁵ Cage, *For the Birds*, 147.

This world of the preformed and pre-existent fed-forward into reproductive production is identified with the “world of objects,” the realm of transcendent stabilities, rather than the fluctuating and complex plane of immanence. While the transcendent is *real* so far as it acts in the conscious reproduction of preexisting objects, it is clearly of secondary importance to the primary plane of immanence, understood as the world-in-becoming, the process that is the event-of-all-events. “In this situation, the universe within which the action is to take place is not preconceived,” Cage writes. “Furthermore, as we know, sounds are events in a field of possibilities, not only at the discrete points that conventions have favored. The notation of *Variations* departs from music and imitates the physical reality.”³⁶

Cage and the Simulacrum: Composition Without a Model

Another portion of Cage’s ontological sketch points toward a revolt against the resemblance between the virtual Idea – the being of an event – and its actualizations: his admonition that he is not a philosopher, or, at least, “not a Greek one!” Here we find another crucial resonance between Deleuze and Cage: the desire to depart from a tradition that assigned a moral value to resemblance, a moral value that worked to occlude the virtual’s capacity for continuous variation and dulled our sensitivity the world’s inherent dynamism.

³⁶ Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961): 28.

Difference and Repetition and *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze's first two original works of philosophy, developed his ontology under a Nietzschean slogan: *to overturn Platonism*. Like Cage, Deleuze recognized the intrinsic link between typological judgment, transcendent "natural kinds," and orders of power. The supposed connection between types and their tokens in the world was not a matter of logical necessity, but a means of naturalizing the tracing process, a way to restrict the proliferation of difference that threatens to undermine the authority of the model. The simulacra are precisely this departure from the model, but we must be careful, *pace* Baudrillard, to distinguish the true simulacra from the badly degraded copy of the model. As Deleuze notes in his early essay, "The Simulacrum in Ancient Philosophy," the authentic copy and the simulacra may resemble one another externally, but there is a crucial *internal* difference between the two. The copy is a "pretender," a duplicate that aspires to the transcendent ideal but deviates from it. The simulacrum, by contrast, aims to subvert the model/copy dichotomy entirely by remaining unconcerned about resemblance to a model. "We are now in a better position to define the totality of the Platonic motivation: it has to do with selecting among the pretenders, distinguishing good and bad copies or, rather, copies (always well-founded) and simulacra (always engulfed in dissimilarity)," notes Deleuze. He adds, "It is a question of assuring the triumph of the copies over simulacra, keeping them completely submerged, preventing them from climbing to the surface, and 'insinuating themselves' everywhere."³⁷

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum in Ancient Philosophy," in *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 246-247.

To subvert the hierarchical operation performed by essences and typological thought, it is necessary to find a means of supplanting the essences with an ontology that promotes difference *as such*—difference without mediation by identity. The role of the essence is to establish a transcendent identity that will be used to determine how the particular *differs from* this higher ontological form. To overturn Platonism requires the replacement of *essences* with *events*: bundles of virtual tendencies taken apart from the qualities and extensions of the actual. “Ideal events” replace “ideal essences,” diagrams of force and spaces of potentials replace lists of properties and orders of resemblance. The “ideal event” is the pure structure of an individuating process minus the terms or bodies involved in the process. The ideal event can be incarnated in countless different arrangements of bodies demonstrating no degree of resemblance to one another. The same bundle of potentials can yield dramatically different structures in different states of affairs—an unhinging of process from product, the replacement of the tracing with the map. The ideal event is open to inflection by accident and chance in its actualization; its inclusive operation accounts for the endless diversity of forms that can be spun out in its unfolding of processes within the actual.

Because actualized entities in no way resemble this field of pure tendencies from which they emerge, it can be said that they have initiated a series of divergent realizations that bear no resemblance to a model. As opposed to the “copies of copies” distinction made by both Goodman and Charles, the truth of their emergence is considerably stranger and antithetical to common sense: they are copies without a model, actualizations that overturn the very validity of the model-copy distinction. Each actualization relates difference to difference without the mediation of a model that could be used to determine

a fixed, timeless identity. Without the feeding-forward of a limitative abstract model into the process of their production, the series will continue to generate differences-of-differences as its process unfolds in an endless array of times and places. The members of the series can take on orders of greater or lesser degrees of resemblance (depending the relative stability of the processes that form them), but they have no known point of genesis to serve as the transcendent model by which they could be absolutely judged as members of a type.

Cage approves of this kind of “quantitative revolution” that lets difference and experimentation run free without the kind of absolute selection or qualitative decision that appeals to higher ontological forms. Against fears that the emergence of these false-pretenders represents a degradation of creative effort and all its assorted virtues, Cage counters with an assertion that celebrates the reemergence of difference and freedom from transcendent judgment. “By letting ‘bad’ elements proliferate,” he asserts, “you need not expect a general deterioration of quality, but a radical change which makes quality appear as an unacceptable limitation.”³⁸

The critique of the model/copy relationship isn’t simply a Deleuzian or Cagean quirk. It isn’t a matter of personal preference for the simulacra over the copy, or a perverse desire to upend conventional moral logic. Instead, this insistence on the emergence of simulacra and so-called “bad copies” points us toward a different mode of thought oriented toward grasping the sources of these divergent productions. As seen in Goodman’s struggle with Figure BB and DeLio’s attempt to grasp the ontological core of

³⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 236.

Variations II, it is the production of simulacra and atypical expressions – in other words, the genesis of the new and unrecognizable – that points us toward the virtual's full productive force. Such productions force us to accept one of two options: to depart from our commonsense ontological model and embrace one that could account for such atypical expressions, or to ignore or suppress such emerges by leaving them simply unthought or by reducing them to mere errors, personal failings, and other aberrations.

* * *

From Ontology to Ethics: The Process That Is the World

An important final note about this ontological sketch is necessary. While the model-and-copy mode of production (tracing) and the production-without-model mode are presented in opposition to one another, they are in fact modes that are different in degree than in kind. All process tends toward the uniqueness of the actual event, the singular emergence of the new, and every actualization embodies the *difference qua difference* of the simulacrum against the sanctified similarity of the model and copy. Even the most rigidly homologized process/product pairing has the potential to re-open and produce mutant offspring. Cage's indeterminate scores are not a special case or a unique invention, but an extreme limit-case of production unmoored from the restrictions of the tracing. Tracing has a functional, practical, and tactical purpose. It permits a useful domestication of productive potentials, and its capacity for the preservation and refinement of events is an essential component of living in the world. The model/copy relationship, however, is not a natural or logical property. Nor is it absolutely beneficial –

the tracing relationship is the source of repressive juridical power as well as the habitual power that trains us to desire infinite self-similar reproduction. The naturalization of the model/copy hierarchy requires a continual working against the flow and flux of the world, a flow that saves us from ossification and self-suppression even as it undoes the familiar and comfortable. The demand for consistent, self-similar objects of communication and transaction is itself a production, not an ontological truth – it is an active making-the-same in an effort to slow the world’s process of self-differing.

If the goal of art is, as Cage often asserts, to imitate nature in her manner of operation, then it is necessary to abandon aspirations to transcendent judgment. “Right” and “wrong” do not factor into a mode of production that is purely immanent – only tactical, functional judgments of “more successful” or “less successful” can operate without an otherworldly standard of measurement. There are pragmatic applications of the tracing model that can be used in select cases to further the project of joining nature in her manner of operation. Cage, for example, refused to apply his purely experimental tendencies to the consumption of mushrooms, as the cessation of his life would effectively minimize his capacity to engage in further experiments.³⁹ Performance should be treated in a similar manner – “ethically,” rather than “morally.” Life is a game of dosages, and while it should perhaps tend toward the non-teleological and non-hierarchical, there is no ontological foundation for why it should *absolutely* do so. Still,

³⁹ Cage makes the “mushroom counterbalance” explicit in *For The Birds*. On page 46, Cage is asked about abandoning his intentional will in composition and whether that act amounts to a form of harm or loss. Cage responds, “That’s not so serious! And it’s only if I act like that with mushrooms that it can kill me... So I studied mushrooms conscientiously, to bring about a balance!”

the experimental tendency is necessary to resist the tendency toward repressive power, and art represents one of the ideal arenas in which to extend the expression of the event-of-events: the world in its continuous becoming. By devising music nearer to the event, nearer to the reality of pure and directionless process, we becoming more keenly aware of our own capacity for endless becoming-other and our ability to slip from the bonds of enforced cultural reproduction. As Deleuze and Guattari assert in the final pages of *Anti-Oedipus*, perhaps their most explicitly “anarchist” text:

It is here that art accedes to its authentic modernity, which simply consists in liberating what was present in art from its beginnings, but was hidden underneath aims and objects, even if aesthetic, and underneath recordings or axiomatics: the pure process that fulfills itself, and that never ceases to reach fulfillment as it proceeds—art as ‘experimentation.’⁴⁰

Experimentation, not reproduction, is the reality of artistic production. Or, more precisely, experimentation *is* reality, and art puts us in touch with this reality of change. It draws us nearer to the process that is the world, against the reductions and minimizations that would encourage us to think a correspondence between our reductive concepts and the world’s capacity for unpredictable change. What Cage’s music provides us is a heightened sensation of this experimental power; in the performance of music, we gain something greater than mere appreciation for the form of a beautiful object. The encounter with the a power for variation gives us a feeling for a form of life – as Cage would say, the work itself is not an object but “a way of being in the world” – or a way of conjugating our powers of production with and within the world’s self-varying, a way of

⁴⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 371.

moving and making and sensing that could carry us far afield of our pre-scripted and predetermined ways of engaging with the world. As such, it calls for new means of evaluating our experiments, one capable of addressing the open-ended power of potential rather than referring to the already-constituted and already-judged, a mode of evaluation that leads us far from laws and prescriptions and into a groundless ethics of becoming.

Chapter Three: A Mistake Is Beside the Point -- Cage and Performance Ethics

*Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us.*¹

*What is heroic is to accept the situation in which you find yourself.*²

Who performs?

Cage valorizes interruption as a function of modern ethics: a willingness to be open to events, to allow one's intentions to be displaced, or, better yet, to question the ultimate authority of one's intentions in the first place. "Distractions? Interruptions? Welcome them. They give you the chance to know whether you're disciplined."³ The willingness to have one's intentions disrupted is at the heart of what Cage deemed "twentieth century ethics." The ringing telephone is a recurring metaphor. Cage chose to remain listed in the New York City phone book throughout his composing career as a way of letting a more contingent, distributed, impersonal approach to creativity into his studio: "I think that this thing I speak of about fluency is implied by [the willingness to

¹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 169.

² Cage, *For the Birds*, 56.

³ John Cage, *A Year From Monday* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1961), 11.

be deterred], and that is partly why I have these ideas I have. If I were to have a totally determined situation of my own conception, then of course I can be unlisted.”⁴

Which is to say that any creative approach that wants to reach into the virtual wellspring of novelty must involve distraction from one’s own plans, an opening onto the world as process. But it’s not just the telephone that provides this *necessary, creative* interruption. Other things are telephone-like, having their own voice, their own creative potentials and their own capacities to interject surprise into their context. Even the most mundane objects are actors, processes ever-unfolding, self-varying, and exerting their creative influence. Speaking of Jasper Johns’ tables, Cage invokes the lively insistence of objects, giving the object its own creative potential, or, rather, the event of the chance meeting between two processes, two collections of potentials. “Just, as answered, the telephone presents an unexpected though often recognized voice, so a table should speak, provoking, if not surprising, at least a variety of responses... Its surface stimulates the tendency to do something, in this case a process of bleaching and staining.”⁵

In order to understand Cage’s attitude toward performance, it’s important that we rethink a question that often goes unasked in studies of musical performance. In a performance, *who acts* or *what acts*? In most cases, it is assumed that performance is in some way an individual, intentional act in which the performer or performers bear a responsibility to some compositional model (the score, the composer’s intention, common standards and practices, etc.). In “realizing” the performance, the performer

⁴ Richard Kostelanetz and John Cage, *John Cage* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 6.

⁵ Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 78.

encounters obstacles and contexts that change or modify intentions, and the adept performer is capable of navigating these challenges with sufficient skill as to retain some degree of intentional communication across the boundaries of composer, performer, and listener. Clearly this model is intimately bound to the conventional model of the work as an object for reproduction or with the work as *possibility* to be realized by an autonomous performer. Thinking in terms of “realizing the possible” places us in a paradigm of agency where subjects act *against* the interference of the world in an attempt to realize personal intentions to greater or lesser degrees of success – a model of agency familiar to anyone with a conservatory background, and the model inhabiting the minds of nearly every performer hacking away in the practice room.

Cage, however, demands that we think about the problem of agency differently. In place of individual responsibility and intention, we are asked to think about the distributed agency of processes or events. Cage speaks of performances as events within this process-world, drawing together multiple process lines to yield a singular, unpredictable event. This event includes human intentions, but the event in its folding is not reducible to them – there is always an element of contingency which exceeds intention, deflects it, either slightly or dramatically. It is not simply the human performer that “animates” the musical situation. Instead, the human performer finds herself enmeshed in a busy field of material actants with their own particular agencies. Performance, therefore, is not the reproduction of an already-existent object, but is an action taking place within an ecology, a tweaking of potentials and processes already unfolding, always with contingent or unexpected results. The event as the cumulative effect of all its participants is the true “agent” of performance, and the role of the

performer is be sensitive to this situation in which she finds herself. “There is no more subject in a *combine* than there is in a page from a newspaper,” Cage insists. “It is a situation involving multiplicity” – a multiplicity that is the true agent of production.⁶ There is no doer, only the deed.

In order to understand why this ecology is necessary, we need to consider what Cage thinks of *things*. On this point, Cage is akin to McLuhan, Whitehead, Bergson, other process philosophers. Things in the world, regardless of their apparent stability or lifelessness, are actors because they are processes. That is to say, they have their own dynamisms and exert their own influences. Moreover, they combine together and allow their potentials to interpenetrate – a situation always has its own unique agency above and beyond the contribution of any individual. For Cage and Deleuze, the only thing that has true agency and the only thing that makes anything occur is the assemblage itself in its *bringing together of potentials*. Assemblages, not individuals, are the true actors of a performance.

Moreover, things are themselves open-ended assemblages that enter into ever-larger assemblages. Things are not *things* – stable, self-identical – but reflections of the virtual processes that are the generators and producers of the world. “For me, nothing flees. Nor is anything *present* anymore without moving,” Cage insists. “Things come and go. They are no more absent than present. If they were more this or that they would be reduced to objects. Once again we are dealing with processes rather than with objects,

⁶ Cage, “On Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work,” in *Silence*, 101.

and there would be no objects if there were no process of the whole, the process which each object is as well.”⁷

This liveliness of things is essential to understanding what Cage expects from performance in “the process that is the world.” Even the most apparently lifeless, common, inert objects possess an inner life, a way of cohering and changing amidst the forces that form, animate, and undo them. From our commonsense perspective, as middle-sized objects interacting with other middle-sized objects, most of the world we interact with seems almost painfully inert, and it is relatively easy to see how we might achieve our vitalist chauvinism about our agency as compared to the agency of, say, an ashtray. But Cage and Deleuze would insist that this is an optical illusion produced by the differences in our rates of change – the ashtray left alone would endure longer than our sense of change permits, giving it the false appearance of being inanimate or fixed. Similarly, the extraordinarily rapid changes occurred at the microscopic level of the ashtray occur faster (and at a spatial scale smaller) than our thresholds of experience permit. But this is merely an objective illusion, and a change in the scale or familiarity of our relationship with the ashtray, by technical means or in performance, would give us an opportunity to sense the way in which it, too, is animated by the world’s ongoing current of change, putting us closer to the noumenal world of dynamism as opposed to the phenomenal world of apparent stability. Cage emphasizes this secret or obscured dynamism of things in his interviews with Daniel Charles:

⁷ Cage, *For the Birds*, 154.

While in the case of the ashtray, we are indeed dealing with an object. It would be extremely interesting to place it in a little anechoic chamber and to listen to it through a suitable sound system. Object would become process; we would discover... the meaning of nature through the music of objects.⁸

Opening the field of expression to a range of non-human actors has an important consequence – it de-centers the source of every supposedly intentional action.

Supposedly successful intentional acts, or acts in which a presupposition about what is to occur matches what actually occurs, are consummated by dominating these secret potentials, by suppressing the liveliness of things unfolding their own processes, expressing their own virtual Ideas, enacting their own diagrams of forces and changes. One achieves the sense of being the sole actor by successfully regularizing interactions with things-as-processes until they appear simply as things-as-objects. Intention backgrounds the unpredictability of objects, it tames them, it crops out their process-lines and specificities in order to provide utility, predictability, stasis, mastery. But the successes of intention are only apparent; they only succeed by regulating contexts and interactions within tolerable bounds. As with the mutant versions of musical works lurking beneath codes and regulative demands, even the most precise performances possess a suppressed singularity, a fragment of inescapable contingency, a trace of expectation exceeded:

Exact measurement and notation of durations is in reality mental: imaginary exactitude. In the case of tape, many circumstances enter which ever so slightly, but nonetheless profoundly, alter the intention... Some of these circumstances are the effects of weather upon the materials; others follow from human frailty—the

⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 221.

inability to read a ruler and make a cut at a given point—still others are due to mechanical causes, eight machines not running at precisely the same speed.⁹

In order to give an account of what Cage expects from performers, in order to understand how we should approach difficult terms like success and failure when evaluating these performances, it is important to understand the consequences of this complex agency – which is, properly, an agency of *events* rather than an agency of subjects. Conventional accounts of performance, tinged with anthropocentric morality, place undue emphasis on the agency of individuals (the performer who bears responsibility for an outcome) and admit factors such as “context” only insofar as they facilitate or impede intentions. By contrast, Cage and Deleuze posit an ethics of performance that flattens the relationship between the agency of the sentient and non-sentient, folding them both into the agency of assemblages, of elements in combination with one another. For Cage, this ethics is the definition of a performer’s nobility – to be noble involves treating “all things equally and having equal feelings toward all beings, whether sentient or non-sentient.”¹⁰ An ethics of performance involves sensitivity to the complex field of intertwined processes *expressed by objects* and the negotiations between these complexities and the apparent simplicity of intentional action. “That’s what I’m trying to accomplish in my field: an ecological music,” Cage reminds us. “A music that would permit us to inhabit the world.”¹¹

* * *

⁹ Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence*, 30.

¹⁰ Cage, *For the Birds*, 202.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 215.

Ethics and Morality: A Deleuzian Distinction

In an interview with Richard Kostelanetz, Cage issues a statement that has profound resonance with Deleuze's work on ethics. Quoting their common philosophical ancestor, Antonin Artaud, Cage inquires:

[W]hat does this statement of Artaud's mean—*en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*? We should be finished once and for all with the judgments of God.¹²

What would it mean for a musician to be “done with the judgments of God?” What constitutes such a judgment? The answer is closely linked to the distributive, multilateral agency sketched above. God constitutes the figure of transcendent, unconditioned, unilateral and intentional agency – the master-sign of the world, that which creates, animates, and guarantees the stability of creation. A composer-god creates, *ex nihilo*, a stable and self-identical musical object, with intelligible and rational contours, a clear and distinct creation to remain itself and only itself for all time. A performer, able to grasp this musical object intelligibly and as a clear and distinct concept, feels herself duty-bound to reproduce this transcendent object in the material world and to erect a correspondence between the produced and the ideal. Sent away to a practice room, the performer disciplines herself and the materials she comes in contact with, eliminating the tics and interferences of dumb matter in an effort to sound a performance of worthy correspondence to its heavenly counterpart. Inevitably, the pathologies of human frailty

¹² Kostelanetz and Cage, *John Cage*, 8-9.

and material stubbornness compromise the performance, but, as the object of moral obligation still appears clear to the performer's reason, she must behave "as if" the world will not have its say.¹³

The regulative form of judgment applied to musical performance is the model of morality *par excellence* – its form is that of the judgment of God, the comparison of what a being is with what is expected of it, that is, the comparison between an essence or possible form with the (always-defective) actions of a being. Errors appear as external to the essence or the standard. Consequently, they must be attributed to a something outside of the form of possibility – the potential for deviation is not *within* the work itself, but emerges from elsewhere. In the case of musical performance, the "elsewhere" from which error arises is almost universally the supposed frailty or inadequacy of the performing subject, understood as the responsible individual performer. *You and you alone are the responsible moral agent of performance.*

To be done with the judgment of God, therefore, is to affirm something other than morality in performance. It is to affirm what Deleuze opposes to morality – to affirm *ethics*. Ethics calls not for conformation with the possible, but experimentation with the contours of the virtual and the potentials for transformation and novelty within a specific situation. It asks us to seek what a body can do in accordance with or in defiance of other bodies, how we can gather the potentials of a given situation to enact a transformative change within it. Ethics calls for the exploration of a body's capacity to act. Unlike morality, with its isolated center of responsibility, ethics recognizes the inherently social

¹³ This is Kantian morality reframed as performance demands by the work as regulative concept, as found in Lydia Goehr's *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, 101-6.

quality of all action. Not only the social quality of humans interacting with humans, but humans interacting with a lively world of object-processes with their own whims, demands, encouragements, and resistances. Moreover, the only way to enact the ethical approach is to *act with others* – ethics demands performance, not competence! Ethics experiments with what is possible by tweaking the relationships between things acting together to draw out the potential for novel experience, for a change in the relationships between them. In other words, we draw with Cage and Deleuze a distinction between a *moral* approach to performance – individual, “responsible,” subject to judgment by a transcendent standard – and an ethical approach to performance – complex, distributed agency, judged by an immanent standard. Cage aspires to this god-less, divergent world of continual creation, and his approach to performance foregoes the hierarchy of the model-copy relationship (with its inherent attribution of “error”) in favor of a horizontal, immanent network of relations which empowers all actors, human and otherwise, to mutually engage in the creation of the new.

The death of God is not the same as the elevation of Man – or, in this case, the death of the composer is not the elevation of the performer. It is not simply a function of replacing one transcendent Self with another, but of dissolving or evaporating any figure of the unconditioned, intentional actor. In this Cagean-Deleuzian world, there are not subjects who act or choose freely, but a more dispersed, complex, and impersonal freedom. There is no freedom in a sense of foundational free-will, since there is no such thing as an individual entity that could embody that will; instead, freedom exists only as the world’s own openness, an openness that we can enter into or open onto but from which we never stand independently, a freedom that moves around and through us but is

never our sole possession. As Deleuze writes about Nietzsche's death of God, our freedom emerges not from elevating ourselves but dissolving the sovereign subject so that it "opens itself to all other selves, roles, and characters which must be run through in a series like so many fortuitous events."¹⁴

* * *

Moral Agency, Ethical Agency

In his "45' For a Speaker," Cage makes clear the connection between the moral view of agency and the ethical view of agency with regard to error:

Error is drawing a straight line between anticipation of what should happen and what actually happens. What actually happens is however in a total not linear situation and is responsible generally. Therefore error is a fiction and has no reality in fact. Errorless music is written by not giving a thought to cause and effect. Any other kind of music always has mistakes in it.¹⁵

The conclusion he draws is as explicit as it is disruptive to conventional approaches to performance. For Cage, errorless music can only be made when one can "suddenly awaken to the fact" that "there is no split between spirit and matter."¹⁶ There is no difference in kind between our way of acting together with world and the manner in which the supposedly inanimate or non-sentient being acts together with the world. *Being is said in the same way for all things* – all things participate in the same way in an ongoing modification of one another, in the seamless becoming that is the world. More

¹⁴ Deleuze, "On the Will to Power and the Eternal Return," in *Desert Islands and other Texts* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 118.

¹⁶ Cage, "45' for a Speaker," in *Silence*, 168.

radically, the placing of spirit and matter on the same plane of existence means that there is nothing uniquely creative about spirit as opposed to matter. Creativity is a dimension of matter itself, just as spirit is a means by which matter gives an image to its own self-creativity. Moreover, the collapsing of spirit and matter into one self-modifying substance effectively eliminates the spirit-subject as the lone originator and executer of action. No longer can we speak of the individual as the unique originator of an action or as a moral agent. Instead, the merging of spirit and matter calls for a thinking of the *agency of events themselves*, or the agency of specific assemblages (gatherings of things and potentials).

Commentators and enthusiasts will often celebrate Cage's murder of the composer-God and his subsequent "freeing" of performers. By celebrating the newfound agency of performers, however, Cage's devotees (and, occasionally, Cage himself) fail to truly free themselves from the image of divine judgment. To have done with the judgment of God is to have done with any single-agent guarantor of cause and effect, of any single-agent guarantor of identity. Accounts of Cage's music that emphasize the "freedom" permitted to performers by replacing the composer-God with the performer-God miss this sense of distributed agency. Cage demands the destruction of all Gods in favor of the process-world and its complex, divergent, unpredictable open-whole nature. "This turning is psychological and seems at first to be giving up of everything that belongs to humanity—for a musician, the giving up of music. This psychological turning leads us 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.”¹⁷ The death of God isn’t the empowerment of the subject but its dissolution as an image of God – all creation (including the creation of subjects) is given to the chaotic, self-creative world-process in its unfolding. As Cage insists, the creative impulse belongs not to “a kind of subjectivity,” but to “something which comes before that and which – beyond that – allows ‘subjectivity’ to be produced.”¹⁸

Kant and Kantian thinkers focus on intentional agency (“the power to formulate and enact aims”¹⁹) because this is believed to be an exclusive domain of the human or the living. It is, in Deleuze’s terms, a version of the “hylomorphic” model of agency: the vital power of intentions and the will of the individual push the world’s dead matter into forms. We find a clear parallel in the conventional model of musical performance – the performer animates her instrument, which obeys her will to the degree that it conforms to her intentions. Within this model, the world of objects – instruments, concert halls, fellow performers, the social and physical structures surrounding the performer – can only act to define and constrain intentional actions. The performer acts “in context,” in a battle of intention and individual will versus the world. At its worst, the stuff of the world is pathologically resistant to the will of the performer. At its best, it is merely backgrounded, harmless, transparent.²⁰ As always, the emphasis is stubbornly subjective and anthropocentric. A perfectly human morality – the individual rational performer who

¹⁷ “Cage, “Experimental Music,” in *Silence*, 8.

¹⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 234.

¹⁹ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010), 29.

²⁰ Ibid., 29. “A structure can act only act negatively, as a constraint on human agency, or passively, as an enabling background.”

chooses and whose actions are gauged by resemblance to a standard to which it cannot remain faithful. The world as constraint prevents “the perfect performance.”

Performance, in its deviation from a transcendent perfection, can only build resentment and neurosis. Every performance is a moral failure.

Cage and Deleuze reject this model of inbuilt failure and perpetual shame at the cost of the model of God-like agency. Instead of action originating in a sovereign subject, they recognize the *world itself* as the agent of all action. More precisely, the *world itself is action* – it is a process. Every seemingly subjective action, every decision, rides atop a torrent of action already in progress and processes already underway. We are born into our actions rather than our actions being born within us. In *A Year from Monday*, Cage explicitly takes birth as his example of a decentered or complex action against the apparent simplicity of subjective decision: “To do? Or is it already done for us? What did we do to be born? Did we, after consideration, choose life here rather than on another planet or in another solar system, feeling there were better opportunities on Earth?”²¹ Our births, like our thoughts and actions, *occur to us*, and our subjective nature emerges from the complex interplay of social, technical, and material processes at once immediate, local, and specific and yet extending out to infinity. Against simple cause-and-effect reasoning, Cage and Deleuze attribute action not to a single source, but to the immense and infinitely complex entanglement of processes that produce the world. “The truth is

²¹ Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 113.

that everything causes everything else,” says Cage. “We do not speak therefore of one thing causing another.”²²

The Cagean-Deleuzian perspective on distributed or assemblage agency does not pose the subject as the origin of an effect, but rather sees the subject as selecting from potentials already at work in the same way that one dips a rudder into a rushing stream. In place of the supposedly self-sufficient efficacy of the actor-performer, we encounter, in the words of Jane Bennett, “not one vitality, but a swarm of vitalities at play.” Our ability to act is not an *ex nihilo* creation but an effect of the vital swarm itself, a production within an ongoing event (the creation and maintenance of a body, itself a product of an ever-expanding network of social and material forces) and a selective force within that ongoing production. Intention, therefore, isn’t something that adds a spark of animation to a static scene, but something that *selects*, *limits*, and *redirects* the movement of potential – “to figure the generative source of effects as a swarm is to see human intentions as always in competition and confederation with many other strivings... it vibrates and merges with other currents.”²³ Intention, far from being self-sufficient or sovereign, is a fold within the swarm, constantly affecting and being affected by its contours. Cage’s oft-spoken non-intention, therefore, is less a function of ignoring or negating the actual existence of intention but of affirming the kernel of contingency, chaos, or virtuality at its core. Again, from the interviews with David Charles:

²² Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 17.

²³ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 32.

D.C.: But that paradox [of purposeful purposelessness] doesn't suppose a renunciation on your part of all control.

J.C.: There is, obviously, control over what happens. But that control is a function of uncertainty...²⁴

Moral approaches see the directedness of movement as a purposeful intention of God or a God-like subject (one capable of enacting his will without resistance). By contrast, ethical or assemblage-oriented approaches can only see intentional trajectory as emerging from the overlapping impulses of bodies affecting and being affected by one another: intentions are neither separate from nor other than the elements of a context, but are instead a registering of the potentials in a situation. Choices are immanent to a situation without preexisting it – the appearance of free choice is a product of overlapping processes already under way and an emergent effect of a network of nested complexities. This should not be mistaken for the subject acting in context, a model that still implies an autonomous actor whose impulses toward action are modified by her surroundings. Instead, the true actor is *the event itself*, the process sweeping along a meshwork of bodies and ideas in their mutual complication and interaction. In place of simple cause-and-effect, we find a much slipperier, skewed view of a performer's intentional agency.

Which is not to say, however, that Cage and Deleuze denied the presence of intentions, significance, and the sense of self-directed action. Human intentions do indeed have crucial effects on an unfolding situation, but they are constantly displaced as the sole meaningful producers of actions. Instead, human intentions and musical works can enact a transformation on an assemblage – they can be an “assemblage converter,”

²⁴ Cage, *For the Birds*, 168.

changing the virtual relationships within an ecology, but they can never be the sole determiner of what occurs in this complicated, manifold sense of causality. She can induce an event, as seeding clouds can induce rain, but cannot control the precise dimensions of what will precipitate. From the vantage point of the event's unfolding, human agency appears "as a local input of free variation... an interrupter... an irruption of transductive indeterminacy at its very heart."²⁵ In a 1965 interview with Richard Kostelanetz and playwright Richard Foreman, Cage explains the importance of this redirected intentional action, which serves to induce or redirect an event's unfolding but is incapable of fully determining it:

The new word for me is 'contingency.' It means acting in such a way that not necessarily anything happens. But that if you didn't act, if you didn't perform, nothing would happen at all... Now if between the cause of an effect and the effect itself—the effect being a performance—there are junctions which are flexible and which you are ignorant about, then when you activate the removed cause and travel through this junction to the effect you don't necessarily do anything.²⁶

Human intention therefore is required to induce the event of performance and to steer it, but the full array of a performance's effects and outcomes cannot be solely attributed to its powers. Instead, it is the creative power of intention to permit the appearance of *surprise* – Cage's non-intention, therefore, is precisely this opening-up to the over-human potentials that intention helps to steer, the unthought in intention, or the excess over

²⁵ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 130.

²⁶ John Cage, Richard Foreman, and Richard Kostelanetz, "Art in the Culture," in *Conversations on Art and Performance*, ed. Gautam Dasgupta and Bonnie Marranca (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 121.

intention that haunts every action. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze says that the goal of ethics is to avoid willing *what* occurs in the event, but rather that one should will *something in that which occurs* – one merely gives body to the emergence of a difference.²⁷ Intentions and goal-oriented actions do not disappear, but are instead subsumed by the agency of the process itself, which invariably occurs within the emergence of a singular, irreproducible event:

The process opens up to include things which have no emotive properties, but also to re-include objects charged with significance and intention. These objects are carried along in the process, they no longer dominate it and turn it into an object... [they] can enter into this enlarged situation, without determining the nature of this situation... [T]he situation as a whole can be seen or experienced outside of a consideration of each individual.²⁸

A shift in perspective, from the primacy of individual agency to the dispersed agency of events, has profound ramifications for the performer's experience. Regardless of the precision with which an action is performed, regardless of rehearsal and rigorous bodily discipline, hours or months or years of institutional refinement of technique, there is always a fringe of indeterminacy in every performance – in fact, our ability to enact anything in a performance affirms this open-ended indeterminacy. Disappointment and surprise are thus two sides of the same coin. The deviation of results from intention in the moral approach to performance inevitably and cruelly places sole blame on the individual for failing to enact her will. The gap between intention and action registers as disappointment. By contrast, the performer who enacts an event, who excites potentials

²⁷ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 170.

²⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 147.

within a given setting and allows the event to achieve its own ends, registers the difference between intention and action as a sign of the productive power of distributive agency. No melancholy, but celebration – no doer, only the deed. “We aren’t the ones celebrating,” Cage affirms, “it’s *what occurs that does the celebrating*.”²⁹ Bruno Latour, whose theories of assemblage-oriented agency echo the Cagean cry, puts it thusly: “There are events, I never *act*; I am always slightly surprised by what I do; that which acts through me is also surprised by what I do, by the chance to mutate, to change, and to bifurcate.”³⁰

What is curious is that the “moral” performer feels these potentials, too, but the valence is changed. The sweaty-palmed musician playing a jury before their superiors feels the incursion of all these becoming-others, these impersonal tics and twitches, the “something more” fringing every personal activity, but they are terrifying rather than exciting. Why the terror? Because they are subjected to the power of the abstract model, the moral rule – and the authorities waiting to re-impose it, to freeze the becoming of one of these unofficial variants before it can unprofitably stray from its model. By contrast, the ethical performer seeks to slip from the model-copy relationship, with its emphasis on the production of resemblance and making-the-same, and court each event in its singular unfolding, embracing the fringe of indeterminacy that founds decision and sensing the contours of the swarm. To do so is always an imprecise, anexact science, an always-incomplete selection, merging, and redirecting of forces. It is the properly *experimental*

²⁹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 211.

³⁰ Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 281. Quoted in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 103.

science of investigating this slippery causal network and teasing out its transformative potentials. Above all, it is a process that requires suspension of our sense of autonomous action, an opening up to the new possibilities provided by a situation's combined potentials. As Cage says:

So that when one says there is no cause and effect, what is meant is that there are an incalculable infinity of causes and effects, that in fact each and every thing in all of time space is related to each and every other thing in all of time and space. Being so there is no need to cautiously proceed in dualistic terms of success and failure or the beautiful and the ugly or good and evil, but rather simply to walk on 'not wondering,' to quote Meister Eckhart, 'am I right or doing something wrong.'³¹

* * *

With this approach to ecological or assemblage agency in place, we should revisit the question of how to conceive of the Cagean-Deleuzian divide between morality and ethics. Morality and ethics are two operations of becoming, two orientations toward operating within the world's process-unfolding. Faced with the absolute singularity and uniqueness of every moment and the complexity of every situation, they serve as two means of coping with reality's teeming complexities. As such, it is not a question of which approach accurately reflects reality – there is only one reality, the reality of constant change – but of how one chooses to act within that reality. Ethics and morality always exist in mixture; it would be impossible and surely undesirable to live without any grounding in habit, repetition, and stability. But it is equally dangerous to live without it –

³¹ Cage, "Composition as Process," in *Silence*, 47.

one ossifies in the domain of endless static repetition, one becomes increasingly disinterested and closes off to the vital currents that surround us, increasingly stupid and insensitive to one's enmeshment in a complex causal network.

Morality relies on an economy of reproduction, recapturing each new situation and framing it in within general rules – it is the domain of *habit*, the cultivation of good habits, education. It operates by the exclusion of particularity – it extracts general rules from singular occurrences, and feeds them forward into new contexts. Here we should be particularly attentive to the roots of the word morality, stemming from the Latin *moralis* and its implication of proper manner, behavior, or custom. Morality becomes a function of habit, of cultivating the correct general responses to a given particular situation. One extracts the essence of a situation, apart from its particular inflection, and applies a generalized rule of behavior. Morality carries the weight of obligation to a transcendent standard – the ideal action that it is called to resemble – and personal responsibility. The moral obligation takes the form of rule-bound generality. A moral rule is a universal rule, an obligation to be fulfilled regardless of the encroachments of context. There's a Kantian ring to this “moral responsibility” – one imagines oneself a free actor, apart from the pathologies of interest and untroubled by the persistent halo of contingency framing each situation and oblivious to the processual web from which such freedom emerges. Morality appears in the dimension of individual or personal choice within a context, as if the two elements (subject and context) could be separated. Above all, morality calls for the subtle death of surprise. It is assurance, confidence, the domain of good sense and common sense, ensured by an identity-guaranteeing form of God (regardless of religious

belief) and patrolled by the police, both in the internal form of conscience and the external form of repressive or generative disciplinary power.

It is no accident that morals are often most rigorously encouraged by institutions and authorities (though they need not be exclusively), as the role of these powers is to regularize the occurrences of certain kinds of events across contexts – that is, to minimize the influence of the “something else” in each re-emergence of an event. They ensure that behaviors cross contextual gaps relatively intact; any changes that do occur from context to context occur within predictable, tolerable, or recognizable bounds. The musical work as possibility is the moral model par excellence – an infinitely receding horizon of possibility to which we aspire but inevitably fall short, the unattainable standard to which each event emergence is held. The failings are external to the work itself when conceived as a moral law – there is nothing in the work that caused their production – and the difference between intention and realization most often falls on the performer. Nearly every error in a well-regulated context becomes a *subjective* error. When the relationship between the musical work and its performance is based on resemblance to a transcendent standard, it becomes a model of *infinite debt* and *personal, individual responsibility*. Moreover, it creates the cult of the composer’s intention: in place of God or the ideal man or any other transcendent standard, it erects the creator-God of the composer, to whom an obligation is permanently owed.

It is this moral obligation that Cage opposes – the reinstatement of subjects, Gods, genius men and women. There is, however, no reinstatement of another standard and no solitary source of authority. The ethics that replaces morality opposes *wisdom*, or the sense of knowing the proper response to a given situation, with an emphasis on invention

the transformation of values rather the upholding of a transcendent standard.

Responsibility to authority is replaced by responsibility to the world's self-creation; one tends to events. Cage suggests that his determinate-indeterminate works provide a model for this impersonal, a-personal, trans-personal creativity. Stripped of a capacity for resemblance, they put us into contact with an ethics of the event. Cage attacks the reduction of the complexity associated with individualist morality as an act of repressive power. The oversight of a transcendent "ought" is not a fact of nature or the world's infinite becoming, but a policing of that capacity for difference – a policing that assumes the existence of individual responsibility in order to control the difference-producing effects of deviant subjects. In place of the dominating law of resemblance (a "vision of the work that must contain this or that, thus excluding other elements"), there is an ethical grasping of a "tremulous non-figure" that is the co-functioning of an event's complexity and the potentials contained therein. Cage elaborate on these opposed poles in *For the Birds*:

D.C. When we last discussed Stockhausen's idea of continuum, you disagreed that a work could be at once determinate and indeterminate...

J.C. Yes, if 'at once' implies a global vision of the structure of the work, taken abstractly as an essence, as something very general. That is too often what the conventional composer does, whether or not he composes serially... But that view of things eliminates the strangeness unique to indeterminacy... Don't stick to an overly distant and overly dominating vision of the work which must include this and that, thus excluding various other elements, etc... Tyranny and violence fall under the heading of linearity. Indeterminacy, as I conceive it, is a leap into non-linearity. Or abundance...

(D.C. insists that there is a unity, a whole, a thing even in the most complex of the Musicircuses...)

J.C. Perhaps. But what you discovered was not the unity of a fixed figure, but that of a tremulous ‘non-figure.’ That is what I call multiple unity. It’s not the unity of a multiplicity or diversity. I mean that the plurality of the groups is not eliminated by the impression of a super-individual unity.³²

By contrast, ethics operates immanently within the situation at hand. Rather than appeal to externalized general rules, it operates within the specificity of determining constraints and concerns itself with the creative conversion of constraint into potential. It suspends universal judgments of “good and evil” in favor of tactical judgments of “good and bad.” Ethics operates within a relative or situational horizon rather than an absolute obligation. Ethics pertains less to duty than to freedom – it is situated within experimentation rather than duty, though habit and the form of duty do have a place. While morality works to restrain the production of diversity that the world’s inherent differing generates, ethics seeks to sensitively track the potentials for transformation. Whereas morality works backward from the particulars of a situation to a general law, ethics begins with the generalized form of habit or familiarity and extends into the unpredictability of the particular. The goal of ethics is not self-destructive or arbitrary action, but self-sustaining creative transformation; ethics is the project of becoming at home *within* transformation by grasping situational transformative capacities. It is to understand oneself and one’s actions as a particular, permeable node of difference (to see “things directly as they are: impermanently involved in an infinite play of interpenetrations”³³) within the world’s becoming and to sustain that node not by

³² Cage, *For the Birds*, 198-99.

³³ Cage, “Experimental Music: Doctrine,” in *Silence*, 15.

defensive, paranoid identity-obsession and reproduction of the same, but by a careful leap into the stream of difference.

In order to be free of the transcendental *ought*, duty, and obligation, Cage and Deleuze work toward an immanent ethics that seeks to eliminate resentment – the sense that the world impedes the pure execution of our “oughts.” This requires a dissolution of the boundary between an acting self and the other that judges it; in other words, it requires a shift from the perspective of individual agency to the agency of the event in its unfolding – to complicate, intensify, complexify, to confuse agencies or to place them between the supposed actors. It is to view the open-ended potentiality of a situation *as such* from the perspective of its event-unfolding. In order to abandon the form of God, it requires that one first abandon the form of the self, that one recognize the self as a production within a de-centered, a-personal event, and that the sovereign “I” be replaced with the impersonal “someone.” In order to approach this point where the self becomes imperceptible, it is necessary to move beyond the confines of imagination (“imagination becomes my blinders”) and away from the form of possibility, leaping instead into the topological realm of the virtual and the a-subjective agency of the event and its attendant forces or potentials.³⁴

³⁴ Constantin Boundas, “Deleuze’s Difference,” in *Deleuze and Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), 15. “Intensification and intensity, in order to be capable of delivering us from the judgment of God, must first free themselves from subjectivity, transcendental fields, and personological coordinates. They must be resituated, away from the typologies of the noetico-noematic structures of reasons, motives, and deeds, and closer to the topological diagrammatic configurations of forces and counterforces.” A Cagean-Deleuzian ethics can never fully hinge on *intention*, insofar as intention, in its inherently conservative form as “possible action to be fulfilled,” is something to be subverted or opened by contingency.

Thus, the ethics advocated by Cage and Deleuze requires that we cleave a distinction between context and situation. “Context” implies this divide between a subject (nominally free) and the elements within which it interacts. “Situation,” however, “is an empirical context grasped from the point of view of the eventful washing-through it of an ongoing movement of transformation.”³⁵ This unfolding event- or process-dimension that moves through a situation is *prior* to the recognition of oneself as “acting in a context” – a situation operates of its own accord, and one’s recognition of “error” is back-projected according to what one *expected* to happen in the unfolding of an event. It is only after-the-fact that one recognizes how intention differs from the event’s actualization; prior to that, Cage insists, “everything that happens authentically is.” The initiation and execution of an intention, therefore, is not limited by context – it is *produced* from the potentials inherent in a situation. Choice is the experience of the complication of these tendencies in their mutual interaction and modulation, the feeling of tapping into already-unfolding processes, of linking their potentials.

This kind of ethics makes no appeal to a transcendent or universal standard. Instead, it seeks to evaluate acts by the potentials they embody and reveal, the immanent mode of existence implied by the act and its effects. One says or does this, thinks or feels that: what mode of existence does it imply? “We always have the beliefs, feelings, and thoughts we deserve,” writes Deleuze, “given our way of being or our style of life.”³⁶

³⁵ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 265, n. 9.

³⁶ Daniel W. Smith, “Deleuze and the Question of Desire: Toward an Immanent Theory of Ethics,” *Parrhesia* 2 (2007), 67. Deleuze quotation is from *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 1. On the distinction between ethics and morality, see *Negotiations* 100-101, 113-114.

Whereas morality is restrictive, limitative, or explicitly prescriptive, ethics is facilitative – it calls upon an event to change what a body can do, what it can hear, what it can feel, how it can exist in the world. The evaluation required by ethics is an evaluation of what sort of life-world an event suggests, what possibilities it allows. It is, by definition, experimental. The musical work in Cage’s hands becomes something other than an object for reproduction; it becomes “a way of being in the world,” an ideal event, a way of experimenting with a situation’s potentials or jacking into the combined potentials of an event.

Thus Cage and Deleuze reframe *performance* as an ethical necessity. Here we must separate performance from competence – performance is the exercise of a style, a singular way of bringing together heterogeneous elements, whereas competence concerns a relationship of resemblance between an ideal and an actual act. Here we find another important commonality between Cage and Deleuze, one that directly bears on their process-oriented approach to ontology: their re-appropriation of Nietzsche’s eternal return. Both ethics and morality pit the performer against the same imperative: *whatever you will, will it in such a way that you will its eternal return*. For the moralist, this calls for an eternal return of the same, the eternal return of what already is and has been – a demand for moral perfection of the familiar and habitual, a refinement of what is already established, or a nearing to an essential ideal.³⁷ For the ethicist pitted against a world of

³⁷ Cage, *For the Birds*, 47. Cage’s words are an express rebuttal to proposing the eternal return as the eternal return of the Same. Like Deleuze, he proposes an eternal return of Difference, or the eternal return of events. The exchange is also notable for this dissolution of individual identities into the pre-individual flux of singularities and ideal events:

events and processes, however, there is no return of the same, but only an eternal repetition of styles of differing – “there is only eternal rebirth, only that.”

If the eternal return is indeed “perpetual rebirth or reincarnation,” as Cage insists it is, what repeats cannot be the gauged by a law of resemblance – it is not the same set of actual bodies and qualities that are recycled, but *events and processes* unmoored from fixed objects of reproduction.³⁸ A static world would require what Constatin Boundas calls “the morality of resignation” in which we would only need to measure the resemblance between contexts to refer ourselves to a proper habitual response – this instrument is roughly the same as the other, this concert hall like any other, this performance like all other performances. By contrast, Cage’s ethics calls for a forgetting or disrupting of the link between intention and result, cause and presumed effect, and a leap into what Cage calls non-linearity. Only then can we enter the eternal return of events and their concomitant undoing and redoing of the world. Echoing Duchamp, Cage claims the ethical value of forgetting habit, even the habit of creating habits:

...[O]ne must strain to reach the impossibility of remembering, even when experience goes from an object to its double. In contemporary civilization where everything is standardized and where everything is repeated, the whole point is to

D.C. Aren’t you risking forgetting everything the West displays – both in its music and in its conception of time – in terms of duration and future?

J.C. But the instant is always a rebirth, isn’t it?

D.C. Are we the ones who are reborn?

J.C. Us? We’re not there anymore...

D.C. So you take exception to what Nietzsche envisioned under the label eternal return?

J.C. I would say there is only eternal rebirth. Only that.

³⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 138.

forget the space between an object and its duplication. If we didn't have this power of forgetfulness, if art today didn't help us to forget, we would be submerged, drowned under, those avalanches of rigorously identical objects.³⁹

We must break this linkage between a productive principle and an anticipated object in order to render performance properly experimental and creative and thus to break us from the cycle of inert repetitions and moral obligations.

Here we can draw an important distinction between the active experimentation of Cagean-Deleuzian ethics and a common misunderstanding about the role of passivity or openness in performance of Cage's works. Indifference to results needs to be tied to this active, disciplined, amoral approach associated with this ethics of the event. Precisely *what* occurs in the event should not be willed – one merely gives body to the emergence of a difference. This does not mean, however, that one cannot will *something in that which occurs*. To will an indefinite something requires a careful mixture of discipline and recklessness, or between obligation and experimentation. Too reckless and one quickly recedes into mere subjective will ("doing what you want"), too disciplined and one will achieve only what one imagines or endure only what one does not enjoy – no transformation is possible under either condition. One must not simply acclimate or accede to a given state of affairs, but to embrace and activate the potential for *things not yet realized* to emerge within it. Cage's famous ethical injunction – "to accept the situation in which you find yourself" – is not simply a call to resign oneself to a state of affairs (the static "context"), but to forget what is supposed to happen within it, to forget ones habitual obligations and instead grasp, as if outside oneself, the event-situation itself

³⁹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 80.

or the swarm of potentials from which one emerges and in which one participates. Only by embracing the always-underway transformations around us can we hope to avoid being unworthy of the events of our events and free of resentment.

In other words, we should be cautious about adopting a “quietist” interpretation of Cage’s injunction to accept the situation in which one finds oneself. It is not necessarily a call to stoic passivity or a desire for self-wounding. To accept the *situation* in which one finds oneself is not to passively accept *the state of affairs* in which one finds oneself. A state of affairs is but one state of actualization in which a dynamic *situation* appears in the unfolding of an event. In every situation there are potentials defined by the event, potentials unactualized, sometimes even unthought. Ethics is the science of developing sensitivity to those potentials. Resentment of one’s situation – the failure of intention to align with result – is the opposite of such sensitivity. Therefore accepting one’s situation entails opening oneself to the washing-through of the event’s powers of modification and to co-participate in a super-individual, self-enjoying dynamic of the world in its becoming. To accept one’s will as a flux among other fluxes, a flux made possible by its entanglement in other fluxes – to sense the field of choice as it develops out of mutual complication, a multiplicity of intertwined forces, rather than to misapprehend one’s field of choice as separate from the world and as tainted by the whims of context.

To grasp the essence of an event is to enter into a situation is to grasp its multiplicity, its topological essence, which pertains not to the empirical situation at hand but to the forces at work in it, the forces and potentialities conditioning it: “In other words, essence does not belong to things or subjects, but rather to the forces conditioning

these beings, whether these forces be linguistic, social, historical, or affairs of power.”⁴⁰

Understanding his vision of non-intention not as passivity, but as the ongoing and rational redirection and deflection of intention, enables us to relax our desire for control, ownership, and endless self-identity and attempt to explore avenues of experience blocked by the logic of repetition. “To be ‘noble’ is to be detached, at every instant, from the fact of loving and hating... To help you understand what this is all about, I would say that the absence of nobility occurs, in a performer, for example, when instead of behaving faithfully by doing what he is asked to do, he decides that what he has to play is unworthy of him. He has heard it said that this music is indeterminate, left up to chance, etc. – and refuses to play. Or else, the performer may decide that everything is good, that anything goes, and that it is enough to play any way at all.”⁴¹

When viewed from the perspective of morality, the uncoupling of ethics from obligation can be seen as abdication of responsibility. It can also – and Cage sometimes slips into this trap – be thought of as a kind of libertarianism or a freeing of the individual. But the individual freedom is already dependent on a collective investment, a constellation of forces and constraints. The goal of ethics is to explore the degree of play within boundaries that exist (because the boundaries, as such, are already inescapable) rather than to bind oneself. Ethics is necessarily situational and pragmatic, happening between people, materials, forces, tensions and pulls that both constitute and undo intention. There is no intrinsic standard, no measure of good or evil. The ethical value of

⁴⁰ Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 145.

⁴¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 202

an action, as Brian Massumi writes, “is what it brings out *in* the situation, *for* its transformation” – it is a matter of selection and connection, of careful limitation of and considered openness to transformations already underway.⁴² It is not simply a function of eliminating constraint or escaping hierarchy (though it may involve these, too), but a matter of fostering potentials, including potentials that could carry us far afield from our familiar identities, our likes and dislikes. It is not a project of liberating the individual to celebrate predefined wants and needs, but to bring out capabilities and connections that stand to transform us and our situations – to experiment on the real, to facilitate new emergences and test them rather than excluding them *a priori*.

* * *

Permission granted, but not to do whatever you want.⁴³

Why, then, do we need a score? What purpose does the musical work have? *To save us from our habits*. Habit works to limit the influence of a situation’s vital particularities. It assumes a thoroughly regularized, passive, and inanimate context in which an individual acts – it takes a past action, generalized from its own unique assemblage of potentials, and repeats it in a context deemed “close enough” to the one preceding it. It assumes regularity and passivity, it closes off awareness of a material situation’s particularities, its vital potentials, and seeks the same result from a similar

⁴² Massumi, “Navigating Moments,” 9.

⁴³ Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 28.

setting. Cage's scores and suggestions provide us a means of freeing us from the habitual knot that we mistake for freedom – it save us from simply getting what we expect. We will never be able to achieve the freedom of experimental action by simply doing what we want, and we cannot be awakened to the singular potentials inhering within the present by simply eliminating obstacles to our intentions. Our only free acts, to paraphrase Cornelius Cardew, are our accidents – and Cage's music becomes a means of productively generating these spontaneous eruptions by bending intention back against itself so that it can tap into the virtual realm of surprise from which it emerged.

Freedom suggests that individual *decision*, in a situation supposedly free from restriction, provides the source of action and thus is the source of the new, unforeseen musical occurrence. But as far as decision is tied to subjective intention, and subjective intention emerges from habit, it is at best a severely limited form of freedom – a freedom to reduce, repeat, reproduce. For Cage, however, such acts of subjective decision and the creation of the new are mutually exclusive. Improvisation is not sufficient for the discovery of new musical or social relations, since apparently free subjective decision is only the recall or reconstruction of previously acquired habits and preferences. All intentional actions arise from patterns of acquired knowledge and action, regardless of the degree of “imagination” that goes into their arrangement. In a situation with a minimum degree of restriction, every subjective intentional act is bound to succeed in repeating the past. For Cage, all intentional choices are inherently forced choices: “In view, then, of a totality of possibilities, no knowing action is commensurate [with the experimental action], since the character of the knowledge acted upon prohibits all but

some eventualities.”⁴⁴ There is a freedom, however, greater than impoverished subjective freedom – there is a freedom from subjectivity, the freedom of the event or abstract, a-personal Life.

The first purpose of the score is to deflect the influence of habit, which inherently has the moral form. For Cage and Deleuze, habit is more than intimately related to the production of a subject – it *is* the production of a subject. Our bodies, our thoughts, and our behaviors become ours by a process of selection and reduction from the infinite complexity of reality. Habit is the means by which stability, recognition, and the capacity for resemblance appear. Without habit or stability, our personal subjective life would be impossible, or, at the very least, undesirable. But habit withdraws us from the world’s self-creating power as far as it constitutes a capacity for *resistance* to the world’s current of change. There is no creativity within the confines of habit, only recognition and forced resemblance. Habit produces insensitivity, shields us from thought and encounters with the singular. It is palliative and conservative insofar as it is the opposite of thought – habit preserves us from the violence of thought. It is habit and the form of intentional subjectivity that preserve us by selectively blinding us, and Cage points to the necessity of going beyond both: “What I think and what I feel can be my inspiration but it is then also my pair of blinders. To see one must go beyond the imagination and for that one must stand absolutely still as though in the center of a leap.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence*, 15.

⁴⁵ Cage, “45’ for a Speaker,” in *Silence*, 170.

Conscious choice and intentional actions are the result of *finitude*, the reduction of infinite complexity by the mechanisms of habit, which is, properly, bodily and unconscious. Our very bodies are composed of habits, normalized patterns of inorganic materials, an ongoing series of memory folded into anticipation. Habit stabilizes, normalizes, and standardizes – it works to slow the world’s movements toward disintegration and mutation. Habit forms the associations and the preserves stable forms we encounter in the actual; it conserves traces of the past and reorients them toward future stabilizing actions. But habit is not simply psychological – it is a kind of impersonal memory traversing the organic and inorganic, the most animate being and the least. Everything that resists the proliferation of difference, everything that achieves a consistency (for no matter how long or short a duration) is in the grips of habit:

[H]abit manifests its full generality: it concerns not only the sensory-motor habits that we have (psychologically), but also, before these, the primary habits that we are; the thousands of passive syntheses of which we are composed... We are contemplations, we are imaginations, we are generalities, claims, and satisfactions... [T]here is no continuity apart from habit... we have no other continuities apart from those of our thousands of component habits... What organism is not made of elements and cases of repetition, of contemplated and contracted water, nitrogen, carbon, chlorides and sulphates, thereby intertwining all the habits of which it is composed?⁴⁶

In other words, a body is a place where flows no longer move without resistance – a place of selection and tactical reduction. Impingements are buffered by habits, which manage the shock of new events by routing them into patterns of action and reaction. Like everything else, habit is a becoming – a becoming-the-same, a becoming-

⁴⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 74-5.

regularized. Our bodies are regularized currents of minerals and fluids captured in circuits of anticipation and reaction, our perceptions are standardized means of selecting and reducing the complexity of the world to a useful set of responses, our supposedly free choices are standardized means of grasping potentials pre-selected by our bodies. Habit is the process by which our subjectivity is constituted, but at a price – the emergence of a constitutive stupidity. In the process of making-the-same, the particularities of a singular occurrence are converted into a generalized tendency, a tendency to perceive and respond in future situations *close enough* the present situation. To become a subject, therefore, is to become fundamentally disinterested in situational complexity. The body, continually contracting and regularizing fluxes into eddies of stability, performs an unconscious or reactive first selection, acting as a selective filter for the torrent of events passing over and through it. The appearance of so-called “free choice” appears only after this primary, unconscious selection – the appearance of our supposedly active, autonomous will is conditioned by a constitutive blindness and a field of choice pre-scripted by habit. As Quentin Meillassoux argues, “The living is not primarily the emergence of a power of interested choice, but the emergence of a massive disinterest in the real, to the profit of certain rare segments of the latter, which constitute the whole of perception.”⁴⁷

Therefore a fundamental condition of living beings is stupidity and disinterestedness. Our subjectivity is not something added to being, but is a result of this subtractive filtering: “cowardice, cruelty, baseness and stupidity are not simply corporeal

⁴⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, “Subtraction and Contraction: Deleuze’s Remarks on Matter and Memory,” *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development* III (2007), 74.

capacities or traits of character or society; they are the structures of thought as such.”⁴⁸

Stupidity is not the same as error: it is not simply that we do not understand the world, but that our existence as subjects within it emerges because we are closed to parts of it. But we are capable of changing *what variety of stupid we might be*. We can draw nearer to a kind of pure perception of the world’s terrifying, splendid complexity by diminishing our feeling of subjectivity – to abandon stupidity is therefore to abandon subjectivity, as the act of learning involves finding one’s identity effaced, strained, or suspended. Deleuze refers to this constitutive stupidity as *bêtise*: the non-coincidence of intention with the complexity of reality, or the non-coincidence of thought with the unthought from which it emerges. Stupidity is troubling and inevitable, but it is also an essential condition of thought as it permits the bending of its habitual prescriptions. It is because of this non-coincidence that our minds can change, but only by unconscious means – by an encounter with the radical outside Cage and Deleuze see as the greater, impersonal life.

Opening up to this greater life runs a risk, however, for us as a bundle of habits – the risk of harm, derangement, even death. Cage clearly aspires to a habit-breaking music that would not render us beatifically comfortable in our current form, free to indulge in familiar pleasures, but one that will put us into contact with danger and death. Music as morality, education as conformity (“always the next step from the police”⁴⁹), and the safety of representation and recognition all shield the safety of our habit-built subjectivity

⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 151.

⁴⁹ John Cage and Joan Retallack, *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan UP, 1996), 293.

at the price of distancing us from world's creative transformation. Those that would privilege self-similarity and stability above all else side with the police and the judges, preserving order by resisting the capacity for change inhering in every situation. "What they have in mind is self-preservation," Cage asserts. "And what is self-preservation but only a preservation *from* life? Whereas life without death is no longer life but only self-preservation... The acceptance of death is the source of all life."⁵⁰

We should be mindful not to think of this acceptance as merely a passive act. Cage saw it as an active opening, a making-receptive of our body-minds instead of habit's active making-closed. He referred to this active, sensitive, experimental making-receptive as *discipline*, an inversion of the commonsense understanding of the term as a practice that reduces variation by inducing closure:

[D]iscipline is, before everything, a discipline of the ego. The ego without discipline is closed, it tends to close up on its emotions. Discipline is what ruins all that closure. With it one can open up to the outside as well as the inside. Perhaps its becomes more difficult, in a situation of heightened amplitude, when one is surrounded by a music of stronger intensity. But it is more effective. One opens up even more.⁵¹

We must open up and actively *court* just a bit of death in our actions – just enough of the chaos to save us from ossifying, just enough to sustain counter-habits and fluxes of transformation that in turn lead our new selves to emerge. "Just like music – why does is

⁵⁰ Cage, "Lecture on Something," in *Silence*, 135

⁵¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 58.

give us the urge to die?”⁵² Death is a virtual attractor in all life; every life is a matter of self-styling our tendency toward the organism-dissolving power of impersonal, abstract Life. It is a balance of habit and openness, of maintaining just enough organization to avoid slipping into chaos, just enough chance inflection to prevent us from paralysis. Therefore death is not just one attractor, as Cage, notes, but two. Every act is a tending toward two poles: a death by closure or habit (self-preservation unto death), and a death by madness and the complete dissolution of our constitutive stupidity, a complete openness to the fluxes folding and unfolding the world.

The ethical stance reframes the question of how action emerges and what likeness our actions have to death. For the moralist, the experience of subjective freedom emerges by its addition to being – we conceive of the artist’s soul or spirit or vital force as the impetus for action. By contrast, the ethicist recognizes our experience of freedom, choice, and subjectivity as a *subtraction* from our complex sociality with the world. To enact one’s will is not to initiate something new, but to veto tendencies and processes already underway, to close off a flow that would carry you involuntarily in its current. The body is already teeming with potential actions underway; rehearsal self-polices our routines until we can ignore the flows of potential passing through us and select just a current of specified, tried-and-true action. Intentional will is a product of *reactive subtraction*. It is a becoming-limited of the performer’s body, the rarefaction of particular node of spirit-matter by limiting the intrusion of other flows.

⁵² Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 140.

For Cage and Deleuze, there are two kinds of life for the body, and thus two kinds of death. The first death is *reactive death*. Reactive death is the closing of the body (itself composed of “habitual” stabilities of inorganic materials) to the stirrings of flows outside it. It is the disciplining of the body until it can fully ignore the outside, until it can close on itself in closed-loop monad of stability. Reactive death is the closure of the gap between act and surprise – the perfect, well-regulated death of potential. Technical perfection and absolute mastery, a nice easy death, closed off of the world’s demands. Death by rehearsal, contraction of potential, the elimination of surprise. Reactive death is the virtual horizon of absolute competence, moral superiority, a priestly death, complete mastery of the body until it turns in on itself, until it no longer opens onto the world’s current of continual disturbance. *Paralyzed by intentional choice*, we would be unforced to choose anything by virtue of absolute closure – pure self-preservation.

Cage recognized the dangers of such self-preservation unto death. The priests of competent performance, the composer who aspires to mastery and the performer of technical perfection concern themselves only with such reactive becoming, the preservation of the familiar good and the desire for mastery. Cage, on the other hand, advocates for a second form of life – *active becoming*, wherein the habit-forming body opens itself onto the turbulence of the world. Such openness to the world’s self-variation is almost universally what Cage means by “life.” Here we get a sense of the opposite variety of death, which is not death by closure but death by absolute openness. To give up the ability to veto the impulses being channeled through ones subject is to experience directly the world’s self-variation. It is to have an encounter with the virtual, the pure virtual – the chaotic complication teeming in every ecology and every assemblage.

In view, then, of a totality of possibilities, no knowing action is commensurate, since the character of the knowledge acted upon prohibits all but some eventualities. From a realist position, such action, though cautious, hopeful, and generally entered into, is unsuitable. An experimental action... is, on the other hand, practical. It does not move in terms of approximation and errors, as 'informed' action by nature must, for no mental images of what would happen are set up beforehand; it sees things directly as they are: impermanently involved in an infinite play of interpenetrations.⁵³

The experience of tending toward this variety of death is entirely different than tending toward a reactive death. Instead of being paralyzed by "choice," one would experience (with great terror) *all options*, thought and unthought, simultaneously:

For becoming-material would be the effacement of the selection of images. And it would seem then that to make an image of death, we would have to conceive what our life would be if all the movements of the earth, all the noise of the earth, all the tastes, all the light – of the earth and of elsewhere, came to us in a moment, in an instant – like an atrocious screaming tumult of things, traversing us continually and instantaneously... To die is to become a pure point of passage, a pure center of communication of all things with all things.⁵⁴

Deleuze, Guattari, and Cage all recognize that completely silencing the intentional self would not result in peaceful release but would instead open us onto total chaos of the event-of-all-events. Cage's silence is not empty, but is instead the state in which "sonorous rest also marks the state of absolute movement," where habits and selections open onto that chaos that they reduce to similarity. Cagean performance and its tending toward this material chaos asks us to align ourselves with this unconscious swarm of

⁵³ Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine," in *Silence*, 15.

⁵⁴ Meillassoux, "Subtraction and Contraction," 104.

tendencies lurking just outside the habits that provide our foothold in the world. We are asked to learn a new way of acting and to break from habit, which invariably involves a kind of violence against that which makes us familiar to others our ourselves. If our commonsense view of death sees it as a suspension or dissolution of habits, models, images, and intentions – all those things that fold the past into the future to make more of the same – then it is indeed a tending toward this point of pure passage.

Our concern is not a matter of free choice versus un-free choice, but of placing ourselves in a position that is either ordinary and disinterested (more of the same, the tight loop of expectation and reaction) or interesting (the encounter that forces us to change, that changes our very field of choice). We cannot increase or modify our capacity to act in the world by our supposedly autonomous decisions, but only through our contact with the radical exteriority of the world in its becoming.

To become interesting rather than disinterested, we are to rig the performer such that the things surrounding her can no longer be buffered by habit. We are to make the things around her problematic and thus potentialized again. To re-fringe them with the halo of connections yet unmade, worlds not yet realized. From the point of view of morality, it is to reintroduce deviance into the world, since one will temporarily lose sight of obligations, models, the reproduction of past relations. It can only be done by placing a body in suspense, by forcing a suspension of the body-brain's anticipative loop – the very loop that gives our sense of identity and place in the world. It is a call to ally oneself with the shifting of the ground beneath routine's feet, to let one be carried by the potentials unfolding within the event without slipping too far toward madness:

The question is not: How much are you going to get out of it? Nor is it: How much are you going to put into it? But rather: How immediately are you going to say Yes to no matter what unpredictability, even when what happens seems to have no relation to what one thought was one's commitment?⁵⁵

As Meillassoux asserts, this tending-toward-madness points to another anti-Kantian feature of experimental ethics. This approach has no regulative dimension, because the end to which we commit ourselves is not a transcendent and regulative Idea at all – because there is nothing we should fear more than actually reaching a full union with the hyper-chaos of impersonal life. To think and to experiment with Life is to take the leap toward impersonal madness without being swallowed by it: “to think is to become a neighbor of the worst of the two [deaths], and to risk the becoming-chaos of life, its infinite becoming-creative.”⁵⁶ And while the easy, narcotic death by closure may seem preferable, it is entirely illusory – there is only one world, Cage and Deleuze's world, and its inevitable and constant return to the tumult from which it emerged.

* * *

The performer's view

The following was written after a performance of Variations III and Duet for Cymbal in February 2010, in response to a friend's question: How do I approach this music? Is it like the performance of a Brahms sonata, a gamelan performance, or something else? My thoughts were reviewed and revised as I drafted this chapter.

⁵⁵ Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 113.

⁵⁶ Meillassoux, “Subtraction and Contraction,” 107.

“The materials I use are always to some degree unfamiliar, even to me – radios, tape recorders, homebuilt electronics, quirky microphones and software patches with some degree of randomness or complication built in. They have very strong wills of their own, and my goal is to sensitively prod them into some kind of place. Things will stray, I have some degree of control, but it's very contingent and requires a lot of attention to track the tendencies in the tools, the sounds, and the way they become complex in a room of a certain size, with so many people, certain resonances, my own degree of distraction or attention, and so forth. There's a Deleuze bit about woodworking, which has been a reference point for me:

[Matter is] in movement, in flux, in variation... This has obvious consequences: namely, this matter-flow can only be *followed*. Doubtless, the operation that consists in following can be carried out in one place: an artisan who planes follows the wood, the fibers of the wood, without changing location. But this way of following is only one particular sequence in a more general process. For artisans are obliged to follow in another way as well... in other words, to go find the wood where it lies, and to find the wood with the right kind of fibers. Otherwise, they must have it brought to them: it is only because merchants take care of one segment of the journey in reverse that the artisans can avoid making the trip themselves... We will, therefore, define the artisan as one who is determined in such a way as to follow a flow of matter... The artisan is *the itinerant, the ambulant*. To follow the flow of matter is to itinerate, to ambulate. It is intuition in action.⁵⁷

Approaching a piece of wood to build a table, you're only partially in control of what happens. The grain of the wood has its own say, and you have to track it carefully to get something like the results you want. It would take a particular kind of moralist to say

⁵⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 409.

that the encounter with my table full of electronics was purely a matter of individual competence, or that it was freely chosen. A vast network of forces, some material (minerals and plastics coalesced in a certain shape, air conditioning in the room that affects the action of temperature-sensitive components, etc.), some social (an economic system that made consumer electronics available, an art community infrastructure, years of music schooling, the informal knowledge about electronic music techniques, etc.), some “personal” (but always partially determined by forces outside myself – anxiety about performance, cranky about a bad parking situation, attempting to focus before a crowd, etc.) have convened in a particular clearing – *this event*, in its absolute singularity. It is like other new music events, but never exactly, it’s always marked by its own contingencies, its own quirks. These quirks are inevitable. More than that – they are every bit as necessary to an event’s unfolding as the more general conditions. Even the most rigorously standardized event is haunted by these little particularities that are as instrumental to the event as any other. The event has its own agency, its own character, and everything I think or do is partially a product of this just-so meeting of elements.

In the case of pieces like these, the instructions in the score provide an “ordering of functions” that intersect with the wills of the instruments. If anything, pieces like *Variations III* and *Duet for Cymbal* are harder for me to play than more improvisational fare, even if they’re only marginally telling me what to do, because the ordering of functions often makes for a rickety fit with the impulses of the equipment. Unlike the violinist approaching a Brahms sonata, there haven’t been hundreds of years of event-refinement to limit the pushiness of my instruments and the volatility of the context in which I am playing them. In the case of the Brahms violinist, that ordering of actions

dovetails so neatly with the instrument that you don't think of them separately. It's this *disinterest* to the material particularities of a given situation which allows the Brahms sonata to take on its feeling of being something more concrete, something like a "work" as it is traditionally conceived. The nice, concrete object-feeling of "the Brahms sonata," and the feeling that I alone, as performer, am capable of "realizing" this possibility without the intervention of a fidgety world.

Playing music "indeterminate with respect to its performance" also feels considerably different from playing other brands of non-notated music. Like these "informal" musics, there is a certain kind of folk knowledge involved in using the gear – if I started with no familiarity whatsoever, I would be incapable of fulfilling the ordering of functions placed before me.

To return to the Deleuze and Guattari example (and the notion of assemblage agency in general) – playing the Brahms sonata or working with the gamelan group is equivalent to building a table with well-planed wood cut to precise standards. The process and the materials are so neatly aligned that you can think of precisely the kind of table (or sonata performance) you want to work toward. Hundreds or thousands of years of technique and refinement have produced a context for work that is completely ignorable. This allows for incredible precision and the potential for near-mechanical reproduction, but leaves little room for invention beyond mere ornamentation, slight tweaks. Playing music like *Variations III* feels like being asked to assemble a table from the contents of a construction site dumpster. It can be done, you can get something that'll do the job of a table, but you can't completely will what it's going to look like – you can will an effect, a kind of table-ness, an ability to hold something up, but you can't will the

form it will take. But you want *something* to happen, a difference, a moment. It's even more complicated than that. It's like being asked to build a table from a description of how a table should be built – and you have never seen a table. It's not manifesting an object, or building from a blueprint. It's a *research program*. Indeterminate with respect to performance is by no means entirely indeterminate. The program, as such, is completely determined. If you're sensitive, you can feel when it is going wrong, when you stop working in accordance with this abstract diagram.

Intentional/unintentional doesn't mean that much to me when working like this. “Directional” fits much better. You initiate something with an idea of what might happen. It doesn't happen (or does), you rein it in (or follow it), modify the move you thought you were going to make next (or don't), and on to infinity. At the same time, you are desperately trying to enact this experimental program that is constantly breaking your habits. You are always deflected, headed somewhere else. At its best and most invigorating, “you” aren't doing anything. *Everything is doing something*. The “constraints” of the score really only make that process a lot more complicated – it adds more interference to the thought process, especially since it's impossible to judge whether I'm doing it “correctly” or not. There's no yardstick by which to measure myself, except an intuition of whether I have grasped the abstract diagram. One of the best things about this music is that most of the things that might be viewed as restrictions or limitations end up creatively converted into positive, productive, or potentializing elements.

This is why I never feeling guilty if I can't fulfill all the obligations I'm asked to, or if I only partially fulfill them, because I'm not always sure what the obligations were supposed to be in the first place, and I'm not the only lively participant. Which is nice,

since I always found that guilt was the most common feeling I had while playing music in the conservatory setting, where producing music became a matter of personal responsibility. It's telling that there's not much of a place in music schools for music you can't feel guilty about. That said, I do have a responsibility of sorts, but of a very different kind – a complex, fluid entanglement in an always-already ongoing situation, the maintenance of just habit enough to feel the event's self-complicating, a stretching of my perceptual boundaries beyond "myself" and into the network from which my self emerges. As Rosi Braidotti states in her treatise on Deleuzian ethics-aesthetics:

This 'faithfulness to oneself' is not to be understood in the mode of the psychological or sentimental attachment to a personal 'identity' that often is little more than a social security number and a set of family photo albums. Nor is it the mark of authenticity of a self ('me, myself and I') that is a clearinghouse for narcissism and paranoia – the great pillars on which Western identity predicates itself. It is rather a faithfulness that is predicated upon mutual sets of inter-dependence and inter-connections, that is to say sets of relations and encounters. These compose a web of multiple relationships that encompass all levels of one's multi-layered subjectivity, binding the cognitive to the emotional, the intellectual to the affective and connecting them all to socially embedded forms of stratification. Thus, the faithfulness that is at stake in nomadic ethics coincides with the awareness of one's condition of interaction with others, that is to say one's capacity to affect and to be affected.⁵⁸

One of the things I've come to realize over the years is that experimental music isn't different in kind from any other music, but it is different in degree of this fit between the abstract patterning of process and the materials in which it is incarnated. It drives a wedge between the two so that you can see how they aren't necessarily or logically

⁵⁸ Rosi Braidotti, "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible," in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantine Boundas, 152.

connected, but historically and arbitrarily so. The moral-regulative aspect in music can only start to emerge once the fit between process/material is snug enough to allow for the abstract, regulative aspect to appear. “Initiate” vs. “amateur” is a good distinction, especially because of this connection to craft, as opposed to science or something like that. You get better at tracking, you get better at compounding the restrictions until a little “wiggle room” appears and that gap (freedom!) between process and material opens again. Kids do have unique access to the world of abstract art/experimental music, that's pretty much what they're doing until someone sticks sheet music in front of them (and begins the path to refining the connection between ordered functions and materials - once the kid disciplines her fingers, you have to get a better horn to intensify the connection between process/materials, etc.). Learning “conventional” music is just selectively closing off the options that you feel intensely when you're playing experimental music. This refinement can be tactically useful (it is handy to know how to build good, consistent tables), but can lead to the guilt (we know how a table *should* look, and yours just isn't up to snuff). Experimental music just recombines the constraints of ordinary music tools so that the gap appears again, so we can select the closed-off options and see what happens. It's too heavy a term (the problem of talking in Hegelian terms), but you're suspending slave-morality (I need to make something recognizable so the master knows who I am!) in order to temporarily slip the bonds by which you can be judged (temporary because you'll be figured out or figure yourself out soon enough). I think it is non-dialectical, because the solution doesn't synthesize opposed terms but combines their potentials and limitations to make that indeterminate gap where something surprising can happen.

The feeling of those potentials ordinarily cropped out by habit impinging on your actions is usually registered as “suspense” or “attention,” and it can be very exhausting to do it for too long (hence the need for some regulated actions and organization – it’s nice to have a stable, safe, utility-loaded place to play). It's the sensation of stimulus-response getting yanked apart so that you can't quite be sure what you are going to do next. This just-about-to-differ-from-yourself feeling is the sensing of abstract/impersonal life as opposed to the personal life of accumulated habit-patterns. When he talks about art and life proximity, I don't think Cage is talking about learning to love the sound of your microwave or insisting that your car alarm is art now. He’s talking about this sensation of suspense when things are undecided and about-to-be-different, as opposed to art that wants fixity, solidity, and mastery (the regulated death of potential).

“Mistakes” are a tricky thing, because my existing taste is one of those constraining/complicating factors (like the twitchiness of the instruments and the score's suggestions). I like things, I don't like things, there's always something I wish didn't happen because I don't like it, certain sounds that really bother me, and so forth. It can't be turned off – but there are all kinds of occasions (and plenty last night) where I discovered spontaneously that I liked things I hadn't thought of liking before. Something that bothered me turned interesting behind my back, not by my active choosing but by placing myself in a situation where it could strike me differently. Those will feed forward are new productive complications next time, as will the things I still don't like. We are always already in the middle, going somewhere else, becoming someone different.

Chapter Four: Happy New Ears! Cage and the Encounter

That is difficult, since the experience itself is always different from what you thought about it. And it seems to me that the experiences each person can have, that everyone is capable of appreciating, are precisely those experiences that contribute to changing us and, particularly, to changing our preconceptions.¹

The object must therefore be in no way identical, but torn asunder in a difference in which the identity of the object as seen by a seeing subject vanishes.²

The Sounds Themselves

Everybody knows what it is to think, everybody knows what music is, everyone can parse music from mere unrecognizable noise – everyone has “an affinity for the true” and is well aware of the natural exercises of their sensible and critical faculties. Musical common sense is the realm of the identical – the flux of the empirical is made to correspond to the categories of reason: “Recognition may be defined as the harmonious exercise of all the faculties upon a supposed same object: the same object may be seen, touched, remembered, imagined, or conceived...”³ The stubborn matter-of-factness of the empirical, with its insistent complexity, variance, its unbounded *difference* is made to

¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 153.

² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 56.

³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 169.

submit to recognition. Within this closed system we repeat what we have known before, we set out to find only what we have predicted before, we cleave music and noise according to bounds we have established before. Aesthetics refers only to the correspondence between real experience and the form of possible experience: the extraction of the “meaningful” component of an event in accordance with a presupposed model to be imitated, the extraction of a general identity from the flux of the particular.

Cage’s oft-cited hostility toward “art” as conventionally defined is an attack on precisely this approach to aesthetics – art as the realm of the recognizable, guided by predetermined standards, and confined to creating objects that merely conform to possible experience. When Cage rails against art or aestheticism, his target is that which threatens to make the sensible conform to the thinkable: “If I want life as art, I risk falling into aestheticism, because I would appear to be trying to impose something, a certain idea of life.” There is a vicious circularity in music, and, as Cage was quick to insist, “I know perfectly well that once a circle is drawn my necessity is to get outside of it.”⁴ Cage found it difficult to understand how music could be little more than the working out of the already possible or prefigured. By deciding in advance what experience counts as musical, one simply rediscovers more of the same in each incarnation. What can emerge new and unexpected from within this closed circuit? Can we think about techniques for redrawing the boundaries between the heard and the unheard? How and where does the becoming-musical of the once non-musical occur? Cage’s philosophy of music rooted in the immanence of “the sounds themselves” is

⁴ Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 129.

precisely this kind of transcendental experiment—drawing nearer to the process that is the world as a means of drawing out new means of functioning within its self-variation.

Thus Cage sought to invert this subordination of the empirical to preformed categories by forcing thought to submit to sensation. Cage refused to presume the categories of noise and music to be foreclosed to change, but also refused to believe that we could redraw the boundary strictly through the force of our own will. Instead, the distinction between music and noise was malleable and open to new movements of sense – new distributions of what can be heard, or what counts as important to the ear. We would not have to arrange sounds according to our preexisting ideas about possible forms, but rather encounter them in their wildness, in their radical, unrepeatable, undirected state:

It appears to me that music – such as I envision it, at least – imposes nothing. It can effectively change our manner of seeing, making us view everything around us as art. But that is not the goal. Sounds have no goal. They are, and that's all. They live. Music is the life of sounds, this participation of sounds in life, which may become – but not voluntarily – a participation of life in sounds. In itself, music does not obligate us to anything.”⁵

A reengagement with the empirical being of sounds – their matter-of-factness—is the way out of this endless prefiguration and into music with a capacity for reconfiguring the senses themselves. In place of an aesthetics that would place us in the closed loop of recognition and the eternal reign of the Same, Cage proposes an aesthetics that forces an engagement with the world's fundamental difference. In place of the calm recognition of the beautiful, Cage puts us into a situation of irritation, even violence, that forces us

⁵ Cage, *For the Birds*, 87.

toward change: an open-ended aesthetics that seeks to change the contours of sensibilities rather than simply affirming that which we already know. It is a creative and experimental aesthetics, one incapable of predicting what form of experience might emerge from the encounters it engenders. An engagement with the matter-of-factness of the sounds themselves is directly connected to changing sensibility, to changing what can be felt and what can be parsed from the world. For Cage, as for Deleuze, this approach to art – one that strips the functionality of a sound to enhance its potential for connection – is directly connected to a project of transcendental empiricism. The shock of encounter, the event *between* a subject and an object that subsumes them both, is that which can change our distribution of the sensible, that which can change our sense of the world.

In composition, Cage sought to eliminate this mirror-play of the prefigured and the performed – to break the supposed linkage of resemblance between the work and its material instantiations. Thus act of composition was rendered *genetic* rather than prefiguring. In performance, Cage hoped that the act of listening would prove similarly conductive or creative. Rather than simply communicating an already formed content and generating an anticipated response – recognition, appreciation, the deadest form of communication – it was hoped that the sounds themselves, wrenched from familiar circuits of selection and reaction, would generate new and unanticipated patterns of response. To render “the sounds themselves” has a fairly commonly understood definition – to strip sounds of their habitual meaning. But the exact nature of the relay between sound and habit deserves some further analysis.

Some of the primary standardizing habits of hearing are familiar Cage targets: notes, scales, and the standardized forms they enable. In systems of reference, sounds are

stripped of their particularities so that they can conform to thought or felt categories; sound becomes functional, referential, or representational. These habitual exercises in hearing function as all habits do – as typological collectors that sort singular experiences (*this sound*, in its unique emergence and under its own unique complications) into categories with which they more or less correspond. Regardless of its unique pattern of overtone decay, or its unique inflection by the sound of a passing truck, this sound with a fundamental frequency of approximately 440 hertz will join the pitch class ‘A.’ Such typological distinctions serve a pragmatic function, standardizing a constantly modulating stream of sound into discrete classes so that they can be passed to a supposedly “higher” level of experience – that of representation – or become material for the construction of musical forms. This transition, of course, comes at the expense of the sound’s particularities and its integration into its real conditions of emergence in all their complexity. It is, for pragmatic purposes, a “logical reduction with regards to the event” – a purposeful reduction of the complexity of experience so that it might feed back into already-decided musical functioning, its wildness domesticated to a certain useful standard (which is creative in its own right – it feeds back in the form of an increased demand for regularity and constancy). Cage contrasts these typological distinctions to the directness, singularity, and intransitivity of noises, which “had not been intellectualized; the ear could hear them directly and didn’t have to go through any abstraction about them.”⁶

Similarly, there are other habits of selection and reduction involving the selection

⁶ Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” in *Silence*, 116.

and reconstruction of sonic objects from the noisy flux of sonic experience: the reconstruction of the auditory environment in accords with the demand of utility. Coupled with the aforementioned (whose logic becomes so habituated it sinks into the background of experience – pitch becomes absolute, unreflective truth, and it becomes exceedingly difficult to un-hear pitch classes once they’re habitually ingrained) are habits of selection, the selection of what counts as “worth hearing” within the complex field of sound. Implied in such selections are an order of utility – we hear what is perceived as important for us to hear within prescribed bounds of habit. Sounds are subordinate to their utility: a loud sound alerts us to impending danger, a tonal sound alerts us to human organization of sound, repeated cells against a backdrop of comparatively disorganized sounds point us toward rational organization and implied sociality, and so forth. A musical sound is extracted from a self-renewing, self-perturbing flux of virtual sound experiences (the noisiness of the real), turned into an object of intellection and appreciation, converted into social utility: the channeling of an abstract stirring into a regularized emotional reaction, the cultivation of prestige-enhancing appreciation.

More problematic is the apparently natural linkage between a sound event in its corporeal emergence and the sound as event – the way in which a sound apparently indexes its source, the way, for example, we speak of the sound “of” a violin. There is, however, no necessary union between sounds and the instruments from which they emerge. This may seem counterintuitive or even perverse, but synthesizer technology has helped to shed light on this disjunction. With the ability to intervene directly at the process-level of sound’s emergence, we have been able, for instance, to produce violin-effects minus the violin. What we discover is that the violin was the first to incarnate a

particular event-pattern, but that production of that event pattern in no way necessarily depends on the violin itself. It is by historical accident that the violin became the proprietor of its sound and that we have developed a habitual linkage between the sight of the violin and a particular abstract patterning of sounds. A particular mode of sound production can (and does) migrate from one set of corporeal hosts to another – the function of the violin in the production of a certain type of event, for example, migrates to the synthesizer. Sounds as *Ideas* or *ideal events*, rather than accidents, as abstract patterns of production, are fully autonomous. To grasp a sound itself is not simply register the empirical qualities of a particular emergence – as self-identical object – but to think of it as a style of variation, to think it in its processual emergence and unfolding. To hear a sound itself is to register a form of dynamism, to sense it as an event rather than an object.⁷ The capacity for breaking the linkage between the seen and the heard became crucial for Cage as early as first works for the prepared piano – an instrument whose audio-visual disjunction allowed the sounds to float free of their indexical function:

But once I developed the prepared piano, notation became a way to *produce* [emphasis added] something. So words were no longer enough to indicate the result. First I had to inscribe the grid of the transformations to be effected inside the piano, and show how to attack the keyboard, but the performer no longer had the impression that he would be able to hear the piece immediately on the first reading, the way it was going to sound.⁸

What each of these conventional habits and associations reveal is that sounds (and

⁷ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 53. “The distinction is between *event* and *accident*... it is between the event, which is ideal by nature, and its spatio-temporal realization in a state of affairs.” A particular sound heard as a member of a class, for example, would

⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 160.

all perceptions) are not just perceptions, but *potential actions*. We don't just hear sounds – we hear *through* sounds. We hear them for utility, as classes, as conforming to habitual contractions. This means that we hear *selectively*. Some selections seem more voluntary than others, some selections occur in the unconscious of the body, which acts as a filter for stimuli. As Deleuze argues in his second volume on the cinema, the vast majority of our perceptions are not simply transparent renderings of an object, but standardized simplifications or reductions geared toward utility – they are perceptual clichés:

A cliché is a sensory-motor image of a thing. As Bergson says, we do not perceive the thing or the image in its entirety, we always perceive less of it, we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving, or rather what it is in our interest to perceive, by virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs, and psychological demands. We therefore normally perceive only clichés. But, if our sensory-motor schemata jam or break, then a different type of image can appear: a pure optical-sound image, the whole image without metaphor, bring out the thing in itself, literally, in its excess of horror or beauty, in its radical or unjustifiable character, because it no longer has to be 'justified' for better or worse..."⁹

From end to end in his works, Cage insists on this connection between sonic experiences emptied of functional content and the capacity for the self-modifying of sensibility. "Where these ears are in connection with a mind that has nothing to do" – when the sensory-motor linkage between clichéd sound and potential action is stifled – "that mind is free to enter into the act of listening, hearing each sound just as it is, not as a phenomenon more or less approximating a preconception."¹⁰ What happens in that act of

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Continuum, 2005), 20.

¹⁰ Cage, "Composition as Process," in *Silence*, 23.

listening where something “radical or unjustifiable” leaps forth? Our mechanisms of selection change. This project of altering our process of selection is, for both Cage and Deleuze, intimately connected to the production of signs without recognizable utility – that is to say, to separate signs from their current condition of utility in the hopes that they might generate *new conditions under which they could be useful*. This ability to foresee new potentials for connection with the world constitutes the development of new sensibilities, new distributions of value for the senses. What utility masks is the unique, transformative potential of the senses themselves: it assumes a common and good sense of what we can think and what can be felt. It is by stalling the apparent use-value of a sound that we can sense it as singular event, a singular event that opens onto new possibilities for hearing and thus new potentials for action.

Both Deleuze and Cage insist that the thresholds of the senses, their patterns of selection, can be changed by encounters with *transcendental* signs. Transcendental signs are experienced in *the encounter* with the unfamiliar, the unrecognizable, that which eludes “useful” perception. In the encounter, we experience something that can only be sensed – that is, that eludes recognition and disrupts the smooth functioning of a sensori-motor circuit by its incursion into experience. This forces thought to pose a problem, to come up against its limits, to re-frame the boundaries of its attention. This forces a moment in which the we encounter that which can only be thought – we get a sidelong glance at the transcendental apparatus of hearing, we can feel our unconscious selections contort in the shock of the encounter, and we can trace a *new form of life* in the encounter, one that exceeds the experience given.

This moment of hearing divorced from utility – a *pure listening* – is the domain of

transcendental music for Cage. We often think of listening as voluntary, as something willed. I choose to listen to music, I choose to hear the piano rather than the rustling of programs, and so forth. These are all connected to the same order of utility described above. Cage's pure listening, like the Deleuzian encounter that acts as a "shock to thought," cannot be simply willed. One cannot choose to listen in a Cagean manner. Rather, one can only be open to an encounter – one can be selected by the sonic forces around her, willing an event of shock and spontaneity such that one can *only* listen without recognition, where listening feeds into no pre-established pattern of anticipation and reaction. An involuntary pure listening, or a super-personal *event*, an event that fundamentally changes what it means to hear. Such listening can only occur in the fortuitous encounter, and the role of the performer is to incur a situation in which the event of pure listening (divorced from recognition and utility) can emerge. As Cage said of Christian Wolff's encounter-luring music, "All you can do is suddenly listen in the same way that, when you catch cold, all you can do is suddenly sneeze."¹¹

Such listening must necessarily be opposed to a fixed method – instead, it relies on tactical combinations of *constraint and chance*.¹² Method is inadequate to generating the rupture that could change sensibility – that is, that could give us "new ears" – because

¹¹ Cage, "45' For a Speaker," in *Silence*, 148.

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs* (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 2000), 16. "In opposition to the philosophical idea of 'method,' Proust sets the double idea of 'constraint' and 'chance.' Truth depends on an encounter with something that forces us to think and to seek the truth. The accident of encounters and the pressures of constraints are Proust's two fundamental themes. Precisely, it is the sign that constitutes the object of an encounter and works this violence upon us. It is the accident of the encounter that guarantees the necessity of what is thought. Fortuitous and inevitable."

it assumes a subject inclined toward the generation of such novelty (whereas we have seen the subject to be a conservative entity, composed of habits), it presupposes the recognition of what it seeks to hear, and it proposes a clear and definitive separation between the hearer and the heard.¹³ Our ordinary approach to listening presupposes what is to be heard and finds it again and again in experience. The role of the encounter is to traumatize the normal function of our hearing, to impose a specific kind of irritation, an irritation that will help in “keeping us from ossifying,” as Cage insists.¹⁴ *Pure listening* is the only means by which to escape the circle of hearing nothing but presupposition, and therefore the only chance for self-modification.

While constraint and chance seem like contradictory elements, it is only through their careful combination that we can reach this point of pure listening. Constraint problematizes the senses, holding them in a state of heightened sensitivity – think of the way, for example, a limb becomes uncomfortable when bound, how the slightest twitch of a muscle or rub of the rope causes the nerves to resonate. In this heightened state of sensitivity we become particularly receptive to the impingement of accidental or chance elements, elements we might ordinarily ignore in our unconstrained state (a drop of sweat, for example, runs down the bound limb, inducing a sensation that would have otherwise passed below the threshold of attention under less dire circumstances). Discipline, Cage’s word for this constraint, is not opposed to chance – it is a condition for the intensification of chance’s influence.

¹³ See Levi Bryant on Deleuze and philosophical method in *Difference and Givenness*, 76.

¹⁴ Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence*, 44.

Pure listening therefore must be opposed to listening dictated by habit and association, both of which work to smooth over the difference haunting every sensation. Pure listening cannot be intentional or functional listening – one cannot be listening *for* something. One must simply be listening – listening under constraint. Such listening becomes “a sort of performance on the part of being itself that is imposed on me by an involuntary encounter;” one will what one might hear, one can only be open to it.¹⁵

* * *

Encounters

“Something in the world forces us to think,” Deleuze asserts in *Difference and Repetition*. “This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter... In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed.” The something that inspires us to thought is that which is foreign to recognition. It need not evade just simple empirical recognition (the object of a transcendental encounter needn’t be particularly unusual in its features, though it can be) – it can be familiar or alien, “Socrates, a temple or a demon.” It need not appear with particular violence, though it can: “it may be grasped in a range of affective tones: wonder, love, hate, suffering.” What is necessary is that the object of the encounter, regardless of content, be grasped as conforming to rules other than those of normal, need-bound perception. An encounter with this *something* could be said to be properly “*imperceptible* precisely from the viewpoint of recognition,” a moment in which we are not sure what we are

¹⁵ Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 77.

perceiving. The object of the encounter, therefore, causes a momentary faltering of our sensibility. Our senses stammer and bind, they're momentarily paralyzed. We are placed, for an instant, in an intense state of perception as recognition falters.

This impasse, however, is not simple a negative moment – not just a lack of recognition that can be smoothed over with new recognition. In other words, Cage *does not* make all sounds musical. Instead, music is the process of refocusing attention or reworking transcendental thresholds by courting contact with that which outside of music – the qualitative “something more” just outside of experience. For Cage, this something more is silence – not simply the absence of sound, but the teeming more-than-experienced from which experience emerges by a process of contraction, reduction, exclusion, and over-sight. Over-sight is a fitting term, as hearing informed by habit and utility simultaneously presumes to oversee, overlook, survey a territory, but also oversees, excludes, limits, and contracts. What forces thought is the contact with that which is outside of recognition --- as Cage insists, “the means of thought are exterior to the mind.”¹⁶ In recognition, the sensible is not at all that which can only be sensed but that which bears upon the senses in an object that cannot be recalled, imagined, or conceived. The object of encounter, on the other hand, “gives rise to *sensibility* [italics added]... It is not the given but that by which the given is given... It is imperceptible precisely from the point of view of recognition[.]”¹⁷

The object of the encounter is not simply meaningless or empty, but an overfull

¹⁶ Cage, *Composition in Retrospect*, 61.

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 140.

cloud of potentiality. This over-fullness manifests itself in a singular *discomfort* – it poses a problem, it lurches our senses into a discord that forces them to think. It “moves the soul, perplexes it—in other words, forces it to pose a problem: as though the object of the encounter, the sign, were the bearer of a problem – as though it were a problem,” as Deleuze insists in *Difference and Repetition*.¹⁸ The discomfort, the problem-posing, is not simply thought struggling to subdue an unfamiliar object with the comfort of category, but the first thought-feeling of habits and models of recognition bending under the force of the encounter. Thought, for Cage and Deleuze, starts from sensual disruption and culminates in a deformation of habit.

It is here that we gather a glimpse of sensibility itself, as it is temporarily shocked into alertness. We get a feeling of hearing what it is to hear, and we can imagine it topologically – we can imagine how hearing could extend in new, unforeseen directions. Our senses falter at their own limits at the same time as they are raised “to the level of a transcendental exercise: to the ‘nth’ power.”¹⁹ This the limit of hearing, the point where non-sense starts to become sense, just as there is in language that which can only be said but remains unspeakable – the edge of making-sense in production.²⁰

Cage pushes music to its proper limit – a transcendental exercise of hearing that bends music back to its point of emergence, the point at which a sound enters into sensibility. “When I compose, I don’t try to interrupt that irrelevance, that freedom from

¹⁸ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 140-141.

¹⁹ Ibid., 140.

²⁰ Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 96.

being controlled, which characterizes the sounds I encounter. My music basically consists in bringing into existence what music is when there is *not yet* any music. What interests me is the fact that things already *are*.”²¹ Rather than a model of a musical mind recognizing the musical object, Cage and Deleuze suggest that thought occurs only when a dynamic perception that perplexes recognition (a *sign*) gives rise to a dynamic figure of thought (a virtual *Idea*) – an irritating engagement between difference and difference, an intrusion from an unthought outside that punctures the smooth functioning of habit, that drives it into a reconfiguration of its system of recognition. In many cases, the disruption will not prove enough to recalibrate the horizons of audition; a sound will be reclaimed with a deflationary “just:” it was just a rustle, just a piano, and so forth. In other cases, however, the shock of hearing folding back on itself, tracing along the edge of attention, back to the point where a sound enters experience, can yield a forceful, sudden, involuntary reconfiguration of what it means to hear.²² Moments approaching *pure listening*, as Cage calls it, present the seams of experience – a feeling of the senses becoming problematized, re-potentiated, sensitive to their potential for variance.

Hearing itself becomes creative. If hearing has, ordinarily, the feeling of being passive and transparent, it is because the genetic factors that give rise to it are obscured. In the moment of the encounter, we can briefly feel these factors trembling at the edge of perception, the way the ear strains to hear, the way the eye strains in darkness. The once-irrelevant impulse that forces itself into sensation becomes the motor of creation as it

²¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 222.

²² Bogue, *Deleuze on Music, Painting, and the Arts*, 66-9.

deforms the system of habits – “the transmission of noise stimulates the system to develop, to *become* different in spite of attempts to stay the same.”²³ Music or art in Cage’s derogatory comments are precisely the domain of recognition, those sounds domesticated for use. True music, as Cage conceives it, puts us in contact with the elusive outside – with what music-as-recognition would call *noise* and Cage would call *silence*. Cage’s attention-straining music places us before the gap between the noisy busy-ness of the world and the comparative paucity of the abstract models designed to dampen its continual interference within our supposedly close and stables senses. As such, art is not about meaning, signification, or the rendering of truth and beauty; rather, art is an occasion for self-alteration.

Cagean music is the music of encounters, of shocks and interferences that force us to pose questions about sensibility itself. It forces our very bodies and minds to deform themselves when faced with that which exceeds recognition. We are forced to ask questions about the nature of our senses themselves -- "what must be proper to sensibility, what must sensibility be like, what internal logic must it follow for such phenomena to be possible? – but we are left in suspense as to how the questions will resolve themselves.”²⁴ In the moment of the encounter, we are uniquely open to the world’s experimentation on and through us; we are in Cage’s experimental situation as it pertains to hearing itself. Hearing is indeterminate with respect to what new sense it will adopt, what potential connections it may forge in the future. “For nothing can be said in

²³ Sean Higgins, “A Deleuzian Noise/Excavating the Body of Abstract Sound,” in *Sounding the Virtual: Gilles Deleuze and the Theory and Philosophy of Music*, 54.

²⁴ Bryant, *Difference and Givenness*, 101.

advance, one cannot prejudge the outcome of research,” Deleuze writes in *Difference and Repetition*. “It may be that some well-known faculties – too well known – turn out to have no proper limit, no verbal adjective, because they are imposed and have an exercise only under the form of common sense.”²⁵ Music should confound recognition, and it should stimulate thought and the senses to grasping rather than to understanding. Music compels the senses to wrestle with the conditions of their emergence, or to feel the act of *hearing* rather than simply recognizing the *heard*.

The idea that forms in such an encounter is not a new category or a habit-circuit for trapping future encounters – though it may become one in time – but a new threshold between the interior and exterior, and new differential between music and noise, or a new distribution of value and importance in the world. It forms involuntarily, it cannot be predicted, its outcome cannot be predicted. It can be courted, lured in, but not willed; one cannot will the change, but one can be open to it to greater or lesser degrees. And one cannot prejudge the change that occurs as this indeterminate charge of potential moves through the nerves and brain – one can only explicate the possibilities it opens or the ways of life it implicates by luring future encounters and by experimentation with the new mode of hearing and thinking. The idea is not simply a new abstraction for disciplining the empirical but an implied life-style or a new topological diagram for living, one that can only be tested by teasing out its variable forms.

In other words, the experience doesn’t belong to the listener – the listener belongs to the experience. In the moment of the encounter, the sound itself curls and winds its

²⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 143-44.

way through us, and our thinking is the movement of this force. It is not a moment for reflection or appreciation, but a moment of conduction. A new way of hearing comes over us, occurs in an event, in the same way that one might say “it rains” or “a season changes.” A haecceity – an event having proper individuation and an agency but no subject – through which new subjects emerge. The shock does not belong simply to subject nor does it flow from the object. It is instead the event of their coming-together, an event which redistributes the bounds of subjectivity and the sense or significance of the object.

What matters is that the sound be caught *in flight* from utility to no-utility. It is in this moment that the sound is freed from its function and the typological traps that subsume its singularity. The sound is not simply being placed in new recognizable function, but is instead suspended as a “matter of fact” or as a particle of becoming. The sound in this movement of deterritorialization – the passage from coded significance to potential-charged ambiguity – is shedding functions, passing from one formation to another. It is leaving one circuit of anticipation-reaction for another, but that destination is not yet specified. Out of habitual containment and into a new containment – but, for a crucial and dangerous moment, temporarily between both. These *sentiedum* are not simply incomprehensible and the encounter is not simply “the dark night” of chaos. Their meaninglessness isn’t simply a void in experience, but a sign that we are in an “other” realm – a realm that is too-full of possible connections to remain in this state of suspense forever. True indeterminacy is not just an ambiguity, or a collection of competing possible meanings, but the movement of the virtual into the actual. Its carriers are asignifying signs, signs drifting from established functions to new and yet-undetermined

functions. They are signs that precede their utility and may, or may not, engender a new order of functions. They are not arbitrary or unfathomable expressions, but *experimental* ones.

Cage's insistence on rigging encounters emerges from his concern for the real conditions from which music emerges – the event-ness of the musical performance. "Music," understood by Cage in its limitative or regulative form, "is an oversimplification of the situation we are in."²⁶ Whereas most musical performances imagine themselves as self-contained entities and the productions of members of a class or type, Cage consistently emphasizes the inclusion of the inessential within the essential inherent in the actualization of events. Each and every musical performance occurs as a modification of a sonic environment already teeming with tendencies and events, tendencies and events that necessarily provide chance-inflected variation unique to its conditions of emergence. In each instance, there are elements that escape any other occurrences of the same event, regardless of the degree of resemblance. Seen from the moral position of classification, these unique features appear as errors, anomalies, and insignificant particularities – they are brushed aside as extraneous, erroneous, or ignorable. For the listener concerned with grasping the "possible experience" of the musical work – a predetermined type of experience – they slip out of attention at best or disrupt attention's focusing at worst.

The ubiquity of these anomalies, however, reveals a critical component of events: the *necessity* of these chance variations in the event's occurrence. The unthought,

²⁶ Cage, "45' for a Speaker," in *Silence*, 149.

unheard, disregarded *outside* of recognition is not simply an interference disrupting the reception of an intelligible signal – a musical sound, a message communicated – but the very ground from which it emerges. Each recurrence of an event will necessarily include the anomalous as a condition of its emergence. There is no recurrence of an event without these variations, and it is these inflections that render each event singular – “not just an event, *this* event.”²⁷ Each event, emerging as it does from an already-underway set of dynamic conditions and necessarily containing extraneous elements, cannot be logically reduced to a general type – it is uniquely itself, exactly as it happens, exhibiting its own unique pattern of individuation and belonging only to “its own field conditions of anomaly.”²⁸ Cage himself describes exactly this co-participation as early as “Experimental Music: Doctrine:”

Urgent, unique, uninformed about history and theory, beyond the imagination, central to a sphere without surface, [a sound’s] becoming is unimpeded, energetically broadcast. There is no escape from its action. It does not exist as one of a series of discrete steps, but as transmission in all directions from the field’s center. It is inextricably synchronous with all other sounds, non-sounds, which latter, received by other sets than the ear, operate in the same manner... Beyond them (ears) is the power of discrimination which, among other confused actions, weakly pulls apart (abstraction), ineffectually establishes as not to suffer alteration (the “work”) and unskillfully protects from interruption (museum, concert hall) what spring elastic, spontaneous, back together again with a beyond that power which is fluent... pregnant... related... and obscure (you will never be able to give a satisfactory report even to yourself of what just happened).²⁹

²⁷ Massumi, “Like A Thought,” in *A Shock to Thought*, xxiii.

²⁸ Ibid, xxiii.

²⁹ Cage, “Experimental Music: Doctrine,” in *Silence*, 14.

The short circuit between the singular and the generic, however, is what allows the singular occurrence to modify sensibility. Each singular event is unique to its moment of actualization, but the singularity is what permits it to be repeated anew – albeit with new, necessary variations and chance inflections. Reproduced under similar circumstances (the containment or “capture” an event), what once struck the senses as anomalous has the potential to become a new type all its own. Future repetitions may to a greater or lesser degree resemble those of the first occurrence, but will always carry that same charge of this-ness that is the particular to each unfolding. A type, albeit a type under continuous variation – a potential series linked by internal differences and modulations rather than resemblance. The experience is thus *exemplary* – not to be repeated or replicated, but reenacted in continual variation, followed-through-on. It carries beyond itself into future variations, but cannot be strictly imitated. In Kant’s terms, what does remain universally communicable is not the inner sensation of beauty itself but the conditions under which these sensations can occur – the conditions of receptivity as such, or the style of variation through which these transformative, receptive experiences can occur.

A new sound emerges, or an old sound strikes us in a paralyzing, intense way. Delivered with enough clarity and force, this singular occurrence is not simply a gap, absence, or nonsense, but is instead the edge at which nonsense becomes sense. It is a moment of *potential generality*, a window onto a style of sounding or a style of listening whose bounds have not yet been defined. It is an exemplary event – “something that has an eventful prospective on generality but on which generality has as yet no

comprehending perspective.”³⁰ This event, grasped in its absolute particularity, temporarily shorn from the utility-seeking function of recognition, prospectively envelops a series of future events in continuous variation: it suggests a new sensibility, a new order of value in perception and a new order of habits in action. Not simply a moment of new recognition on the part of thinking subject, but a genuine, singular event leaping between subject and object, a subject-less contingent occurrence wrought from the mutual inclusion of intended and unintended action in a particular instance. The mutual inclusion of intended and unintended attests to the super-personal nature of expression and the autonomy of events. The world itself sounds, the world itself produces singular events and atypical expressions – we can extend and intensify this potential or we can bind it, but it’s always already underway. It is the world in its becoming, the becoming from which we emerge. As Cage says:

Is it not a question of the will... of giving consideration to the sounds of knives and forks, the street noises, letting them enter in? (Or call it magnetic tape, *musique concrete*, furniture music. It’s the same thing, working in terms of *totality*, not just discretely chosen conventions.)... It is evidently a question of bring one’s intended actions into relation with the ambient unintended ones. The common denominator is zero, where the heart beats (no one *means* to circulate his blood).”³¹

Cage’s goal is to seed the conditions of these encounters without dictating how they might reconnect to action. The variability of this reconnection is related to Cage’s

³⁰ Massumi, “Like A Thought,” in *A Shock to Thought*, xxiii.

³¹ John Cage, “Erik Satie,” in *Silence*, 80.

“each having their own experience:” not simply a banal encouragement to let everybody appreciate what they’d like, but the intention-less tweaking and reopening of potential to extend these shocks and their vague inklings into unforeseen modes of hearing and acting. Such encounters form the “junk DNA” of music – sites for potential recombination without any affixed function.³² These are the blank patches in which unpredictable mutations can occur, some giving rise to new and intense modes of connection, some fizzling out without much consequence. To free music from its functionality and utility (its sensory-motor schemata as Deleuze would call it in his cinema book), to divorce it from the bounds of already-shaped human thought, and to let it be post-human, of the world’s self-varying, to produce responses for a people yet to come. Not representative or meaningful, but reality-producing: creative, in its production of actual variable stances toward perception and action. And unpredictably so.

* * *

The world is in a constant state of change, a change registered in vibrations nested within vibrations, turbulent and self-complicating. Cage ‘s reality is vibratory: “Sounds are just vibrations, isn’t that true? Part of a vast range of vibrations including radio waves, light, cosmic rays, isn’t that true?”³³ Sound disturbs and displaces a continuous

³² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 322. “Biologists have stressed the importance of these determined margins, which are not to be confused with mutations, in other words, changes internal to the code: here, it is a question of duplicated genes or extra chromosomes that are not inside the genetic code, are free of function, and offer a free matter for variation. But it is very unlikely that this kind of matter could create new species independently of mutations, unless it were accompanied by events of another order capable of multiplying the interactions of the organism with its milieu.”

³³ Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence*, 51.

field of matter, itself already vigorously energetic. The world is the constant potential for sound. It's matter in endless movement and self-relation, a continuous dynamic ripple, the constant perturbation of a virtual continuity by the emergence of the actual. The world, as this unfolding of virtual abstraction in the actual, however, is not made of discrete sounds but is instead a constant sounding. Discrete sounds are an entirely different matter. A discrete sound – the sound of piano playing middle C, the knock on a door – is a particular registering within experience of a band of these vibrations. It is a process of selection from within the total potential sound field, a reduction of the continuously self-complicating totality. It is fundamentally *not* an audible account of things-as-they-are or simple perceptual intake of a “sonic object.” The impression of distinct, discrete audible objects is a retroactive fiction formed in the gap between hearing and the heard: a real fiction, a fiction that has its own creative effects by its engendering a stereotyped response for further recognitions and reproductions.

No sound exists individually. Every sound emerges from a complex, every sound emerges in mixture, with interference from the total dynamism of the universe. Before and above every discrete “sonic object” is a chaos of vibration. Not indistinct, but hyper-distinct: every moment singular, turbulent, self-varying. To re-work a phrase from Brian Massumi, hearing emerges from the auditory confound, the co-presence of interference among vibrations, regions of singular emergences sharing zones of indistinction with one another. Potential sounds continually co-modulating one another within the soundfield. The truck outside the music school inflects the piano note, disturbs its motion, renders it singular amidst the clamor of being. Pressing the key in the center of the keyboard sends ripples through the field, each different as it is inflected by the continuous variation of the

total event. Each sounding singular. Despite the regularity of our perception – we sense the “same note” – each sound-perception is tinged with a bit of the this-ness however faintly perceived.

Every sensation has a component irreducible to a concept or a category – every sensation is in excess of the abstract model that would quell its unique impingement on the senses. We have spoken of encounters as if they were a unique species of occurrence, but this excess above and beyond the recognizable – the excess that allows recognition to occur even as it slips recognition – means that *every* moment is an encounter. Every sensation is a re-potentialization of the body. In Kantian terms, we find ourselves faced with a constant stream of sensible intuition for which no concept is adequate – the very emergence of sensation marks the appearance of *beauty*, that which sets the mind to free play and becoming. At the point at which sensation emerges, beauty and irritation are one in the same. Art is not a mode of being separate from life, but a different posture toward the impingement that singularity makes on habit. Habit and typological systems render most moments of beauty *ordinary* by selective cropping – toward the end of utility. When utility is blocked, the potentialization has nowhere to go and thus enters suspenseful, self-reflexive resonance; the encounter’s singularity is foregrounded, placing us in a *special* state of beauty. Suspenseful art and instrumentalized life exist on a continuum – Cage’s supposed merger of art and life is an encouragement to attune to the singularity, to court special transformative encounters by adopting an artful and utility-free manner of sensing:

Consideration of the activity of listening... that to be direct it must not be followed by any other activity formed (intellectual) or uninformed (emotional, kinesthetic,

critical, discursive), thus making possible a transformation of experience (which was which? the sounds or I?)...”³⁴

In this suspended state (“which was which?”) we catch a glimpse of ourselves in contemplation, not quite active but not quite passive – our “very existence is suspended upon these feelings,” in Steven Shaviro’s words.³⁵ The feelings belong to the event, the coming-together of bodies in a contingent, singular encounter best rendered in the middle voice, as in the French construction *faire-faire* (“to make one to do”).³⁶ The feelings do not yet belong to a subject, as their singularity prevents them from conforming to the habits that compose subjectivity but the subject’s emergence is entirely dependent on them. Singular, special encounters are the site of a new subject’s emergence. In them we discover that thought is what Deleuze calls a “spiritual automaton” – an act between compulsion and freedom. What we think is forced by what we encounter (by the shock to thought) but it is also free by virtue of the indeterminacy of the response. The breaking of the recognition linkage forces free-play of thought, the generation of a style of synthesizing that has its own topological flexibility. The world doesn’t depend on our categories – our categories are forced and formed by the world’s impinging on us. The means of thought lie outside of thought: we have to court new shocks, new accidents, if we want to go beyond recognition. We have to go beyond our imaginations and let the

³⁴ Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 126.

³⁵ Steve Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2009), 13.

³⁶ The *faire-faire* construction plays a prominent role in Bruno Latour’s “Factures/Fractures: From the Concept of Network to the Concept of Attachment,” *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 36 (Autumn, 1999), 20-31.

outside force its way in.

* * *

The Zen Archer

Every encounter is a gamble. Cage offers this warning about aesthetic experience: “let’s not talk about changes in terms of accomplishment.”³⁷ Encounters do not guarantee any particular outcome, but rather intimate a style – a way of becoming, or a linkage of virtual differences with the potential for an array of unique actualizations. In other words, they give us occasion to think in terms of an *ideal event*. Both Deleuze and Cage tell the story of the Zen archer, which is a parable for the “releasing of the event in its eternal truth.” the kind of thought engendered within the encounter. Cage tells the story at least twice – once in “How to Kick, Pass, Run, and Fall,” and once in *For the Birds*. The version told in “How to Kick, Pass, Run, and Fall” is as follows:

Four years ago or maybe five, I was talking with Hidekazu Yoshida. We were on the train from Donaueschingen to Cologne. I mentioned the book by Herrigel called *Zen and the Art of Archery*; the melodramatic climax of this book concerns an archer’s hitting the bull’s eye though he did so in total darkness. Yoshida told me there was one thing the author failed to point out, that is, there lives in Japan at the present time a highly esteemed archer who has never yet been able to hit the bull’s eye even in broad daylight.³⁸

³⁷ Cage, *For the Birds*, 95.

³⁸ Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 137. Cage retells the story on page 231 of *For the Birds* as well – “There is an archer in Japan who is considered a master, an extraordinary archer, but has never been able to hit the bull’s eye, even in broad daylight!”

Deleuze calls on the same story in *The Logic of Sense*:

The relation to the archer is closer to Zen: the Bowman must reach the point where the aim is also not the aim, that is to say, the Bowman himself; where the arrow flies over its straight line while creating its own target; where the surface of the target is also the line and the point, the Bowman, the shooting of the arrow and what is shot at... The sage waits for the event, that is to say, understands the *pure event* in its eternal truth, independently of its spatial-temporal actualization... But, at the same time, the sage also *wills the embodiment* and the actualization of the pure incorporeal event in a state of affairs and in his or her own body and flesh... This is how the Stoic sage *represents it and, by this, selects it*, and that an ethics of the mime necessarily prolongs the logic of sense.³⁹

As an action severed from its familiar circuit of anticipation-reaction – from success and failure – the archer's gesture is successful insofar as it unmoors the event from the grounds of judgment and recognition. This unmooring, however, doesn't place us in the dark night of chaos. It is not a negative moment. Rather, it is a positive moment – a semblance – in which the virtual event *as such* is rendered palpable. In a single gloriously useless gesture, the archer renders sensible the virtual event of archery – he draws together all potential outcomes thought and unthought into a singular, almost unbearably tense moment. Archery is no longer a matter of hitting the target, but an entire array of potential connections: a style. It is by isolation from the circuit of cause and effect, success and failure, that we can feel the contour of the event *for itself*. The Zen archer succeeds regardless of the success of his shot because he embodies the event in a way that establishes “its eternal truth,” that disperses it from the circuit of anticipation and reaction and opens it to new application, reveals both its singularity and its capacity to be repeated *as event* for all time. But this Idea is not a Platonic essence – it is an implied

³⁹ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 147.

series of future events embodying the topological essence of archery.

Importantly, this is an impersonal function even if it includes personal labor – it is more difficult to isolate, subtract, and reduce the event from its natural moorings than it is simply to succeed. It is profoundly difficult to render a sound itself, to clip its functional associations and its habitual relays so that it can stand *as a matter of fact* and embody a style. But the further we can tend toward this artful mode of performance and listening, the more we can sense the contours of processes that compose reality – processes we can explore and unfold in an infinite array of new settings. Sounds can be rendered more than functional. They can be made *exemplary* – members of a class containing only themselves and their implied future-past iterations. The exemplary sound has an “accidental” body, but is selected and isolated such that we can feel its virtual potential apart from any particular instance. *The sound itself in its own event-ness, felt in the audition of this singular sound.* This is what Cage means by “the sounds themselves” and what Deleuze means by the *rending asunder* of phenomena. Objects rent asunder allow us to think process, to grasp a semblance in the direct perception of a possible life-style – “an intuition of the thing as a life motif – a pattern of varied repetitions.”⁴⁰

* * *

A Situation Where I Am Unable To Evaluate

The purpose of such listening is not simply to gain an aesthetic appreciation for the banal, but to *continuously redistribute sense*, to rejoin the complexity of the

⁴⁰ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 50.

continuous soundfield and the event-of-all-events in its unfolding. To develop an operative approach to listening that would sharpen sensitivity to the singularity of emergences in the total complex rather than dull sensitivity by logical reduction – in other words, to engage hearing-as-thought rather than hearing-as-habit. Art cannot be used as a means to an existing end, but only to discover new means leading to unforeseen ends:

[U]nclosed art can only escape. Then, I place myself in a situation where I am unable to evaluate... I try not to be inhibited: blocked by a value, and slave to a judgment. Of course, I rarely manage to do this. However, that is what poetic life is! It is salvation. But it is also the leap that makes you fall back to the starting point.⁴¹

Against art that can only find that which it already recognizes, Cage and Deleuze posit that we no longer know what it is possible to hear and that music – indeed, all of art – becomes the practice of redrawing the boundaries of attention, of coming into contact with the seams of sensibility of itself, of drawing near the limit of what it is possible to sense in order to retrain those boundaries. Category, proportion, traditional notions of beauty are purely anaesthetic and palliative: they force conformity of thought over the radical difference of the empirical – the intense world of difference from which our habits of recognition emerge and into which they again recede. They dull the constant impingement of difference on our supposedly stable subject, cropping the capacity for change lurking within even the most regularized encounters and buffering our sensibilities from becoming what they are not. By contrast, art places us in an encounter with that radical outside, with that which exceeds recognition – that which can only be

⁴¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 120.

felt, which can only be sensed, which forces our network of regularized interactions and our bundle of habit into excitement, irritation, and becoming. “Irritating one way or another,” Cage reminds us, “that is to say keeping us from ossifying.”⁴²

In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze reconciles what he calls the “wrenching duality” at the heart of aesthetics. On one hand, aesthetics theorizes the conformity of the sensible to the categories of thought: it “captures only the real’s conformity with possible experience.” On the other hand, aesthetics also addresses the theory of the beautiful, which depicts the reality of thinking’s “free play” in the encounter with an intuition for which there is no adequate concept. The two poles are united when we determine the real conditions of experience – the excess of the sensible over the thinkable, the presence of the anomalous that renders sensible intuition possible in the first place. Deleuze poses the reconciliation as follows: “Everything changes once we determine the conditions of real experience, which are not larger than the conditioned and which differ in kind from the categories: the two senses of the aesthetic become one, to the point where the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation.”⁴³

The real conditions of experience are the *something more* that gives rise to a sensation, that forces the encounter – it is the force of impingement exerted by the world’s becoming, by the unrecognized but necessary component of all sensation. The conditions of real experience include this excess over what can be recognized but is

⁴² Cage, “Composition as Process,” in *Silence*, 44.

⁴³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 68.

typically buffered by our habits, habits which constitute our ability to convert impingement into action by means of recognizing an encounter as “close enough” to an abstract model: by reducing the self-differing component of the encounter, submitting it to common and good sense. Habits of perception block by asserting predetermined value, they inhibit by judgment – they convert the singularity of the encounter into a regularity of use. But a body extracted from its habitual circuits and severed from its functional relays finds itself anew in a position where it is unable to evaluate. As Steven Shavero says:

Such aesthetic contemplation is explicitly opposed to action. Great films, for example, paralyze the viewer. They leave him or her suspended in what Deleuze calls ‘a pure optical and sound situation,’ one that does not ‘extend into action, any more than it is induced by an action.’ That is to say, they interrupt the sensori-motor circuit that is the basis of ‘normal’ perception and action...⁴⁴

All hearing, all seeing begins as an impulsion to become otherwise than we already are – it is a registering of the world’s processual unfolding, the difference that is behind everything. Every act is virgin, even the repeated one – it begins as difference, as its own unique way of occurring, without precedence or resemblance, unconstrained within identity. These are the real conditions of experience: the impulsion to become other than we already are, the impingements of the world’s difference. All hearing begins as a pain in the ears – all pains are spurs to action, to becoming.

⁴⁴ Steven Shavero, “The Wrenching Duality of Aesthetics: Kant, Deleuze, and the Theory of the Sensible,” 12. The Deleuze quotation is found in on page 18 of *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*.

The real conditions of experience, as Deleuze claims, are not to be sensed in the moments of supposed correspondence between the sensible and the intelligible, but in the fundamental discord that passes an impulse from the sensible to the intelligible. Cage and Deleuze's shared reverence for Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* attests to this power – the work forces us to think, jars us from regularized patterns of response to language, induces a forced, violent movement that reveals glints of future action yet untested, new paths of connections yet unregulated. “Thus the conditions of real experience and the structures of the work of art are reunited: divergence of series, decentering circles, constitution of the chaos that envelops them, internal resonance and movement of amplitude, aggression of the simulacra.”⁴⁵

The real conditions of experience are not the mirror play of the possible and the real, but the continual production of dissimilarity as the virtual passes into the actual and vice-versa. The world is becoming different; experience is not a mirroring of the outside world to the inside of subjectivity, but the mark of a becoming. Every sensation is a product of the world's processual unfolding, its becoming-different. The endless circuit of becoming and habit torsioning one another plays through our experience – the something-more in every experience forcing our becoming, habit buffering those impingements, shocks to thought bending the contours of our habitual mesh. To intensify that becoming is to become sensitive to the world's impingements, to let them carry experience outside itself until inside and outside are indiscernible. To let the unthought, or the irreducible to thought, wrack our senses: “happy new ears” through the painful fringe of beauty in all sensibility. We must tend toward the processual incursion that

⁴⁵ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 261.

forces listening's emergence rather than the placating satisfaction of recognizable sonic objects. As Brian Massumi says in *Parables for the Virtual*:

Objects are anesthetic specifications of the growth pain of perception's passing in and out of itself. The anesthetic is the *perceived*, as distinguished from the perceiving... If the empirical is the anesthetic, then the pain accompanying perception's passing forcefully into itself and continuing superempirically in flight from its objective quelling—what can this be but the *aesthetic*?

The pain is the beauty (of the world emergent).⁴⁶

This is the great lesson of 4'33" – not simply that “all sounds are musical” or that we might be momentarily excited by sound of our programs rustling. The lesson is not that these particular sounds are musical. It is that every situation is tinged with this *something more*, something not yet accounted for: not quantitatively, but qualitatively. The excess over actual experience is virtuality. The piece never exhausts if one looks for the transcendental change – a change in *form of experience* – rather than just simply the inclusion of additional aesthetic material. There are always more ways of engaging the earth than are available in the selection that is subjectivity. We increase our powers by gaining affects and by remaining open to encounters. But these encounters require us to break our habits by short-circuiting them, by paralyzing our functional being so that its powers of reception may be heightened. It is in these situations that this something else can bend the modes of reception themselves, through a contingent encounter with that which has no function as of yet.

⁴⁶ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 161.

The effort, therefore, has to be continual – it cannot be a “once and for all” claiming of all sounds for music. Instead, we have to develop new capacities for selection, new ways of surprising ourselves and generating new affects, new ways of engaging with the world. The discovery of a new sound, or the re-discovery of an old, is an engagement with a yet-undetermined way of acting on the world or a latent, undefined action in a present unrecognized perception. It is creative in that it is produced and experimental in that the consequences cannot be grasped beforehand. It doesn’t call for a judgment of good or bad but suspends such judgment by virtue of its *otherness* – we find ourselves in an area where our standard rules and our rules of standardization are not yet applied, the space in which new ways of living are invented through us.

Chapter Five: Through Many a Perilous Situation

What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real... A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back “to the same.” The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged “competence.”¹

A Happening should be like a net to catch fish the nature of which one does not know. And at this point the word “discipline” means what it originally meant—namely, giving up oneself in order, one could even say, to know oneself.²

How are we to judge a performance of Cage’s music when Cage has displaced most traditional criteria for the judgment of performance? There is rarely an order of resemblance between notation and sounding result – most scores require several degrees of translation and modification to render them performable. There are few ways to compare the fidelity of a performer’s actions to the instructions in the score, actions that are always bound to diverge from performer’s intentions as complex situations unfold. There are occasional signposts provided in the compositions themselves (a gesture, notated pitches, timed reference points), but rarely a means of mapping a sonic object

¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 12-13.

² Cage in conversation with Lars Gunnar Bodin and Bengt Emil Johnson (1965), *Conversing with Cage*, 119.

back upon any composed prefigurations. Cage insists that it is never sufficient to look for criteria of “correctness” or adequacy – the very idea of correctness holds little appeal. “A ‘correct understanding’ doesn’t interest me,” he asserts in *For the Birds*. “With a music-process, there is no ‘correct understanding’ anywhere. And, consequently, no all-pervasive ‘misunderstanding,’ either.” Every performance is its own unique event and carries its own unique charge of indeterminacy; like sounds themselves, every performance implicates a complex, dynamic field that exceeds any individual agency. To perform within this complex field is not to act unilaterally, but to modify and tweak the conditions under which an action *expresses itself*. And like sounds themselves, performers should be active and dynamic but should not “worry about whether they make sense or whether they’re heading in the right direction. They don’t need that direction or misdirection to be themselves. They *are*, and that’s enough for them.”³

Moreover, Cage’s judgments about performances and seemingly contradictory attitudes toward concert preparation further complicate matters. Cage was staunchly averse to most pre-concert preparations: one of the compositional priorities listed in his career-summing essay “Composition in Retrospect” is A MUSIC THAT NEEDS NO REHEARSAL.⁴ Yet he routinely demanded extensive rehearsals for orchestras after a series of debacles involving under-rehearsed and careless ensembles, and he worked closely in performance preparations with any number of musicians.⁵ In some cases, Cage

³ Cage, *For the Birds*, 150.

⁴ Cage, *Composition in Retrospect*, 62.

⁵ One famous case of orchestral “sabotage” involving the New York Philharmonic under the direction of Leonard Bernstein will be examined later in this chapter. For another

praised performers who apparently deviated consciously from the score or performances that seemed marred by external complications that made it impossible to execute the score's demands faithfully. In other cases, performances that appear to follow the letter of the law lead to swift and occasionally angry condemnations. These judgments show less concern for fidelity to the score than a concern for maintaining an ethical stance rather than a moral stance, affirming a process of experimentation rather than a process of reproduction, representation, or restriction. The successful performance for Cage is the performance that frees an event, one that produces or enables a new mode of hearing and thus a new mode of being in the world. The work must become a research program, and the relationship between the act of composing, performing, and listening must be a relation of continual production rather than the mirror play of representation and resemblance ("...writing is one thing, performing another, and listening a third; and... there is no reason for the three operations to be linked.").⁶

"When it's clear that the person who is realizing the work is doing his work not only in the spirit of the composition, but in such a way as to free him from his choices, then I think it makes no difference what the results are, because we're not really interested in results," Cage insists in *For the Birds*. "Results are like deaths. What we're

example of Cage's struggles with large ensembles, see the extensive footnote detailing the first performance of *Cheap Imitation* in *For the Birds*, page 183. Stories of Cage's interactions with individual performers are manifold; for a particularly detailed account of pre-concert preparations, see Cage's interviews with Joan Retallack and Michael Bach in *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, and Music* (Hanover, CT: Wesleyan, 1996), pp. 246-290.

⁶ Cage, *For the Birds*, 129.

interested in is things going on and changing, not in their being fixed.”⁷ His most vigorous condemnations are reserved not for performances that strain against the score’s demands or go beyond its explicit instructions (as ideal events have their own malleability, their own means of exceeding their representations), but for those that aspire to substitute knowledge for learning, representation for experimentation, interpretation for research. At times, Cage’s own evaluations play on traditional measures of value to perverse ends. For example, Cage insists that “even a bad performance” provides an opportunity for transformation if this spirit of experimentalism is maintained; a failure to adhere to the score, for instance, may sometimes (but not always) “help to educate musicians and listeners to the possibilities of this new work, and stretch their capabilities to be interested in their experiences.”⁸

Above all, performance should open composer, listener, and performer alike to unforeseen perceptions as a means of reconnecting to the world’s eventfulness. Perceptions *are things* – they are marks of potential. To experience a new perception is to reveal a new potential for engagement with the world, a potential that could be tested or extended into new ways of living. Every perception is not a perception *of* an event, but it *is* an event – the marking of a change in our interaction with the world. Familiar perceptions leave us with clichés, familiar programs of action: art that puts us back within the relays of representation, within the established realms of habits and identities, cannot put us in the realm of events that change our sensibilities. A performance should initiate a

⁷ Cage in conversation with Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras (1975), *Conversing with Cage*, 108.

⁸ Cage in conversation with Calvin Tomkins (1965), *Conversing with Cage*, 109.

chain of atypical expressions: it should initiate a series of prospective generalities, latent experimental actions, without prefiguring what those programs should be. It should not be a matter of representation but of the creation and conduction of potential modes of engagement with the world in its unfolding – the generation and proliferation of unpredictable research programs. A performance that lapses into interpretation – or a performance that gives habit a sufficient foothold for relay into interpretation – cannot effect this kind of change. A performance is not a demonstration of a concept or the relaying of a message, but a place, as Deleuze says, in which we find not the “infinite account of interpretations” but instead “processes of experimentation, protocols of experience.” Each stage of the chain from composition to performance to reception is uniquely and differently *productive*: “programs are not manifestos, but means of providing reference for an experiment which exceeds our capacities to foresee.”⁹

In each of the following examples – performances of *4’33’’*, *Variations II*, *Song Books*, and Erik Satie’s *Vexations* – the nature of the of productive, non-representational link between composition, performance, and listening is in contention. In each instance, Cage’s response to the performance is closely tied to the manner in which they negotiate the resonance between series having no common form or correspondence – the way they link composition, performance, and listening without assuming a resemblance between these different registers. The series of variations implicated in the score should not be “represented” in performance, but should transform (and without foreseeable ends) the functioning not just of a performer, but the complex event in which she already finds herself – an event having an entirely different nature of organization than the materials of

⁹ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 48.

a score. Similarly, the sounds and actions generated in performance should in no way be a representation of a previously-molded “concept” or “meaning,” but should intimate a new distribution of sensibility in the listener, and thus a new *potential* orientation within the world, an orientation which can extend into new and unforeseen events outside the concert hall, new ways of living and interacting with reality itself. To lapse back into the mere mirror-play of communication is to arrest the chain of varying potentials passing from work-process to performance-experiment and into listener-potential – and Cage’s harshest condemnations are reserved for performances that lapse into the common form and correspondence of habit and identity rather than for those performances that encourage experimentation. His highest praise is reserved for performances that allow the world’s own self-varying processes to resonate between the composing, performing, and listening series – that allow for chance inflections always afoot in the world to inflect each occurrence, opening us to the “something more” that teems within and outside our habits and identities.

Importantly, the examples examined in this chapter do not offer any fixed prescriptions or prohibitions. There is no universal solution for all cases in a world under constant metamorphosis and no outside position from which to posit laws and regulations. The conditions necessary for a creative act – an act that places us outside the closed loop of representation, intention, and judgment – will be unique in every case. Each performance contains its own conditions of anomaly, conditions that a performer will have to maneuver in and through with caution and sensitivity if she is to evade the snare of habit and let the event take its own course: if she is to be “the offspring of her events” and not their master. An experimental action, as Cage insists, is one whose

outcome cannot be predicted ahead of performance; Deleuze reminds us that one “cannot prejudge the outcome of research.”¹⁰ While universal method has to be abandoned – one can’t will the transformative experience, one can only be open to it – conditions for the creative or complex act require careful preparation and consideration. The slate is never blank: it is always crowded with incipient habits and recognitions that have to be suspended, stalled, interrupted. Cage speaks of “sobering the mind” to render it susceptible to external, super-human, “divine” influence. Deleuze maintains that “a nobility is discovered in the preparatory movement which must nevertheless disappear in the result.”¹¹ Cage’s preferred performances are never those that reflect mastery, but those that spur a chain of learning – the infinite task by which thought and sensibility bend around the world in its unfolding, the passage from sensed shock to the emergence of a new style of life.¹² “It is from ‘learning,’ not from knowledge, that the transcendental conditions of thought must be drawn,” as Deleuze proposes in *Difference and Repetition* – it is only the contingent encounter, the unexpected action, the unrecognized noise, which can spur the transformative movement in thought.¹³

¹⁰ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 143.

¹¹ Ibid., 166.

¹² Cage went out of his way to prevent mastery in otherwise masterful performers. For an illuminating example, see his remarks on Paul Zukofsky’s tendency toward pitch-perfect performance in *Musicage*, page 253: “But if you tell him something he can’t understand, like something too fine... in fact, it was his situation of *knowing* that let me to discover ways of *keeping him from knowing*.”

¹³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 166.

Song Books

In 1975, Petr Kotik invited vocalist and composer Julius Eastman to join the S.E.M. Ensemble for a performance of Cage's *Song Books* (1970). Eastman had departed from the ensemble earlier that same year under difficult circumstances: during rehearsals for a performance of the music of Marcel Duchamp, Eastman's growing annoyance with the ensemble's repertoire of indeterminate music peaked. He stormed out and refused to join Kotik's group for any further performances. Despite their difficulties, and given Eastman's extremely successful earlier performances from *Song Books* in Albany in 1971, Kotik invited Eastman to return for the work's performance as part of the ensemble's "June in Buffalo" program. Kotik had fully expected him to refuse the invitation. Much to his surprise, Eastman accepted the offer, and the performance that resulted became one of Cage's key negative examples concerning performance of his works – and a rare example of Cage's anger appearing in a public context.

As was typical for Cage, he categorically refused any rehearsals prior to the performance of the *Song Books*.¹⁴ Eastman's earlier performances had surely engendered confidence in Cage, who worried that rehearsal might function to limit indeterminacy with regard to performance rather than stimulate it. The *Song Books* themselves are extraordinarily open-ended works, even by Cage's standards: two volumes comprising

¹⁴ On Performing Feldman's "For Philip Guston:" A Conversation by Petr Kotik and Walter Zimmermann, <http://www.cnvill.net/mfkotik.htm>

eighty-nine individual works demanding actions that range from conventional singing to neo-Dada theater (“Play a game with another person (e.g. chess, dominoes) or others (e.g. scrabble, bridge)”) and the interpretation of an impressively broad array of notational devices. Eastman’s realization of “Solo for Voice No. 8” proved particularly shocking to both concertgoers and Cage and placed considerable strain on the relationship between Cage and his associates (Morton Feldman would not join SEM for another performance until 1987) and the Ensemble. This eighth piece in the set is a reprise of Cage’s *0’00’*, and its directions read as follows:

In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action.

With any interruptions.

Fulfilling in whole or part an obligation to others.

No attention to be given the situation (electronic, musical, theatrical).

For his disciplined action, Julius Eastman prepared and delivered a mock lecture on what he called “a new system of love.” He accompanied his remarks with demonstrations on two live “specimens” – his young boyfriend, called Mr. Charles, and his own sister, called Miss Susiana. By the end of the performances, Mr. Charles had been stripped completely nude. Eastman would then attempt to undress Miss Susiana, but she vocally refused his attempts before he moved on.¹⁵ In a review for the *Buffalo Evening News*,

¹⁵ Kenneth Silverman, *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage* (Evanston: Northwestern, 2012), 268. A corroborating report of the same performance also appears in René Levine Packer’s *This Life of Sounds: Evenings for New Music in Buffalo* (New York: Oxford, 2010), 145-46.

critic Jeff Simon described the performance thusly: "By the time Eastman's little performance was finished, Mister Charles was completely undressed and Eastman's leering, libidinous, lecture-performance had everyone convulsed with the burlesque broadness of his homoerotic satire."¹⁶

Cage's reaction was furious. While he was in no way unfamiliar with lackluster or resistant performances from unsympathetic ensembles, he found himself greatly disturbed by this aberration from a cast of presumed allies. During a tense lecture session the next day, a student from the State University of New York at Buffalo asked Cage how the performance could be judged such a failure if the composer had failed to provide a more explicit score. Cage exploded, pounding his fist on the piano and exclaiming, "I'm tired of people who think that they could do whatever they want with my music!"¹⁷ He went on to declare that serious performers of his music must share some of his sympathies, even going as far as to state that a thorough reading of Thoreau and familiarity with the music of Satie might be a requirement for their proper performance. In an interview with Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras published later that year, Cage provided further insight into the nature of his complaint:

But when someone uses a piece like that, that they think is free, in order to do anything they want to do, when I say, for instance, 'Make a disciplined action,' I'm not saying 'Do whatever you like,' and yet that's precisely what some people now think I'm saying. That's why recently in Buffalo there was a seminar in

¹⁶ Jeff Simon, "Artists Enjoy Options in All-Cage Program," *Buffalo Evening News*, June 5, 1975. Quoted in Packer, *This Life of Sounds*, 146.

¹⁷ http://robhaskins.net/writings/song_books_notes.htm#_edn1 -- Haskins cites an old Peter Gena post from the *Silence* list, -- Peter Gena, "Re: John Cage and Song Books in Buffalo," online posting, 7 December 1997, *Silence: The John Cage Discussion List*, 15 June 2002, <http://www.newalbion.com/artists/cagej/silence/html/1997q4/0292.html>.

which I was obliged to speak after what I thought was a very poor performance of the *Song Books* to speak as I am speaking now, and point out not uncertainly that the freedoms I've given have not been given to permit just anything that one likes to do, but have been invitations for people to free themselves from their likes and dislikes, and to discipline themselves.¹⁸

In other words, Julius Eastman didn't tap into the virtual – he couldn't generate the asignifying gesture so important to Cage's investigations. He remained trapped within *identity*. Transgression and negation alone are insufficient to carry us from habit; they shock in a conventional sense while stopping well short of the shock-to-thought of the creative event. Provocation doesn't reach into the virtual: it reaffirms an existing order of actions and reactions. It is reactive rather than exploratory – it is parasitic upon an existing hierarchy of identities, which it may momentarily invert but is incapable of displacing or setting into flight. Eastman may have produced discomfort for a moment, perhaps, but such discomfort is destined to map itself back onto a standard grid of identities. He offered perhaps a glint of a present tension, but no trace of that vague feeling of becoming in the action. Tied to what exists rather than an unpredictable trace of what might exist, Eastman was unable to reach that point of abstraction, that shedding of functions or creative subtraction and that could carry the performance into an unforeseen *something more*.

In the end, Cage deemed the performance too intentional, too destined to achieve the provocation it set out to achieve. For all its presumed immorality and irreverence, it was a performance destined for a moral interpretation rather than an ethical

¹⁸ Cage in conversation with Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras (1975), *Conversing with Cage*, 108.

experimentation – there was no room for contingency, no diverted intention, no blurring of the distinction between subjects and objects or a thinking-feeling of impersonal individuations. Julius Eastman remained in command of the situation, he remained distinctly himself throughout, he wasn't a conduit for an event of transformation but a godlike, transcendent figure of control. One could be shocked, but one couldn't be transformed – least of all Eastman himself. While Eastman aspired to self-expression, Cage had desired *just* expression – the Deleuzian moment in which the “life of the individual gives way to an impersonal and yet singular life that releases a pure event freed from the accidents of internal and external life, from the subjectivity and objectivity of what happens: a ‘Homo tantum’ with whom everyone empathizes and who attains a sort of beatitude.”¹⁹ Eastman's provocation is purely reactionary from this vantage point – human, all too human. In the truly disciplined action, it is the event that acts through the actor, who becomes the “offspring of his events.” Eastman's performance was too pre-individuated and too representational to achieve that distance from himself that would allow an event to free itself from the bounds of his subjectivity.

Eastman's performance also provides us the opportunity to consider the role that humor might play in Cagean performance. Though an audience may have convulsed with laughter, Cage – known for his joyfulness and generally sunny disposition – found little humor in Eastman's performance. Here, Deleuze's differentiation between humor and irony proves useful to parsing this problem. Irony functions by means of *ascent* from the singularity of what happens: it relies on a subject that already knows how an event is

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a Life* (New York: Zone, 2001), 28.

supposed to unfold, what it is supposed to mean, what an action signifies or how it relates to other actions. It presupposes a world parsed into stable units that can be expressed in a common language – a world of consensus apart from and above the tangle of an event’s particularity. Irony attempts to claim a position outside the world of flux and difference or to posit a point of view outside of difference and singularity: it aims to establish a vantage point where nothing escapes its view, the view of subjectivity and representation. Humor, on the other hand, is the art of descent and the escape from the straitjacket of intention and meaning, a movement toward the unbearable complexity of the event in its excess over every form of representation. While both humor and irony rely on a non-coincidence between expectation and result, irony offers “the promise of a higher sense against a failed lower one” – a higher sense guaranteed by the self-awareness and security of the ironist.²⁰ By contrast, humor displaces the security of self-identity and undercuts the reliability of representation in general. In the collaborative essays of *Dialogues II*, Claire Parnet and Deleuze celebrate the positive, productive nihilism of humor against the closed and tragic art of irony:

The whole destiny of irony is linked to representation, irony ensures the individuation of the represented or the subjectivation of the representer... Humor is the art of consequences or effects: OK, fine, you give me this? You’ll see what happens...The arts of Zen, archery, gardening, or taking tea, are exercises to make the event surge forth and dazzle on a pure surface.”²¹

Humor is the art of singularities – the art of events without predefined meaning,

²⁰ James Williams, *Gilles Deleuze’s Logic of Sense: A Critical Introduction and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2008), 19.

²¹ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 68.

the noises and disruptions that escape signification. While irony ascends from the singularity of the event, humor descends to it, seizing that which escapes meaning and order in its capacity to *disrupt* the smooth functioning of anticipation and reaction. Against the regularizing powers of habit, narrative, and morality, it affirms the corporeality and chaos from which thought emerges and toward which it returns. While irony can provide a critique of reason, it lacks the positive and sense-producing potential of humor – it always risks lapsing into nihilistic cynicism rather than tending toward productive chaos. In her description of Deleuzian irony, Claire Colebrook highlights humor's capacity to resist irony's logical reduction of the event:

Humour falls or collapses: 'down' from meaning and intentions to the singularities of life that have no order, no high and low, no before and after. Humour can reverse or pervert logic, disrupt moral categories or dissolve the body into parts without any governing intention... Concepts are used, not just in ways that suggest an unconventional meaning, but in ways that destroy the very convention of meaning. One cannot mean or say anything without some shared order of a before and after, a sense of what is and is not.²²

By resisting the ascent of irony, humor plunges us into the unmanageable complexity of the real, beyond its ability to be contained within meaning. It undermines the illusion of purely subjective intention by putting us immediately and uncontrollably in contact with the agency of the event itself – the a-personal or super-human movements of the world that simultaneously enable and thwart our ability to have thought and act coincide. Irony secures identity, claims the dominance of meaning and subjectivity over the particularities of this or that encounter. Humor rejoins the world's own insistent

²² Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (London: Routledge, 2004), 135.

activity, its capacity to exceeds the net of preferences and intentions we attempt to cast over it. Humor affirms the ever-present capacity for something more – a new way to have our sense of sovereign subjectivity bent and broken as the world works in and through us. Irony claims that there is nothing new under the sun, while humor attests to the always-new of every encounter. According to Deleuze, humor is “the savoir-faire of the pure event... with every signification, denotation, and manifestation suspended, all height and depth abolished.”²³ An inversion of expectation is not enough for humor – the art of humor is the suspension of the horizon of expectation entirely, the suspending of sense so that a new sense might emerge out of nonsense and vice-versa. Humor demands the conditions of *absurdity*, not simply the inversion of expectation or provocation. One must be the Zen archer, not the provocateur:

What is required is humor, as opposed to the Socratic irony or to the technique of the ascent... To paint without painting, non-thought, shooting which becomes non-shooting, to speak without speaking: this is not at all the ineffable up above or down below, but rather the frontier and the surface where language becomes possible and, by becoming possible, inspires only a silent and immediate communication, since it could only be spoken in the resuscitation of all the mediate and abolished significations or denotations... Humor is the co-extensiveness of sense with nonsense.”²⁴

The fault of Julius Eastman’s performance was not that it lapsed into nonsense – it failed because it couldn’t escape signification and because it couldn’t find the seam between sense and non-sense within its situation. Sabotage and tricksterism cannot aspire to Cagean humor. One must instead be a traitor against all meaning, but it is difficult and

²³ Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 135-41.

²⁴ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 48.

dangerous to do so, surely more dangerous than just agitation and titillation – one must lose one’s face and become unrecognizable. To be humorous and not simply ironic is to lose one’s identity and become unknown, to experiment on oneself (“to free themselves from their likes and dislikes”) by suspending the power of the ascent (“to discipline themselves”). The trickster “claims to take possession of fixed properties, or to conquer a territory, or even to introduce a new order” – and thus she is merely another incarnation of the priest or the soothsayer. By contrast, the humorist is “atonal [and] absolutely imperceptible” from within the world of signification and order – and for this reason is the cutting edge of creation, one who rejoins with the world’s endless escape from the limits of the thinkable.²⁵

* * *

Variations II

Composed as birthday present for David Tudor, *Variations II* (1961) holds an exemplary position in Cage’s repertory. It represents not only Cage’s furthest foray into indeterminate composition, but also represented a turning point in his thought about composition and performance. It would spur a fruitful series of compositional events and explorations, both within the *Variations* series and in nearly every subsequent Cage composition, that would expand not only on its compositional premises but on the potentials suggested in Tudor’s unique performances. Tudor provided Cage with new strategies for performance, strategies concerned not with the “authentic” reproduction of

²⁵ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 40-41.

a work but the development of research programs for open-ended exploration. Indeed, Tudor's ability to wring unforeseen potentials from the score without violating Cage's experimental principles offers us insight into the composer's understanding of the musical work as process-oriented intervention rather than musical object. (This would not be the first time that Tudor helped Cage actualize a virtual potential in his work – his extremely precise interpretation of *Music of Changes*, for example, was an important antecedent for Cage's "clock time" notation.)²⁶ As he would tell Daniel Charles, Cage felt *Variations II* was his most significant work for David Tudor, one he would "like to think will always hold some interest for him."²⁷ Cage's conceptual leap was met with a virtuosic and profoundly inventive actualization by Tudor, one that the composer saw as extending a line of continuous variation rather than simply exhausting its potentials.

The notation for *Variations II* consists of six straight lines and five points placed on individual plastic transparencies. Points pertain to sound events, and the lines provide reference axes for sonic parameters – duration, timbre, frequency, relative complexity (number of tones, overtones, etc.), amplitude, and the placement of sound events within the overall time span selected by the performer. The performer is asked to overlay the transparencies on one another and measure the distance between each point and the six reference axes to determine the characteristics of each sound. The total number of sound

²⁶ John Holzapfel, "Cage and Tudor," in *The Cambridge Companion to John Cage*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 173. See also James Pritchett, "David Tudor as Composer/Performer in Cage's *Variations II*," 2001: 2. http://www.getty.edu/research/conducting_research/digitized_collections/davidthudor/pdf/pritchett.pdf.

²⁷ Cage, *For the Birds*, 178.

events is left to the performer, who is permitted to make any number of readings from the provided transparency materials.

As James Pritchett details in his article on Tudor's *Variations II*, David Tudor seems to diverge from these precise instructions. Whereas the score calls for some degree of precise measurement of each parameter, Tudor converted his measurements into shorthand "rules of thumb" for engaging with his chosen instrument – the amplified piano. In his initial investigatory notes, Tudor converted his measurements into much more open-ended queues for activating the piano. Measurements for amplitude, for instance, were rendered as short, medium, or long; measurements for frequency were converted to into the comparably less-precise low, medium, and high. In his final performing notation, the results of the measurements were further simplified: all parameters were designated either "simple" or "complex."²⁸ Moreover, in writing his performance notes Tudor shifted his focus from describing the sounds produced to describing the *means* by which the sounds would be produced; in other words, simple and complex came to describe the method by which sounds would be generated (a simple means of affecting amplitude, for example, versus a complex alteration of the volume levels) as opposed to the concrete qualities of the sounds themselves.

Clearly, Tudor had carried the work afield of Cage's original vision – while Cage had produced a system that could be used to prefigure the results of a performance, Tudor converted *Variations II* into an open-ended program for interacting with the performing environment. Cage had intended *Variations II* to generate an image of the product of

²⁸ Pritchett, "David Tudor as Composer/Performer in Cage's *Variations II*," 3.

performance; Tudor carried the indeterminate charge of the score across the threshold of composition and into performance by converting its event-dimension into his performance notation – a repetition with difference. Tudor’s approach to the amplified piano would ensure that a similar relation of non-relation between his intention and the sounding result would ensue.

As conceived by Tudor, the amplified piano would significantly inform the horizontal assemblage of human, score, instrument, and environment that would in turn disperse the performer's control over the sonic result. The amplified piano was more than simply a louder version of a standard piano, perhaps even more than an “instrument” in any conventional sense – it carried unpredictable potentials all its own. Microphones were placed above the piano, contact microphones were attached to stiff metal wires used to vibrate the strings or placed directly on the instrument to resonate freely with Tudor’s agitations. Phonograph cartridges outfitted with alternative styluses (in the style of *Cartridge Music*) were scraped against strings or used to amplify resonances within the instrument. All these elements were fed through a mixer and projected through speakers that would, in turn, further complicate the sound via the induction of various feedback loops and unpredictable interferences. In short, the amplified piano was less an instrument than an *ecology* or *assemblage*, and Tudor was not in a position of mastery or control, but instead acted as a catalyst within a complex system whose only true subject was its own self-modulation, modulations induced by but not fully controlled by Tudor’s actions.

Though Tudor seems to have strayed from the score’s explicit instructions, Cage was thrilled with the approach, admiring in particular its simultaneous fidelity to the

“spirit” of the event-work and its ambitious approach toward an open-ended performance situation. In the interviews contained within *For the Birds*, Cage claims a special pride of place for Tudor’s ambitious inventions: “We composed everything thinking it would be performed by David. We knew that he would be capable of executing everything we entrusted to him, and that his playing would be absolutely faithful to what each piece required.”²⁹ Of particular interest was the manner in which Tudor counter-actualized the score and its instructions – the manner in which he traced back the virtual conditions or set of problematic features that gave rise to *Variations II* – rather than simply reproducing the given instructions. Clearly, Cage saw Tudor’s interventions not as an attempt to usurp the composer’s authority but as an alternative actualization of the process that gave rise to *Variations II* itself. As Cage says in conversation with Daniel Charles:

[Tudor] decided to begin with what was unknown rather than to force the unknown to become known. His point of view was that we must use the unknown to make the known unknown. And not the other way around. That comes from his genius for solving puzzles. And I strongly doubt that anyone else ever had the idea of going about it that way. I must admit that it is an idea that would have never occurred to me.³⁰

Indeed, Cage found himself changed by Tudor’s approach. Subsequent incarnations of the *Variations* event dropped the demand for measurement in favor of Tudor’s method of establishing field conditions for a complex event without prefiguring the performed results. *Variations III* retained the transparency sheet notation, but abandoned the condition of measurement in an effort to render it more process-like, an

²⁹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 124.

³⁰ Ibid., 128.

operator to be enmeshed within other ongoing ecological processes in the same way that Tudor's reworking had functioned:

Variations III, you know, has circles that are all the same, but each one is on a different sheet of transparent plastic. When they are tossed onto a surface, they overlap. The ones that do not overlap the principal group are removed; so what you have in the end is a complex of overlapping circles. Some overlap more circles than others. For instance, the lowest will be one overlapping one other, whereas the highest will be seven, eight, or nine circles overlapping.

What I mean by that is that our activities... We are constantly active; we are never inactive. There is no space in our lives. But there is a greater or lesser number of things going on at the same moment; so that if I'm not doing anything other than listening, the fact that I'm listening is that I'm doing something by listening. That's what *Variations III* is.

David Tudor helped to eliminate the last traces of prefiguration – the last traces of morality – from *Variations II*. Through his reworking of the instructions and his development of the complex instrumental assemblage of the amplified piano, he spurred Cage toward a more fully developed ethics of experimental performance, one that called for performers to adopt virtuosic *flexibility* rather than virtuosic technique: an openness to the current of events rather than attempts to domesticate and dominate them. Tudor's performance provided an exemplary instance of a score leading toward productive chaos or acting as a tool to aid the performer in tracing a haecceity's virtual contours. Tudor proceeded from the known toward the unknown – the score was a springboard to a particularly patterned state of dynamism without forecasting the sounding results. The volatility of the amplified piano added to this edge-of-chaos creativity, forcing Tudor to attune to its peculiarities, to abandon paths that threatened to send the instrument into

completely uncontrollable noise while tracing those that yielded interesting and unpredictable results.

At the close of his article on *Variations II*, James Pritchett challenges Tudor's rendering on the grounds that he pursued "an idiosyncratic interpretation of Cage's open-ended notation to further his own personal musical interests, rather than using it in a pure fashion to explore the universe of sound in a detached manner." While Tudor's performance may have been interesting, Pritchett argues, it was fundamentally "inauthentic" in its relation to Cage's intentions. He is quick to ascribe Cage's leniency to Tudor's privileged place in the composer's circle. But examined in light of Cage's ethical and ontological stances, it is hard to see this question of authorship and authenticity as anything other than poorly posed – it fails to grasp what was truly at stake in Tudor's work. Every performance is inauthentic insofar as it represents a modulation of the work itself – performance is a process of conduction or a self-transforming leap of the event, an event that is already on the move, always-already unfolding in a different manner than its first emergence. Cage's first conception is but one actualization of that virtual current itself. It's made to be carried further afield, to undergo modulations provided something of its abstract relations stay intact (but those are abstract relations, not extensive factors for comparison). It is inevitable that it would result in Cage-Tudor co-creation. The work is its own process of drawing-together and modulating contexts – it has the autonomy of the virtual event, independent of those that incarnated it, even those that incarnated it for the first time.

* * *

4'33"

David Tudor gave the first performance of *4'33"* (1952) on August 29, 1952, at the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York. Tudor played from Cage's handwritten score consisting of pages of empty measures on grand staff paper with a tempo of sixty beats per minute, allowing for simple measurement via stopwatch. Tudor sat, by most accounts, nearly motionless while using the stopwatch to measure the time, turning pages in accordance with the number of silent beats that had passed. The opening of the piano fallboard indicated the beginning of each movement; the closing of the fallboard indicated the conclusion. The score called for three silent movements, the total duration of which comprised four minutes and thirty three seconds of "silence" – which was actually teeming with the ambient sounds of the room, the murmur of wind and rain outdoors, and the movements of the performer and of the audience in whatever audible form it manifested itself. Tudor turned the score's pages as time passed, yet played nothing at all. The keyboard lid was raised and lowered again for the final movement, during which the audience whispered and muttered.²

A common question is whether subsequent performances of the work are necessary or effective – in other words, is *4'33"* reducible to its conceptual content? Clearly Cage believed that the purpose of the work was not didactic in the manner of most conceptual art and routinely repeated his belief in the irreducibility of its experiential dimension to a generalized concept: "But what really pleases me in that

silent piece is that it can be played any time, but it only comes alive when you play it. And each time you do, it is an experience of being very, very much alive.”³¹ As Cage’s favorite composition, *4’33”* provides an exemplary instance of his critique of representation – a performance of the work is an operator within an ecology already underway, a foregrounding of the conditions of anomaly as necessary to every musical performance as the general conditions inducing it, not simply a pedagogical tool but a functioning parable about the coexistence of the intentional and unintentional within every event (the margin of surprise haunting even the most staunchly regulated recurrences, the virtual excess over every actual occurrence):

I think that the division is between understanding and experiencing, and many people think that art has to do with understanding, but it doesn’t. It has to do with experience; and if you understand something, then you walk out once you get the point because you don’t want the experience. You don’t want to be irritated. So they leave, and they say the avant-garde doesn’t exist. But the avant-garde continues, and it is experience.³²

In a reenactment of his 1952 performance for the 1990 documentary *I have nothing to say and I am saying it*, Tudor is a particularly minimal presence. His performance enacts all the ritual of performance minus the actual playing of the piano. The score – in conventional notation, several pages of rest – is placed on the piano’s music stand and adjusted slightly. The keyboard is uncovered at the beginning of the “first movement.” Tudor continues to perform by counting rests. He turns the page in accordance with the passage of each silent measure, maintaining all gestures of focus and

³¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 153.

³² John Cage in conversation with Thomas Wulffen (1985), *Conversing with Cage*, 121.

concentration but stopping just short of actually playing the piano. The fallboard is lowered and raised quietly between movements. Throughout, Tudor's eyes remain focused on the score; there is a palpable sense of concentration on the passage of time, which he unobtrusively monitors with as stopwatch on the keyboard. His eyes make no obvious motion toward the watch. It has all the hallmarks of a conventional performance *minus the performance itself*.³³

By contrast, Armin Fuchs's performance is decidedly stagey, ironic, and conceptual. Fuchs seats himself at the piano, score in place. At the first gesture, his hand begins a swift downward motion, as if to play the first note, but lifts away before touching the keys. He holds his right arm upright alongside the piano's music stand, suspended, stiffened – a clear gesture of *not playing*. He remains motionless, mannequin-still, rigor-mortis-stiffened until the conclusion of the first movement, at which point he quietly and undemonstratively lowers his right hand. To signal the beginning of the second movement, Fuchs initiates a more muted downward gesture and a less-elevated hand-raise, this time hovering a half-foot above the keys with the same frozen, statuesque stillness. Between the second and third movements, there is a gradual lowering of the hand to his lap. At the beginning of the third movement, Fuchs executes a very theatrical mime of preparation – a lean forward, coupled with a slow-motion upturning of the right arm, which is then frozen in place in the pose of a paralyzed concert pianist. The same rigid stillness persists until the conclusion of the work, at which point his arm slowly

³³ Tudor at <http://youtu.be/HypmW4Yd7SY>. Tudor's performance is a reenactment of his 1952 performance. This example appears in the 1990 documentary, *I Have Nothing To Say And I Am Saying It*.

lowers once again. At the conclusion of the third movement, he emits a sort of curlicue with the right arm provides a closing gesture. No stopwatch is visible throughout the performance.³⁴

William Marx offers a slightly different variation. He is explicitly introduced by an offstage voice announcing him as the “soloist” for “John Cage’s *4’33’’*” – marking it as a kind of historical reenactment, but with the historicity pushed to the foreground. He is clad in traditional concert pianist attire, a tuxedo with tails. He sits on the piano bench, quickly resituates the score, and reaches for a stopwatch located near the piano’s music stand. With certain flair, he closes the keyboard cover, lifts his stopwatch, and with a clear and commanding gesture clicks the starter on his timer, which emits an audible beep. At the end of each movement, the watch is stopped – again with an audible beep – placed on the stand. It is picked up again, started (with beep) at the beginning of each movement – the same downward ictus, like a conductor. Marx stares intently at the watch throughout each movement, making visible but “unintentional” motions as he holds the watch at eye level. The score is closed at the end, glasses removed, a bow taken.³⁵

In optimal cases – such as the Tudor and Marx performances – the performer acts as catalyst more than actor, should one interpret the role of “performer” as someone who communicates or expresses a concept. An attempt at communication can only obscure the performer’s role in *4’33’’* – what the performer has to do is induce the event by heightening attention just enough to hold listening habits in taut suspension while

³⁴ Armin Fuchs at http://youtu.be/gN2zcLBr_VM

³⁵ William Marx at <http://youtu.be/JTEFKFiXSx4>

effacing her own conventional role as conveyor of meaning. The situation becomes incredibly fragile – the performer is asked to find the boundary between sense and non-sense through the slightest gestures, recalling just enough of performance convention to allow contingency to forcefully inflect it. The performer aspires to become imperceptible: present, but tending toward the lowest threshold of presence required to make hearing *active*, to make attention strain and to render the ear intensely poised.

Even before the first gesture, the performance site is crowded with clichés, both perceptual and affective. The performer needs to be able to suspend these incipient habitual responses: not just to allow us to hear what we want to hear, but to somehow hold the attention just at the threshold of an individually performed action. That is, to set us that the edge of a performed action without fixing the attention on any performerly act: arrested attention, rigged bodies in a situation of suspense, a heightened receptivity. This is the artfulness required of all performances of 4'33", whether they occur in the concert hall or in private. Performances involving a single individual (who comprises both performer and audience) are extremely difficult: one must reach a point where one can suspend one's own attention past its clichéd points of focus.

Two threats to this state of contingent listening emerge. The first is "over-performance" – exemplified by the Armin Fuchs performance. Too much choreography or gestures rendered with a sense of communication over-emphasize those general conditions of the event's occurrence. The sounds of *this* event in its anomalous emergence lose their singular charge; the event becomes discursive, a communication of a concept, a member of recognized type. A second concern is "under-performing:" performing in such a manner that receptivity for contingency is insufficiently heightened.

In these cases the ear is insufficiently attuned, and such listening is not simply passive, but habit-guided and cliché-prone. Both cases court a similar fate: self-conscious audience participation, laughter, conversation. All these constitute attempts to constrain the ruptures of contingency within this event, to cover over its array of micro-impingements with smoothly-functioning patterns of expectation and reaction. Cage distinguished between audience participation of contingent variety and participation which reintroduced the habits of recognition and exclusion within the event's anomalous emergence: "I thought the audience behaved/performed beautifully, because they didn't intend to cough—they were obliged to cough; the cough had its own sound—and they didn't make any opposing sound. All the sounds, I thought, interpenetrated—nothing obstructed anything else."³⁶ The performer should aim for this minimal point at which the general conditions of the 4'33" event no longer obscure the contingent conditions – the point at which *this* event shimmers in its singularity.

To bring out what could not have been foreseen, to bring the event to the brink where ears become suspensefully taut and not drawn over by the stabilizing streams of self-induced action. "Was it the sounds, or was it me?" Like the encounter in the anechoic chamber, it's a function of *allowing something new to appear*, or of luring the event. The performer of 4'33" is like the performance of the Zen archer: suspenseful but undirected, stopping at the threshold of a determination without specifying an outcome.

The establishment of this performed frame is necessary to keep the immanent plane of sounds sensible and to prevent the sonorous events that occupy the actualization

³⁶ Cage in an interview for Middlebury College Magazine (1981), *Conversing with Cage*, 134.

of 4'33" from dissolving into everyday banality – the performer is essential in heightening attention only to have it occupied by something other than the performer. She provides the minimal general conditions for the event that allow for the maximum impact of those anomalous conditions. The performance ensures that the work does not lapse from singular event – the becoming-musical of *these sounds*, in *this* event – into the generalized law of “any sound is musical.” If reduced to a bland conceptual gesture, there can be no emergence of a transcendental sign capable of transforming habit: everything's already been decided, and hearing itself loses the internal difference that would allow it to change. Rather than effecting a necessary violence on our array of habits, it simply reaffirms them; as Stephen Zepke says of the perils of 4'33", we risk entering a situation in which “anything goes in but nothing comes out.”³⁷

Don't make a point. Don't prove a concept. There's nothing conceptual in 4'33". It isn't a message. It's a call to an operation – foster connections with unforeseeable ends. The blood in your ears can change your life, and unpredictably so. If you've left them with nothing more than “there is no such thing as silence” or “a rustling program is music, too” then you have simply made a joke. Odds are good that life will go on as usual for everyone around. But foster a spontaneous, surprising connection between a body and

³⁷ Stephen Zepke, “Becoming a Citizen of the World: Deleuze Between Allan Kaprow and Adrian Piper,” in *Deleuze and Performance*, ed. Lauren Cull (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), 121. “Once more we are reminded of John Cage's 4'33", and its lack of any constructive intervention within the social realm it opens on to. Indeed, it is this very passivity that risks the collapse of the plane of composition into the banal chaos of the everyday. In other words, anything goes in but nothing comes out.” Zepke's error is in assuming 4'33" to be a passive occurrence – as performed, the piece is anything but passive. It is extremely active and attention-heightening, but toward no predetermined end. One becomes active, but *for nothing*. The concept of “activity for nothing” will be examined at greater length in Chapter Six.

a sound and you change both. Ironic jokes or concepts inhibit exploration. They tell us what we already know, they double like with like. Just as we don't know what we are going to say until we are saying it, just as there is a fringe of surprise haunting the edges of our every intentional action – we don't know what there is to hear until we hear it. There is no redundant performance of 4'33" – some will work, some won't. But there is no once-and-for-all: it is an infinite chain of varying events, singular in every occurrence, with a potential for transformational linkage in each one.

Not every linkage will induce a significant change. Most actualizations of 4'33" will not provoke a change sufficient to change the audience's threshold of attention. Performances that begin with decision, or performances that bury the event under concept and gesture, will ensure that no change takes place. Only the performance that can bring the act of listening into contact with its own contingency – that point, as Cage says, where one's hearing passes through "junctions which are flexible and which you are ignorant about" – can bring us alive, that is, alive to the capacity for change.³⁸ In every sound, in every event, there is more than we have recognized: we are never finished with hearing, never finished with changing. To proclaim that everything is already music places us under the same burden as proclaiming bounds to music – it is to assume that there is no becoming-music, that all we can hear already is all there is. Any performance of 4'33" should aspire to draw us nearer to the more-ness tingeing *every* sounding event:

³⁸ John Cage, Richard Foreman, and Richard Kostelanetz, "Art in the Culture," in *Conversations on Art and Performance*, ed. Gautam Dasgupta and Bonnie Marranca (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999): 121.

a difference in degree of performance, but not a difference in kind, so that we might attune ourselves to that difference subsisting in any encounter.

* * *

Atlas Eclipticalis and Cheap Imitation

Two of Cage's incidents with large ensembles loom large in the composer's lore – the disastrous encounter with the New York Philharmonic in 1964 and the aborted first performance of *Cheap Imitation* by the Gaudeamus Orchestra in Holland in May of 1972. Both receive multiple (and slightly varied) retellings throughout Cage's writings and interviews. The former provides insight into the difficulty of rigging a large habit-fraught ensemble for the kind of transcendental event Cage sought; the latter reveals the composer's complicated relationship with pre-concert preparation.

The confrontation with the New York Philharmonic would be a focal point of Cage's discussion of performance for much of his life. His recitation of the story aptly poses it as a matter of social struggle: anarchistic composer propagating difference and divergence versus the insistence on representation and reproduction seemingly inherent to the orchestral model. A typical Cage recollection of the event is as follows:

What happened was that, at great expense, I managed to amplify by means of contact microphones the entire New York Philharmonic and to send it out by means of twelve channels, in *Atlas Eclipticalis*, when Leonard Bernstein gave a kind of avant-garde festival. What happened at the first performance was that many in the orchestra were furious at the music and tore the microphones off their instruments and stamped on them and smashed them. And the next day, which was Friday, I repaired or brought new microphones for all the ones that had been

broken, and they again smashed them. And on Saturday they again smashed the new ones. On Sunday, Mr. Bernstein gave them a sermon, and they played rather nicely, but then they were not ashamed of their behavior. And one of them came offstage smiling, and he shook my hand, “Come back in twenty years and we’ll treat you better.”³⁹

Further commentary appears in a 1980 interview with Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras:

The New York Philharmonic is a bad orchestra. They’re like a group of gangsters. They have no shame—when I came off the stage after one of those performances, one of them who had played badly shook my hand, smiled, and said, “Come back in ten years; we’ll treat you better.” They turn things away from music, and from any professional attitude toward music, to some kind of a social situation that is not very beautiful. In the case of *Atlas*, they destroyed my property. They acted criminally. They tore the microphones off the instruments and stamped on them, and the next day I had to buy new ones to replace them for the next performance. It was very costly. And they weren’t ashamed.⁴⁰

Recently, in his extensively researched *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits*, Benjamin Piekut provides a considerably less univocal account of the encounter with the Philharmonic. Rather than simple ill will toward Cage, this account shows the performers of the orchestra enmeshed within a grid of habit so dense that it would be difficult for any sort of event to be freed from it. The situation was overloaded with signification: Leonard Bernstein prefaced the performance of *Atlas Eclipticalis* with dismissive-ironic distance: “Uh, this is very serious, and this so-called aleatoric aspect of today’s new music has come in for more comment, excitement, controversy, and speculation than any other aspect... It ranges from the most serious

³⁹ Cage in an interview for the New England Conservatory (1976), *Conversing with Cage*, 120.

⁴⁰ Cage in conversation with Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras (1980), *Conversing with Cage*, 126.

possible intention and execution to the most tricky, antimusical kind of Dadaism. We have tried . . . to choose only works that can be identified as serious in intention, and genuinely adventurous in seeking new paths of music-making.”⁴¹ The disastrous performance of *Atlas Eclipticalis* was preceded by a short improvisation by the orchestra – a muddle of the sort that explicitly defied the kind of focused program-for-experimentation that Cage was seeking.

Whereas previous performances of the piece featured extensive coaching by Cage, the amount of rehearsal time afforded him by the Philharmonic was comparatively miniscule – a mere two hours to coordinate an experiment involving eighty-six separate parts played by an orchestra outfitted with contact microphones and fed into a fifty-channel custom-made mixer. Disputes over the appropriate volume for contact microphones pervaded the rehearsals; complexes of feedback from indeterminate origin were frequent and frequently upsetting to performers. (Mathews recalls that the speakers “were so powerful around the auditorium that it was very easy to get a very loud feedback —horrible and, it turned out, dangerous screech oscillating. In the actual performance, these feedback squawks at dangerously loud levels occurred quite frequently.”⁴²) Some orchestra members flatly deny any unprofessional behavior during the performance; some admit to take the work less-than-seriously, or to outright acts of disapproval or non-participation; most all confessed to some degree of confusion concerning what constituted a “successful” performance of the work.

⁴¹ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* (Berkeley: University of California, 2011), 20-21.

⁴² Ibid., 36.

As Piekut aptly notes, the typical interpretation of this disastrous performance as a “meeting between a beatific Buddhist seeking nobility in his performers and an old-guard cultural institution digging in its heels” is too simple and reductive to account for the complex of factors that created this failure – and it seems inconsistent with Cage’s own concern for the creation of conditions for the encounter. What could have made this a functional encounter, what could have strained or broken habit on this scale? How could one create the conditions for a complex event that would induce a “line of flight” within a professional environment steeped in the logic of representation and reproduction – not to mention the normalizing effects of money, union-scale musicianship and expensive rehearsal time?

Similar factors marred the 1972 encounter between Cage and the Gaudeamus Orchestra at the premiere of *Cheap Imitation* (1969). The story appears in variation in several of Cage’s interviews and his own writings. An extensive footnote in *For The Birds* is repeated nearly verbatim in the author’s forward to *M: Writings ’67-’72*. Upon arriving at the Hague in May of 1972, Cage discovered that none of the musicians were prepared at all – under-rehearsed and generally uninterested. Rather than withdraw his work from the concert, Cage conducted a public rehearsal through which the orchestra continued to struggle. The second night of the concert series featured yet another public rehearsal; whereas the orchestra had only managed to scrape through one movement on the first night, they managed two badly rendered movements on the second.

Dismayed and embarrassed, the Gaudeamus foundation arranged a third attempt to perform the work at another concert a month from the initial debacle. Cage had been assured that the orchestra for the performance at the Holland Festival would arrive

properly prepared. When Cage arrived, however, he encountered identical if not worse conditions. Once again, he was attending the first rehearsal – only now the performers hadn't even bothered to look at their scores. Cage described his frustration in no uncertain terms:

Jan Stulen had been replaced by a pupil of Boulez who, at the beginning of the rehearsal, asked me "I believe this work has three movements; is that correct?" After a few miserable little attempts to play the first phrases, I interrupted the rehearsal, and told the musicians what I thought of the deplorable state of the society in which we live – not just musical society. I added that I was withdrawing the work from the program of concert planned for that evening, and that I congratulated myself for having come up with... something capable of opening the ears of orchestra musicians. I had offered them something with which to make music, and not, as is practiced today, something with which to scrape together a little money.⁴³

What both cases reveal is the difficulty in preparing an environment so burdened with habit, intention, perceptual and affective cliché for an action that would allow a creative event to be released. For all of Cage's interest in complexity and complication, he would come to realize that freeing an event or allowing a dynamic, self-varying process to work on its accord would require careful preparation. Freeing an event always involves an act of creative subtraction: even amidst complexity, one must reduce the connection between an event's singular unfolding and the forces of habit that would standardize it or smooth it over with a deflationary, minimizing narrative ("just" a concert of noise). At one threshold, a performance can do too little – it can employ too little and its gestures can be too small to provide the necessary shock to thought. On the other end, a performance can do too much, and the clarity and isolation that would allow an event to

⁴³ Cage, *For the Birds*, 183-84.

spring forth is crushed beneath the weight of excess, an excess that paradoxically closes the mind to change rather than opening it. Deleuze and Guattari describe the latter danger in their discussion of the musical avant-garde, an example that is particularly striking in light of Cage's struggles with large ensembles in historically-entrenched venues:

This synthesis of disparate elements is not without ambiguity. It has the same ambiguity, perhaps, as the modern valorization of children's drawings, texts by the mad, and concerts of noise. Sometimes one overdoes it, puts too much in, works with a jumble of lines and sounds; then instead of producing a cosmic machine capable of 'rendering sonorous,' one lapses back to a machine of reproduction that ends up reproducing nothing but a scribble effacing all lines, a scramble effacing all sounds. The claim is that one is opening music to all events, all irruptions, but one ends up reproducing a scrambling that prevents any event from happening...⁴⁴

Cage's aversion to rehearsal stemmed from an aversion to prefiguring or policing the form that an event's release would take. Yet through his struggles with orchestras – not just as groups of performers, but as a particular machine of organization – indicated that rehearsal could serve the function of at least attempting to clear a space in which a transformative event might occur. What the encounter with the Philharmonic showed was the necessity of this subtraction; it was not enough to simply offer a choice or to overwhelm the situation with complexity. What was required was an order of sobriety that would be difficult or impossible to attain while attempting to work against the grain of his performers' habits. One would have to become more directly involved not just with the materials of compositions but the with the "materials" of performance as well (habits, tendencies, patterns of expectation and demand) if one was to allow the event to speak for

⁴⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 343-44.

itself. “Your synthesis of disparate elements will be all the stronger,” Deleuze and Guattari remind us, “if you proceed with a sober gesture, an act of consistency, capture, or extraction that works in a material that is not meager but prodigiously simplified, creatively limited, selected.”⁴⁵ Cage could not simply step out of the frame in order to allow the event to emerge and transform the performers and audience – he would have to become more actively involved in the process of clearance and subtraction without becoming a police officer or a god-like creator. Not simply laissez-faire but actively facilitative, but facilitative *for nothing*: not to prefigure, but to help clear the ground for something new and habit-transforming to appear.

* * *

⁴⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 344-345.

Vexations

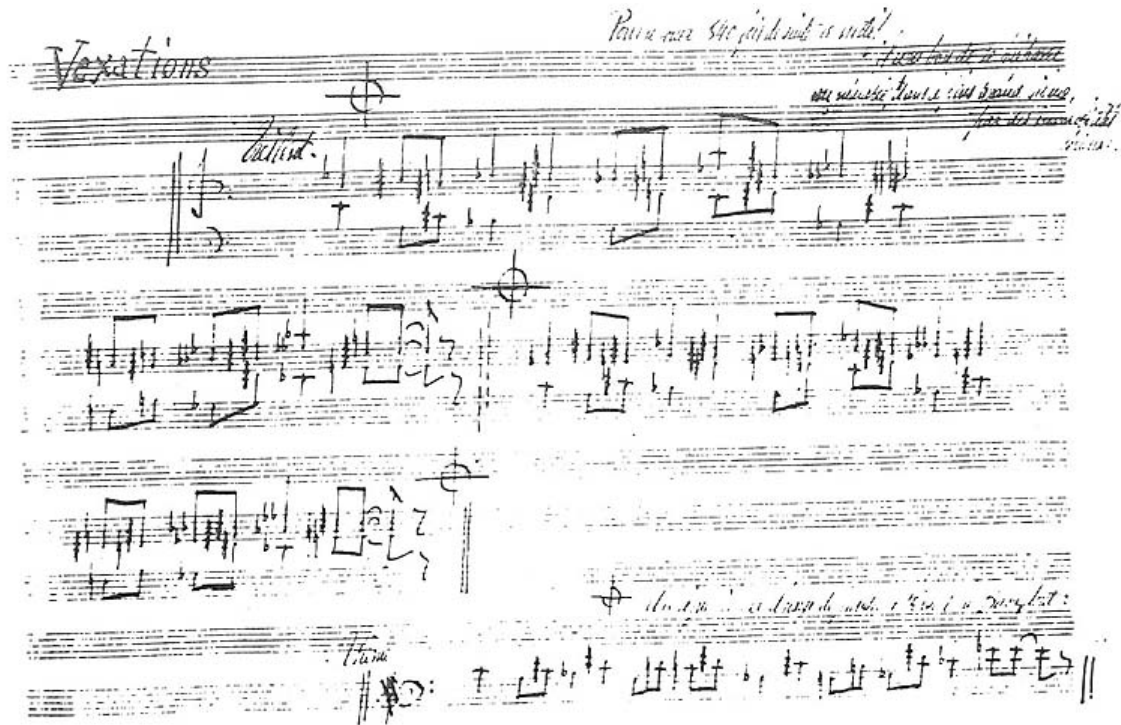


Figure 1 – Facsimile Edition of Erik Satie’s *Vexations*

In 1949, John Cage published a facsimile version of Erik Satie’s *Vexations* on page eight of the sixth volume of *Contrepoints*. He discovered the piece in the private collection of French composer and Satie associate Henri Sauguet. The work, which was neither mentioned nor performed by Satie at any point since its composition in 1893, consists of a short bass theme followed by a superimposed harmonization consisting of harmonically non-directional diminished and augmented chords; the bass theme repeats unaccompanied and is then re-harmonized in the same progression of diminished and augmented chords, this time with the upper voices inverted. Above the staves is a short,

evocative instruction: *Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence, par des immobilités sérieuses* ["To play this motif 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities"].

Cage first attempted to perform the work in 1951. He planned to recruit dozens of artists from music and painting who would perform from 840 mimeographed pages of the score, and the audience would pay on a sort of reverse-scale: the longer one stayed, the less one would pay. Contract problems prohibited the 1951 performances from occurring, and it would take until 1963 for Cage to realize his dream of performing *Vexations* in its entirety.⁴⁶ One might also speculate that 1951 sensibilities – Cage's, pianists', and public – might not yet have been ready for the implications of *Vexations*; indeed, the 1963 sensibilities of John Cage seem like a much better fit for a work of such extraordinary duration and so-called repetition, as the object versus process distinction was a much more prominent aspect of his thinking, as was the sublimation of the distinction between repetition and variation.

In the intermission between the aborted 1951 performance and the successful 1963 performance, *Vexations* received its first American publication in *Art News Annual*, vol. 27 (1958) – a reproduction of the original facsimile. The volume contained an article by Cage staged as an imaginary correspondence between himself and Satie, with remarks from Satie's writing appearing in the left-hand column and Cage's remarks appearing in the right-hand; Cage notes that Satie's death prevents the two parties from hearing one another. In his comments on Satie's mid-century reputation, Cage insists that Satie should

⁴⁶ Silverman, *Begin Again*, 96.

be of no interest to the analysis- and interpretation-minded serialists of the European avant-garde:

From this student point of view, Pierre Boulez is justified in rejecting Satie. *Le bon Maître*'s harmonies, melodies, and rhythms are no longer of interest. They provide pleasure for those who have no better use for their time. They've lost their power to irritate. True, one could not endure a performance of *Vexations* (lasting [my estimate] twenty-four hours; 840 repetitions of a fifty-two beat piece involving a repetitive structure: A, A1, A, A2, each A thirteen measures long), but why give it a thought?

Contrary to the views expressed by *Vexations* advocates such as Gavin Bryars in "Vexations and its Performers," Cage's remarks should not be interpreted as discounting the necessity of performing the work. Instead, Cage is facetiously mimicking the views of his intellectual foils, composers and analysts who would reduce the sensible experience of music to "mere concept." Why give such a performance a thought if one can grasp its essence beforehand? This snipe at Boulez attests to Cage's growing concern for the disjunction between prefiguration and event – and his desire to create music that affirms the gap between the two. Rather than create an event that would bolster the presumed harmony between thought and experience, Cage would use the performance of *Vexations* to affirm the inexhaustible internal difference operating within even the most repetitive events.

The 1963 premier of all 840 repetitions took place from the evening of September 9 to the afternoon of September 10 in a former vaudeville hall called the Pocket Theater as part of the New York International Festival of Avant-Garde Music. A relay team of pianists – John Cale, MacRae Cook, Philip Corner, David Del Tredici, Viola Farber, James Tenney, David Tudor, Christian Wolff, Robert Wood, and Joshua Rifkin – took

just over eighteen hours and forty minutes to complete the sequence. Cage remained awake for the duration, resting on a mattress in contemplative silence in the theater's back room while an astonishing transformation took place within him. Immediately after (and quite tired), he drove back to the country where he slept for a little more than ten hours – “an unusually long period” for an avid worker and night owl. “And when I woke up, I felt different than I had ever felt before... the environment I looked out upon looked unfamiliar even though I had been living there. In other words, I had changed and the world had changed.”⁴⁷ Years later, Cage would recall the surprising effect the performance had in his conversations with Daniel Charles:

D.C.: ...You were prepared for everything except the extraordinary impression that this repetitive music produced... You said that you set in motion something absolutely novel and unexpected. Do you think that Satie's music, arranged according to a strictly repetitive construction of time, contained this something within itself? In spite of the repetitions?

J.C.: Why certainly! Perhaps the best thing would be to quote these words of René Char: ‘Each act is virgin, even the repeated one.’⁴⁸

Cage was not the only participant to experience something unusual in the course of the 840 repetitions. In a 1974 letter to Gavin Bryars, Christian Wolff described the manner in which he experienced the repeated performance of the short composition slipping from individual presentation of a musical object to the a-personal production of a self-varying event. The first variations exhibited the diversity of musical personalities and

⁴⁷ Cage in conversation with Alan Gillmor and Roger Shattuck (1973), *Conversing with Cage*, 238.

⁴⁸ Cage, *For the Birds*, 48.

a willful desire to produce distinctive variations. As the program progressed, however, the event took on its own agency:

The music simply took over. At first a kind of passive object, it became the guiding force... As the night wore on we got weary, or rather just sleepy, and the beautiful state of suspension of self now became risky. Alertness had to be redoubled not to miss repetitions or notes.⁴⁹

Observations about the gap between concept and emergence were not limited to this first performance, either. Gavin Bryars and Christopher Hobbs experienced similar effects in their 840 repetitions – as if the performed excess over *Vexations* as representation (as coded in notation) was effacing the very identity of the work itself, erasing the supposedly stable connection between possibility and realization and replacing it with the decentering, divergent actualization of a virtual multiplicity:

People expect, naturally, that if someone has played a short fragment of music over and over again for a very long period the least that can be expected is that he will know the piece by the end. When music is played from memory the player memorizes the relation between sounds and the placement of his fingers on the keyboard. In *Vexations*, however, there is a curious gap between the music as it is notated and read and the sounds that are produced. On the few occasions when I looked at my hands while playing, the effect was startling: having become accustomed to reading a given note in a number of different notations (A as A, A natural, and B double flat; B flat as B flat and A sharp; D as D natural and E double flat, etc.), I found it hard to reconcile the position of my fingers with the notational information.⁵⁰

The profundity of these experiences, however, seems to be matched by their lack of

⁴⁹ Christian Wolff, from a letter dated September 10, 1974, quoted in Gavin Bryars's "Vexations and Its Performers," *Contact* no. 26 (Spring 1983), pp. 12-20.

⁵⁰ Gavin Bryars, "Vexations and its performers," *Contact* no. 26 (Spring 1983), pp. 12-20. Reprinted online by *JEMS: An Online Journal of Experimental Music Studies* at http://www.users.waitrose.com/~chobbs/Bryars.html#_edn10.

publicity. For the 1963 performance, Cage engaged in a considerable amount of promotion both for the general public and for his cadre of artist peers – unsurprising, perhaps, given the more than ten-year gestation of the project. Few actually attended the performance, and only one member of the audience, actor Karl Schenzer, remained in attendance for the duration. As Cage himself admits, he expected the experience to be profoundly repetitive and endurance-testing. It is entirely likely that his audience shared the same expectation – to the point of avoiding the performance entirely. For these non-attendees, the performance of *Vexations* would simply double like with like: the empty form of a possibility with its material realization. As Deleuze warns, it is difficult to understand what actuality adds to the world if it simply doubles its conceptual possibility. But what Cage and his fellow pianists discovered is that the work of performance didn't simply double like with like. Instead of a realization of a possibility, performance induced the actualization of a virtual idea, producing a divergent series that far exceeded any form of prefiguration or representation:

And even those of us who were playing thought we were headed for something repetitive. We others, the pianists, indeed had to know what was going on. But this is what happened. In the middle of those eighteen hours of performance, our lives changed. We were dumbfounded because something was happening which we had not considered and which we were a thousand miles from being able to foresee. So, if I apply this observation to conceptual art, it seems to me that the difficulty with this type of art, if I understand it correctly, is that it obliges us to imagine that we know something *before* that something has happened. That is difficult, though, since the experience itself is always different from what you thought about it.⁵¹

What happens over the course of these 840 variations? The hierarchy between a

⁵¹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 153.

model and a copy dissolves; as Cage notes, the dimension of resemblance gives way to an affirmation of the internal *difference* inherent in the work itself:

I know quite well that, from another point of view, this is repetition, but remember what I said about *indeterminacy*: you can't repeat anything exactly – even yourself! And when you have many pianists, as was the case... That leads to an experience with so many variations that the dimension of *resemblance* disappears.⁵²

Indeed, *Vexations* becomes a stream of variation – a procession of simulacra. One not only marvels at the diversity of variations, but one comes into contact with the virtual *Idea* that sets them in motion. One discovers *Vexations* as a collection of tendencies and inflections rather than a static form: performance sets the seemingly static form (an “essence” of resemblance) into flight, turning its points into lines of variation. One grasps it *as difference itself*, not above any particular instance but within them all and extending through each presentation. Any horizon of preference or judgment about resemblance is exhausted, and in its exhaustion, we come to sense the unity of differences – we sense the inclusive disjunction of all potentialities, both heard and yet to be heard. Exhaustion of preference or hierarchy allows us to sense the “virtual center” of the work, to get a hold of *Vexations* as an open-ended multiplicity. Amidst the proliferation of dissimilarities, one loses sight of the moral distinction between the essence and the example, and senses the continual escape of the world's becoming from the codes of representation. Echoing Cage's acknowledgment that resemblance becomes subordinate to difference – that resemblance is an effect of difference, not the natural unity between concept and its

⁵² Cage, *For the Birds*, 48.

realization – Deleuze affirms this eternal return of the dissimilar and divergent in the conclusion of *Difference and Repetition*:

Simulacra are those systems in which different relates to different *by means of* difference itself. What is essential is that we find in these systems no *prior identity*, no *internal resemblance*... At this point, everything effectively changes. The Same, forever decentered, effectively turns around difference only once difference, having assumed the whole of Being, applies only to simulacra which have assumed the whole of ‘being.’⁵³

Importantly, this process of variation requires no *conscious* act of variation on behalf of its performers. It is a property of the world itself – or, better stated, it *is* the world itself. Christian Wolff’s remarks testify to the self-varying power: beneath the conscious and intentional variation (all the personalities on display in the vigorous first few hours of performance) stirred a more unsettling variation that only appeared in exhaustion, once the intentional and the demonstrative subsided in fatigue. *The music simply took over*. What had appeared as object now appeared as impersonal event, a haecceity, a mode of individuation “very different from that of a person, subject, thing or substance.” The performance ceases to have a sole determining actor (the pianist) and instead takes on a mode of becoming more akin to the impersonal subjectivity of the weather than any sort of purely intentional doing (“A season, a winter, summer, an hour, a date have a perfect individuality lacking nothing, even though this individuality is different from that of a thing or a subject”).⁵⁴ In such a mode of individuation, there is no doer only the deed. Distinctions such as subject and object are swept along by a process

⁵³ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 299-301.

⁵⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 261.

of variation that is its own agent – intention is but one component operating in a swarm of potentials, the ongoing actualization of an open-ended virtual multiplicity. Forces outside of the supposedly transcendent acting subject start to speak more forcefully. Muscles and minds tire, the tendencies and quirks of instrument begin to speak, an infinite array of contingencies and complexities once cropped out by habit's blinders reveal themselves as components of the greater inhuman agency of the world's own directionless variation. The something-more that simultaneously enables and thwarts intention shows itself: one experiences oneself as an event within the event-of-all-events, a flux and a stream of dissimilarities rather than a transcendent, self-directed agent.

While the music was composed by Satie, the performance and its ramifications strike us as distinctly Cagean. When Cage speaks of *life*, it is the sort of life revealed in the performance of *Vexations*: a greater, super-personal and sub-personal process of variation from which objects and subjects are derived rather than the personal life contained within the subject. What his art illuminates is this excess over what is given in identity and representation; reducing it to the intelligible or conceptual places it back within the dead repetitions of "realization," the doubling of like with like. At the close of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze explains its purpose as such: "The highest object of art is to bring into play simultaneously all these repetitions, with their differences in kind and rhythm, their respective displacements and disguises, their divergences and decenterings... Even the most mechanical, the most banal, the most habitual and the most stereotyped repetition finds a place in works of art, it is always displaced in relation to other repetitions, and it is subject to a condition that a difference may be extracted from it

for these other repetitions.”⁵⁵ Within even the most regularized situation, within even the most rote repetition, is the possibility for divergence. There is always the potential for something else to emerge, provided we become sensitive to it. A world of boredom, seemingly interminable repetition, stifling standardization and policing still contains within it the germ of dissimilarity and the power to become other than what it is. In fact, that becoming-other is already occurring: we can awaken to it and intensify its movement, or we can resist it. Even within the supposedly unendurable repetitions of *Vexations*, there is a universe of other becomings teeming - if we can attune to them, if we can tweak the becoming-other that is always already-underway. As Cage insists, this is the purpose of music: to sober the busy instrumentalism of the mind in order to let the process that is the world speak:

Or the answer must take the form of paradox: a purposeless purposefulness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we’re living, which is so excellent once it gets one’s mind and one’s desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 293.

⁵⁶ Cage, “Experimental Music,” in *Silence*, 12.

Chapter Six: To Inhabit the World

I've merely changed my responsibility from making choices to asking questions. It's not easy to ask questions.¹

Count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think. The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself.²

John Cage's political thought poses a difficult problem for even his most devoted followers. Approaches to art based on the embrace of chance and open-ended becoming are one matter, but extending such strategies to the life-and-death realm of social organization seems like another. Indeed, from within the confines of our everyday engagements with life and work, it is difficult to read some of Cage's political propositions and not feel frustrated by their relentless optimism and far-fetched aspiration. No less a Cage devotee than Yvonne Rainier dismissed Cage's political aspirations as "goofy naïveté," and her list of fears about his detachment from the conventional logic of politics reecho pressing concerns about Cage as a political figure. With a hint of mock sympathy, she encourages us to "not come down too heavily on [his]

¹ Cage in conversation with Tom Darter (1982), *Conversing With Cage*, 228.

² Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 139.

evocation of J. J. Rousseau, on [his] adherence to the messianic ideas of Buckminster fuller some years back, with their total ignoring of worldwide struggles for liberation and the realities of imperialist politics.” Her final charge offers a particularly difficult provocation: Cagean politics requires “the suppression of the question, ‘*Whose* life is so excellent and at what cost to others?’”³

In details, Cage’s political musings do have a troubling pipe dream quality about them, at least when one is seeking practical solutions to urgent issues. His writings and interviews abound with ideas that, when viewed from the point of common sense and existing political options, amount to impractical solutions to pressing problems. In a time of mass unemployment and stifling economic inequality, Cage’s strategies for renovating working conditions – brimming with suggestions that “each of us would just have to work for a day a year” and appeals to universal abundance – can seem so far-fetched as to be mean-spirited.⁴ Those of us enmeshed in the university’s economic struggles, for instance, may balk at the prospect of replacing our standard institutions of higher education with massive wall-free and teacher-less universities from which no one is permitted to graduate.⁵ In the face of looming environmental catastrophe the following exchange from *For the Birds* might strike us as willfully perverse or cruelly absurd:

³ Yvonne Rainer, "Looking Myself in the Mouth," *October*, no. 17 (Summer 1981): 65-76.

⁴ Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 27. “MUSIC’S NOT WAITING BUT SINGS FINAL DISSOLUTION OF POLITICS-ECONOMICS SO THAT, IN EXCHANGE FOR, SAY, ONE DAY’S WORK PER YEAR, EACH PERSON GET PASSPORT-CREDIT-CARD (ACCESS TO WHAT GLOBAL-VILLAGE-HUMAN-RACE HAS TO OFFER).”

⁵ Cage, *For the Birds*, 203-05. “That’s the beginning of Buckminster Fuller’s university! In *Education Automation*, he suggests that the university should become an open space,

D.C. And you seriously think that we can eliminate pollution like that?

J.C. It has become quite easy today to produce stuff we could write on – stuff we could eat afterwards! The inks could have new scents and flavors. You could go out for a newspaper and at the same time buy a pepper steak! We must find analogous solutions for everything that pollutes...

D.C. But you're still not dealing directly with the problem of politics...

J.C. Yes I am! Instead of trying to act against pollution, we behave more and more like *connoisseurs*. I mean that we remain rigidly closed, that we close ourselves off more and more blindly to everything that doesn't seem good enough for us. We adopt exactly the same attitude toward politics...⁶

In a scathing article from the 1997 *October* issue dedicated to Cage, Konrad Boehmer lambasted Cage's compositional and political approach as an affront to human dignity, crystallizing the critique of those who see in Cage's political philosophy only a shocking disinterest bordering on apathy. Cage's withdrawal from dialectical political struggle fosters an environment in which "war, misery, and oppression receive their reactionary justification: since they reign everywhere, they acquire a transhistorical scale, so that striving for their abolition is utopian from the start."⁷ Viewed from within conventional standards of political discourse, it is difficult not to sympathize with Cage's detractors: if

capable of embracing very different activities. The buildings themselves should not be divided up on the inside, so you could teach every subject at once in the same space... There shouldn't be anything but *experimental* universities, 'noble' universities, detached from all preoccupation with employment... I think a student should be able to stay for as long as he wishes!" For Cage's use of the term "nobility," see Chapter 3.

⁶ Cage, *For the Birds*, 60-61.

⁷ Konrad Boehmer, "Chance as Ideology," translated by Ian Pepper, *October* 82 (Fall 1997), 72.

they are taken as his only contributions, Cage's passivity, indifference, or his oblique approach to resolving pressing can often border on silliness or unintentional cruelty.

For many, it is also difficult to embrace Cage's reticence to address pressing political issues in either his texts or his music. For instance, Cage rarely openly addressed the issue of his own homosexuality, a fraught issue in mid-twentieth-century political life and especially within the artistic milieu that Cage inhabited.⁸ When asked to speak of issues of race, Cage appears at best clumsy or at worst insensitive: "We tell ourselves, for example, that it's better to be black than white, or the opposite! That is what I call giving in to emotions. But that leads nowhere."⁹ Others see Cage's insistence on silence as an act of *silencing*. Douglas Kahn's critique of Cage strikes at Cage's willingness to mute the important noises of human sociality in favor of a faux-reverent, silent objectivity: a macho more silent-than-thou disregard for human need. Cage's insistence on shades of silence in his music reflected his deafness to sound's social significance and, implicitly, his lack of concern (or perhaps even disdain) for social concern as such: "Most importantly, Cage's own deafness amid all this inaudible sound, that is, his inability to hear the significance of sound, meant a depleted complexity of what could be heard in any sound in itself. Consequently, his elaboration of panaurality and sonic pervasiveness was compensatory: a space fulfilled by a dispersion of the density of the social and

⁸ For an account of Cage's own discursive tactics regarding his homosexuality, see Jonathan Katz's "John Cage's Queer Silence or How To Avoid Making Matters Worse." <http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzWorse.html>, accessed 10/21/11.

⁹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 61.

ecological.”

Similarly, it is easy to be confused about “Cagean anarchism,” especially when one considers that Cage still seemed to make demands of performers, still evaluated performances, still seemed to express a will. Indeterminacy invites an idea of liberty, of allowing one to “be oneself” or enjoy self-directed autonomy. But insofar as consciously willed intention is intimately bound with habit – which is itself intimately bound with power – one cannot escape ordering or repressive forces simply by appealing to “choice” or “freedom.” Existing in the midst of ordering and tangled in habit, it is impossible to imagine a freedom that simply exists in the absence of external constraint; it is not enough to simply eliminate the police and allow ourselves to continue to exercise our old prejudices in their absence. Freedom is not simply liberty; freedom “implies that any government in whatever form is to be rejected. It is the *fact of governing* that must be suppressed.”¹⁰ And what is the government? “That which maintains these divisions [the methods of typing, of categorization, of identities]. In other words, our body is divided against itself. Just about everywhere anybody has tried to organize, that is *to articulate that body*, it doesn’t work; we are not dealing with a healthy organism.”¹¹ Freedom occurs in the rare instances in which we combine and complicate restraints such that they disarticulate that which governs the body. Not just the social body but the body comprised by habit and policed by common sense and conscience.

¹⁰ Cage, *For the Birds*, 110.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

Therefore what we want to find in Cage is a posture, or a style, that would encourage this pragmatic disarticulation – a dynamic way of moving in the world that produces sensitivity to change, receptiveness to change, and the ability to intensify the world’s self-changing to strategic advantage. Put aside the prescriptive passages in their specifics and instead attempt to extract a *diagram for becoming*, a way of moving in the world that would encourage openness to the forces of variation that compose the world. Such a posture would establish a thread of continuity between Cage’s views on performance and perception and his political posture, such that one becomes a parable for the other. In general, Cage offers us no political stance in the traditional sense – he has little concern for the *organization* of the polis, preferring instead a form of *disorganization* of the polis. He offers not an antagonism, perhaps, but a sort of continual unsettling or fluidifying of the organization that eventually works to unevenly distribute powers of creation and experimentation. The aims of performances and politics are one in the same: to create the conditions for a complex action, to complicate the staid stimulus-response circuits of the world-as-it-is as to open a gap for new ways of sensing and new ways of relating. As Deleuze would have it, the philosophical-political artist is not one who wrests form from chaos, but one who “struggles against the clichés of opinion.” The painter or the musician starts not from nothingness, but from within a field of affective and perceptual cliché – the goal is to escape or transform them beyond recognition, “to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in a breath of fresh air from the chaos that brings us vision.”¹²

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 204.

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What is the problem with “politics” for Cage? Why does he prefer a non-politics? For Cage, conventional liberal-democratic politics reproduces the same error he sees in the realm of music – it mistakes processes of variation for stable objects. Under the liberal-democratic model of politics, the foundational unit of politics is *the individual*, a stable and self-enclosed identity with well-defined interests. His or her identity and interests are stable enough that they can be *represented* by a political system without undergoing significant conversion. Human beings become isolated objects and interests become stable categories, all subject to the objectifying power of identity and representation to which both Cage and Deleuze rigorously object. Representational systems of government capture the dynamic processes that are people, things, and systems in a static form – they are incapable of grasping these elements in their dynamic, mutable powers. In fact, representational systems of government and the liberal insistence on individual human beings view such dynamism as a threat: that which threatens to escape from its categories must be either overtly suppressed or gently folded back into a representational system. Just as all musical works are made to conform to a resemblance-based identity, all bodies are coerced to retain an identity that can be represented by and for the system in its policing power. It is the dogmatic image of thought wrought at the level of social organization – be yourself, be stable, be recognizable.

By contrast, Cage’s non-politics – or what Deleuze and Guattari call “micropolitics” – would engage with the political at the point of experimentation with

identities, or, more precisely, would experiment with the ways by which identity could be set into variation, rendered fluid, and subjected to mutation. The foundational unit of such politics would not be the human individual with defined interests, but processes of variation and complication capable of produce and proliferating new ways of engaging with the world. From the point of view of representational politics and its preoccupation with stability and identity (and, by consequence, hierarchy and authority), such politics could be seen as nothing more than *anarchy*. Its goal is not to ascertain the eternal identity of concepts like the state, the people, the economy, or the nation, but to stimulate and intensify that which might escape from them. The object is not to expand the range of entities that could be identified and represented, but to mutate that which exists until it could not be subject to the conforming power of the dogmatic image of political thought – to become something unrecognized, ungovernable, but something that would unpredictably and productively change from within the constraints of identity and, ultimately, escape from them. As the image of thought always struggles to reclaim the new and the unrecognized as its own, its contestation must be a process of revolution: permanent revolution, a constant current of variation cutting across and through the realms of the human, the natural, and the technical.

Cagean and Deleuzian politics, therefore, concerns itself less with the conventional preoccupations of liberal politics – the state, the individual, the economy – and more with discovering what strains these identity-producing structures and what sets them into variation. It is unconcerned with determining how we should act or to what models we should conform; instead, this brand of (non-)politics would call for experimental practices geared toward determining *how it might be possible to live*, what

ways of inhabiting the world might be made possible by and through active experimentation with the real. It is necessarily a creative and productive politics, and it is inherently risky – there is no guarantee that a given experiment leads to liberation or that a novel approach doesn't fold back onto the grid of existing identities and representations. It offers no general rules or assurances and illuminates no "judgments of God:" "There is no general prescription. We have done with all globalizing concepts."¹³ Neither is it an individual undertaking nor a strictly human one. It is a question of ecology and ecological engineering, a question like "what connections can *we* form" where "we" is understood as an aggregate of powers and potentials drawing together human subjects, natural forces, technical instruments, sights, sounds, concepts, and all the things of the world. It is not a search for justice or a prescription for how we should live or even an aspiration toward reducing human suffering. It is a call toward exploration of the productive differences that form our lives, to experiment with how processes can be linked, rearranged, or otherwise tampered with to create new and perhaps more intense ways of living. It is the process of inventing sustainable strains of continual transformation and mutation that, in Cage's own terms, "don't require the intervention of the police" and "escape *the fact* of governing" via representation and identity.

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¹³ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 144.

What we should extract from Cage is not a particular political program, but an abstract set of strategies for achieving a creative anarchy, a situation that would maximize our collective capacity for interacting with and experimenting upon the world. The aim of politics is to foster a situation in which these creative capacities could be released, a climate that permitted experimentation and evaluation without recourse to transcendent *oughts*. “An anarchy that would not require the intervention of the police,” as Cage puts it, is the ultimate goal of politics. Such anarchy would not be a stable utopia, but an ongoing process of collective invention, or a state of “permanent revolution:” a life at home on the move. “We must put all the resources of the world into a fluid, fluctuating, mobile state so that nothing exists that we have to try to get rid of,” Cage insists, and the suggestion is that one must not resist the world’s flows – resistance leads to ossification, to selections that diminish inventive powers – but instead tap into them, redirect them, bend our creative powers back to merge with world’s self-varying. Cage offers us a capacity to release powers of creativity (expressed in individuals, but separate from them) from hierarchical distributions. The difficulty with the present economic-political system is that the powers of self-invention (or, rather, *self-inventing powers*) are unequally distributed, offered to some bodies but not to others.

At the same time, Cage acknowledges the need for some measure of ordering, even if temporary and flexible. This ordering is not the primary object of politics, however, but a condition for the greater politics of mutation and creation to which Cage devotes his energies. If true creation precedes its utility, then only people divorced from the order of need and debt can participate and can express the world’s full creative potential. Only people liberated from the threat of starvation, imprisonment, and so forth

can find the space to experiment without direction. Ongoing tactical sabotage of the existing order is necessary to shake becomings from the bonds of identities, but our survival – and hence our persistence as currents of transformation – depends on the preservation of a minimum foothold of stability within the existing order. The goals of Cagean and Deleuzian politics share this ethical aspiration – to modify the conditions of the world as it is such that they become the conditions of experimentation and variation. The two projects are interlinked: identities, needs, demands *do exist*, but they are not the privileged level of politics any more than reckless, suicidal escape from the present order (an intervention recaptured by the police, ended by death, and so forth) should constitute a privileged level of politics. What’s needed is experimentation with the dosage of order and mutation so that the former might aid the latter.

What’s required is just enough organization to liberate us from need – “I keep only the amount of organization that is useful for survival... Men generally act otherwise... They forego organizing what should, on the other hand, be organized: the utilities.”¹⁴ Cage’s insistence on the distribution of utilities reflects this as a condition for anarchic creation: “If the object is to reach a society in which you can do anything at all, the role of organization must be focused on the utilities... first of all, everyone must have access to what he needs to live, and the others mustn’t try to deprive him of anything

¹⁴ Cage, *For the Birds*, 47. Here Cage directly echoes Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy*: “We require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master” (107). The two elements of escape and capture – deterritorialization and reterritorialization in the language of *A Thousand Plateaus* – are two ongoing operations, neither separate from one another. It is never a question of escape versus capture, order versus disorder, but instead a question of their mixture – of their dosage.

whatsoever.”¹⁵ It’s a mistake to believe that Cage saw chance/indeterminacy/anarchic-impersonal creation as strictly a *means* for achieving these ends. Rather, these conditions have to be satisfied and sustained to foster the greatest distribution of anarchic creations. We cannot extend the full creative powers of the earth without a more egalitarian distribution; a reduction in human suffering may be a beneficial side effect, but it isn’t the primary goal of Cagean performance and politics. The goal isn’t to increase pleasure, but to radically proliferate the *joy* of creation. If suffering is reduced, it’s reduced because we have invented more ways to live that can accommodate a wider variety of ways of engaging with the world.

Cage’s attitude toward what he calls the utilities – the basic materials for sustaining life, the basics of transportation and energy – exemplifies this approach. “The ‘utilities’ insure non-order, freedom,” Cage insists. “Without the ‘utilities,’ on the other hand, you’ll fatally relapse into order, into linearity. Tyranny and violence fall under the heading of linearity. Indeterminacy, as I conceive it, is a leap into non-linearity. Or into abundance.”¹⁶ For liberal politics, the object of politics might be to ensure that individuals receive an adequate distribution of that which they lack, ends which require a notion of *property*, or the individual’s relationship to what he or she owns and what rights he or she possesses toward these objects. Liberal politics thus attempts to define and represent individual interests and mediate the relationship between them so as to ensure that these needs are met. This, of course, is a significant and worthy goal, but one

¹⁵ Cage, *For the Birds*, 53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

achieved at the sacrifice of powers of creation and transformation – it assumes individuals pre-formed, needs pre-identified, everything relatively stable and secure. Consequently, Cage seeks to replace *property* with *utility* – a mixture of fluidity and order that would stimulate non-linearity and replace the ordering requirements and the straitjacket of stable individuality with mobile distributions that could encourage invention and experimentation capable of modifying needs and identities. Property demands the disciplining of variation into stable forms subject to identity and representation, whereas utility encourages variation. The ongoing variation fostered by utility would undercut the very conditions required for property, while a minimum of organization is required to prevent the reemergence of need, weakness, and the subsequent relapse into conditions requiring the enforcement of property right through “tyranny and violence.”

If traditional politics matter to Cage, it is only as a means to challenge the limits of liberal politics and to bend them toward the greater end of this non-politics: bending back to the world’s quasi-chaotic self-organization. Negotiations about the nature of economic organization should only exist to the extent that they neutralize the need for such conversation – to the extent that they help liberate humans from need. Need restricts the free flow of invention and turns all “solutions” toward pre-formed problems; it places us back in the realm of liberal politics and the disciplinary requirements of identity and representation. “The economy must be eliminated, and politics, too. We shouldn’t let it rule us, we should rethink it so that it will free instead of limit us,” Cage demands, issuing a call to micropolitics. “But you have to start by liquidating the most anachronistic of dogmas – the profit motive... It becomes the medium of organization. It

exalts property. It makes it different for all those who won't devote themselves to making a living to live in a suitable way. That's what employment is – we should get rid of it!"¹⁷

Hence art provides an exemplar for the *disinterest* required of radical, change-oriented micropolitics. Bodies bound by need, composers and performers bound by the demands of career and opinion, can only conform to existing paradigms: they can only respond to their conditions reactively, they can only appeal to the bounds of what is. They are either bound by routine or necessity to the existing order. Bodies set free from the demand for conformity, however, can cultivate the conditions for creative risk, can attempt the leaps from self-interest into the domain of creation – they alone are capable of tapping into the world's virtual reserve of *something more*, as they can afford the risk of the leap without the risk of obliteration.

* * *

Life/Art

Throughout his writings and interviews, Cage insists that his art offers a model for a practical anarchy – an anarchy that invites no intervention from the police. This is one of the most consistent themes in all eras of Cage's writing, reaching back from to the earliest examples from *Silence* and extending all the way to his final interviews with Joan Retallack, collected in *Musicage*. In order to establish a continuity of tactics between art and (non-)politics, we need to consider what aspects of artistic creation Cage sees as useful for application to the social field.

¹⁷ Cage, *For the Birds*, 205.

For Cage, art provides to a twofold approach to reshaping the political ecology. One important aspect of music is the opportunity it provides to practice strategies for politics of fluidity and change. At all times, it is important to separate the *content* of Cage's music – the particular sounds that appear – from these abstract strategies and postures. Cage himself insisted that the specific content of each musical work was only useful to the extent that it provided a sign for these abstract strategies – that it allowed a certain way of inhabiting the world to be felt, a posture that could be repeated, with difference, in any context. The political component of Cage's music is thus not represented by its content, but implicated in the form of its emergence, a form that establishes conditions and potential connections that can be carried far afield from a musical setting. "If you do [musical politics] with content, you do it so to speak impurely, but if you do it without content it's pure information which then the listener, the user, can apply in any circumstance he wishes."¹⁸ Cage's music demands not that we admire its content, but that its content provides us with a feeling for the power of transformation that it expresses. What we should extract from Cage's music and from his political musings is not any set of particulars, but a set of strategies for creation without a model. Cage asks us not to refine our tastes or to put a particular political program into practice, but to hone the skills of active self-creation without the terror – or comfort – of a model. It is the *practice* of musical performance and the practice of pure listening that trains us to be worthy of our events, not the precise content or character of the results that emerge.

What is the problem with political content in music? For Cage, as for Deleuze,

¹⁸ Cage, *Conversing with Cage*, 275.

music that is simply critique falls into the trap of *mere communication* – it lacks, as Deleuze would say, the claws of necessity necessary to bring about a change in politics, or to modify the field of identities itself. Complaint, protest, and affirmation of existing political opinion binds us to the field of the actually-existing, reproducing existing antagonisms and hierarchies. They issue a call for conformism to already-existing individuals – and thus necessarily constitute an ordering and organizing force. Cage was acutely aware that mere critique was insufficient for a politics of transformation, a virtual politics of change. “Protest is all too often absorbed into the flow of power,” he asserts in his interviews with Daniel Charles, “because it limits itself to reaching for the same old mechanisms of power, which is the worst way to challenge authority!”¹⁹ Simple criticism and argument about existing political options presumes the world already formed, disciplined into discrete units of consensus. It is foreclosed to experimentation, yet is itself the product of experimentations long since constrained and normalized until they are habitual, until they appear as self-stable objects. Communication presumes stability, competence, uniformity: “everyone knows” what is being communicated. Communication and content will never be enough to work micropolitically; only that which resists and transforms communication can provide sufficient resistance to its conforming power. Communication is, fundamentally, a making-the-same – it is discipline, it is power. As such, Cage rejects its role in (non-)politics, favoring instead an open-ended and constitutive process of conversation:

¹⁹ Cage, *For the Birds*, 236.

D.C. So in your ideal society, people would be near each other but not communicating...

J.C. They would not communicate, but they would talk, they would carry on dialogues. I much prefer this notion of dialogue, of *conversation*, to the notion of communication. Communication presupposes that one has something, an object, to be communicated... Communication is always imposing something: a discourse on objects, a truth, a feeling. While in conversation, nothing imposes itself... It is that 'anything at all' which allows access to what I call the *openness*. To the process.²⁰

In *What is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari offer a complementary, expanded version of this same demand. "We do not lack communication" and its disciplinary force, they insist. "On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation. We lack resistance to the present. The creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist." The latter part is the greatest challenge – it constitutes Cagean "conversation," this calling forth of a new earth and a new people. The object is to create conditions for statements that do not simply oppose or escape communication – not non-sense – but that which could induce a spontaneous, unexpected torsion in the field of communication itself. The aim is not simply to protest communication or to garble it; it is not enough to simply grind it to a halt. Nor is it enough to simply suspend it temporarily and allow the grid of pre-formed meaning and

²⁰ Cage, *For the Birds*, 148.

identities to resume un-tweaked. One has to create the conditions for a mutation of communication itself, to allow the *process* that gives rise to identities and representations to exercise its own self-varying force. It is to render communication neither broken nor modestly expanded into polyvalence, but genuinely open, sensitive to chance, capable of metamorphosis. To will something in the conversation-conversation without willing the form it will take – to allow the event of conversation to actualize new relations, new forms of sense. Deleuze's remarks on conversation in his book on modern cinema echo with a particular Cagean resonance:

The less of a pre-existing social structure there is, the better is revealed, not a silent natural life, but pure forms of sociability necessarily passing through *conversation*. And conversation is undoubtedly inseparable from structures, places, and functions, from interests and motives, from actions and reactions which are external to it. But it also possesses the power of artificially subordinating all these determinations, of making them a stake, or rather of making them the variables of an interaction which corresponds to it. Interests, feeling, or love no longer determine conversation, they themselves depend on the division of stimulation in conversation, the latter determining relations of force and structurations which are particular to it.²¹

A conversation that is not communication or representation – an artful conversation – cannot be used to generate consensus. This conversational art cannot appeal to an already-existing populism or the identities rendered within representational democracy. As Deleuze and Guattari argue in *What is Philosophy?*, this resistance to existing identities is the purview of a rarefied, anomalous class capable of changing those identities or driving them to a point of indiscernibility. To converse as such is to create. It is to speak to a people that do not yet exist from the edges of a people that do exist; as

²¹ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 230.

such, it is not the populist but only the “most aristocratic” that lay claim to this future.²²

Such sentiment pervades Cage’s writings as well – his purchase on both art and politics is, as he says, “not so much a democratic point of view as it is equally aristocratic.”²³

There are two elements in this creative aristocracy. The first is the distance from need. It provides the foundation from which one can engage in this masochistic act, where one can indulge a denial or conversion of self-interest without threat of abolition. The Cagean concern for abundance attests to this – we need enough of the basics so that we can take the leaps. This needn’t be achieved through the accumulation of wealth, though it can be – the difficulty is that wealth imbalance restricts which bodies have access to powers of transformation and which are bound by need. It can also be achieved by avoidance of forces that generate routines and uniformity – paid work, in particular. Amateurs, composers without career prospects, performers outside the conservatory, and inventors of instruments that only they can play: all these offers outlets from standardized, monetized circuits of expectation and reaction. Each person capable of leaping beyond the bounds of representation and recognition, each person temporarily freed of expectation, taps into this aristocratic position. He who plays for a career, who is still bound by necessity to judgments of “success” and “failure” and can never reach this point of creative force. Aristocracy is not a matter of wealth for Cage and Deleuze, but of distance from the field of exchange and its tendency toward universal equivalence – the opposite of creative difference.

²² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 108.

²³ Cage, *A Year from Monday*, 121.

The second element is trickier, and more to Deleuze and Guattari's point. The aristocrat necessarily stands apart from the field of consensus, from the collective "everyone knows." And yet the aristocrat remains attached, if just tangentially, to the masses. He is not "above" but "on the edge" of the pack: not opposed, but always on the verge of flight from it. He is a cutting edge of the masses in mutation: not a person of power or dominance, but one in a position to survey the whole *if just to evade its jurisdiction*. He is anomalous – not abnormal, but without designation, without a majority to which he conforms.²⁴ He proceeds by distance from the populace, yet is invested with responsibility by a public that relies on his ability to exceed any recognition. He is not a person who knows, but one who simply *manages not to know what everyone else knows*:

But here and there isolated and passionate cries are raised. How could they not be isolated when they deny that which "everyone knows..."? And passionate, since they deny that which, it is said, nobody can deny? Such protest does not take place in the name of aristocratic prejudices: it is not a question of saying what few think and knowing what it means to think. On the contrary, it is a question of someone – if only one – with the necessary modesty not managing to know what everybody knows and modestly denying what everybody is supposed to recognize. Someone who neither allows himself to be represented nor wishes to represent anything.²⁵

²⁴ Jeremie Valentin, "Deleuze's Political Posture," in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantin Boundas, 195. "What strikes Deleuze and Guattari is that 'the chief resembles more a leader or a star than a man of power'. And yet, this does not mean that the chief does not have a very special place in the group. Holding himself at some distance from the group, he is nonetheless the chief. Being endowed with qualities that few of the members of the tribe seem to possess, he has constantly to have these qualities measured against the logic of the group." In Cage's circle, David Tudor is the very essence of this aristocracy – a star, an anomaly, possessing a unique separation-connection to the world of instrumentalists.

²⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 165.

The aristocratic stance verges on irony – intimately connected to the world and history, yet impossibly distant. He requires a connection to the world as *that from which he is differing*. History and its progression is that from which we are departing, that which exists is a rough sketch of what we're becoming, then the aristocrat of Deleuze and Cage is the singular individual on the edge of our becoming, placing himself in the midst of an event of transformation already underway, the most intense fringe of the world as process and manifest in an individual. The aristocrat is not just an escape artist – she is not just avoiding the world-as-it-is – but is a leading edge in transforming it. She is the figure of Cage and Deleuze's ethics rendered at the level of the group rather than the level of the individual subject: a figure who lures the event, not in an effort to develop consensus among existing identities but to invent process that can change the very way those identities are individuated.

What is necessary for a genuine creation is not consensus, but dissensus. Genuine creation for Deleuze and Cage is the disruption of an image of thought – “the image of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one's bearings in thought.”²⁶ All accepted opinion and convention begins with the implied framework of “everyone knows,” the unspoken assumptions and unthought presuppositions that allow for intelligibility and communicability, but also prevent the thinker from grasping potential *as such*, potential in its yet-unqualified form. “I don't trust my imagination. I know what my imagination is, and what I'm interested in is what I don't know. The logical mind is offended when anything comes in that isn't within the range of its imagination, whereas

²⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 37.

the accepting mind is delighted.”²⁷ It is this presupposition of a common frame that submits thought to the dull repetition of recognition and identity: an endless order of more-of-the-same. Concepts only ever designate possibilities, and possibilities, seen as merely the negative image of that which actually exists, lack that power of creation that would force a change in the image of thought – they are unable to redistribute the *problems* that thought addresses, for they emerge from the already-existing image of thought. The highest power of the thinker-creator, following Artaud, is not “to orientate his thought, or to perfect the expression of what he thought, or to acquire application and method or to perfect his poems, but simply *to manage to think something*” [emphasis added].²⁸ True thought emerges only in confrontation with that which is not already recognized and reconfigures what it is possible to think; true creation precedes by establishing the conditions for new sensation and new thought but stops short of prescribing what should emerge. The most potent form of creation, therefore, is not that which perfects or orders but that which turns thought against itself. It is that which short-circuit the power of imagination so as to embrace “an amnesia in memory, an aphasia in language, and an agnosia in sensibility,” the only moments in which thought reaches beyond mere recognition and into a realm of impersonal or a-personal creativity.²⁹

Therefore the true anarchic situation, both musically and politically, can only

²⁷ Cage in conversation with Roy M. Close (1973), *Conversing with Cage*, 227.

²⁸ Another Artaudian echo in Cage appears in *A Year from Monday*, 119. “In order to think must I wear my thinking cap? Will it be sufficient just to bite my lips? Or, if I am in a room, will pacing back and forth like an animal in a cage, will that do the trick? *Can’t I just plain think?*” [emphasis added]

²⁹ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 147.

emerge in the absence of habitual self-policing: it can only function in the in the *absence* of models for subjectivity and in the moments when we stop recognizing ourselves.

Anarchy occurs only when we create a situation “in which nothing is selected in advance, in which there are no obligations or prohibitions, in which nothing is even predictable.”³⁰

The anarchic situation involves what Brian Massumi terms a *nonstandard, non-authorial constructivism* – an approach to creativity that forgoes both model-based re-creation (the appeal to standards, resemblance, and identity) and the construction or communication of fixed statements (the appeal to simple critique or reformism). The first step is the disruption of habitual circuits by selecting materials and rigging situations that combine potentials ordinarily segregated from one another: to complicate, to confuse, and to problematize. Stopped at this point, the creative process simply disrupts the image of thought momentarily, but cannot displace it. It still reaffirms the model of communication: what is constructed is a statement *about* the presumptions grounding thought and perception. In order to achieve a true conversion-conversation, in order to displace and destroy an image of thought, one must construct scenarios such that the habitual order is paused “not primarily to interrupt and make a statement, but to invite an effective variation on continuing.”³¹ It would suspend a regularized interaction already underway so that it became sensitive to chance elements and opened back onto they dynamism from which it emerged – not simply chaotic, but quasi-chaotic, mixing habits and rules such that they re-fluidify and, perhaps, establish new forms and patterns of

³⁰ Cage, *For the Birds*, 77.

³¹ Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 101.

belonging together. These forms will, in turn, pass into new circuits of anticipation and reaction, which they may disrupt or wherein they themselves might be captured and regularized, forming new images of thought – at which point the process of stimulating variation begins again.

The object of Cagean politics is therefore not an object at all, but an ongoing process of exhausting conventional possibilities in order to let other kinds of creation bloom. – “it is perpetual birth or reincarnation; it is life.”³² It is possible to see Cage’s stance toward the utilities (public services, water, food, free time) as a utopian ideal toward which his music aspires or to which ends it serves. One could imagine that Cage saw his music as a means of reaching such a utopia and the presumed reduction of human suffering that would accompany it. But those who approach Cage as such are bound to leave disappointed or even annoyed by the content of his work or the apparent impracticality of the solutions he offers. Instead, we should consider Cagean non-politics as the ongoing creation of techniques for inhabiting the world together, techniques adequate to and stimulating of the world’s own self-variation, and those sketch-like political platforms as a means toward creating assemblages capable of enacting – and surviving – these variations. Instead of considering a more egalitarian distribution of the utilities as a goal, it is possible to think of this distribution as a *condition for something greater than politics*, a condition for opening onto a world less constrained by habit and policed category, a world that free or intensify the processes of creation already underway within it. “I would say that the notion of a change of existence in general, for

³² Cage, *For the Birds*, 138.

the better rather than for the worse, and—this seems to be a different point of view—for the majority of people rather than for an elite, doesn't seem to me to be ultimately incompatible with an opening-up of aesthetic responses.”³³

Art is not simply a low-risk area to practice these strategies – art *is* the production of new ways of living independent of existing models, whether a “work” emerges or not. When Cage and Deleuze suggest that the goal of art is to integrate itself with daily life, it is not simply to provide decorative sense or a dim feeling of aesthetic emotion amidst the drudgery of routine. It is a call to discover the margin of variability existing within even the most rigidly policed contexts and to extract and amplify the play of difference always at work within them. Small changes to our senses, small modifications in our patterns of response can be taken up and intensified – one never knows for certain what an audience will do with a new perceptual strategy, how new eyes and ears will manifest new routines, new habits, new people. “But you can well understand that in a certain sense music must be abandoned for it to be like that. Or at least *what we call* music! For politics, it is just the same thing. And so I may indeed talk about ‘non-politics,’ just as people talk about my ‘non-music.’ It’s the same problem!”³⁴

As a consequence, we cannot afford to reduce art to a site of bland appreciation, the realm of the “beautiful soul” who appreciates all differences as equal and all struggles as a mere matter of “misunderstanding.” It is too simple to assume that Cage wants us to find aesthetic pleasure in the sounds and experience of daily life – to assume that these

³³ Cage, *For the Birds*, 96.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

sounds are simply misunderstood and not recognized for their inherent beauty. A benign appreciation of that which already is, or the extension of a standard of “beauty” into the everyday, is too modest a goal: it adds little to the world’s self-creating power, it renders what is simply decorative. What is necessary is to create experiences that destroy a conventionalized image of the beautiful, that open us to experiences that displace the question of conventional judgments entirely, to rupture the good and common sense of art. In the first chapter of *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze issues a cautionary note about this bland tolerance that characterizes the beautiful soul:

We refuse the general alternative proposed by infinite representation: the indeterminate, the indifferent, the undifferentiated or a difference already determined by negation, implying and enveloping the negative... In its essence, difference is the object of affirmation or affirmation itself... At this point, does the philosophy of difference not risk appearing as a new version of the beautiful soul? The beautiful soul is in effect the one who sees differences everywhere and appeals to them only as respectable, reconcilable, or federative differences, while history continues to be made through bloody contradictions. The beautiful soul behaves like a justice of the peace thrown on to a field of battle, one who sees in the inexorable struggles only simple ‘differends’ or perhaps misunderstandings...

In very general terms, we claim that there are two ways to appeal to ‘necessary destructions:’ that of the poet, who speaks in the name of a creative power, capable of overturning all orders and representations in order to affirm Difference in the state of permanent revolution which characterizes the eternal return; and that of the politician, who is above all concerned to deny that which ‘differs,’ so as to conserve or prolong an established historical order, or to establish a historical order which already calls forth in the world the forms of its representation.³⁵

Clearly, Cage and Deleuze have little interest in the artistic politician that would divide the world between that art and that which differs from it – the separation between

³⁵ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 53.

music and noise. But they have no interest in its liberal-tolerant variant, either: the inclusion of non-musical sounds in the realm of music, provided they behave sufficiently “musically.” It is not enough to simply admit new experience into the well-policed boundaries of “art,” to allow art to lasso in more and more sensation that could classify as edifying or beautiful. Such a strategy is a liberal-tolerant variant on the common theme of inclusion, which permits diversity provided the now-included bodies agree to the conventions and conditions of existing orders. What is necessary is to reject present possibilities and present coordinates for the recognition of beauty – “the object of art is to hide beauty”³⁶ – but also form conditions under which the entire boundaries of art and experience would be redefined again and again. For Cage and Deleuze, the object of art and the object of politics coincide, and the tactics of art and politics include one another: throw a wrench in the mechanics of the world as it is, force thought to confront the unthought, destroy an image of thought and slip out before a new one can form. It is a crueler kind of beauty, one that forces us to directly, sensibly, and perhaps uncomfortably engage with experience for which there is no intelligible concept or criteria for judgment. “The work of art appears as experimentation” – as experimentation on the mixture of organization and disorganization in the world itself.³⁷

³⁶ Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 98.

³⁷ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 68. In *Difference and Givenness*, Levi Bryant provides an excellent rebuttal against the passive-fascist tendency represented by the “beautiful soul.” With respect to these connotations, perspective, point of view, or essence is treated as the internal domain of a subject independent of every other subject's point of view and unreachable by any other subject's point of view. Under this popular position—which is just another variant of the cult of the individual-matters quickly degenerate into unsupportable and incoherent moral assertions to the effect that “this is my point of view, that is yours,” which are supposed to be democratic and tolerant but

How to Improve the World – You’ll Only Make Matters Worse.

Take the following exchange between David Cope and John Cage as a motto for this brand of non-politics:

- *And the asking of the questions actually is a process of invention.*
- *That’s what I trust.*³⁸

This pairing of invention and question-asking is essential to understanding both Cage’s musical and social aspirations. How does question-asking link to a process of invention without the mediation of statement or communication? How does one problematize a situation such that it neither stops short of transformation (deconstruction) nor is reclaimed by standards, norms, representations and identities? What conditions are necessary – and what risks do we run?

which in fact prove to be a form of mastery in which one no longer has to hear or engage with the alterity of the other. Moreover, this strategy fails to see that it is itself based on a universalist perspective that aims to transcend any particular point of view. The claim that we ought to be tolerant of the views of others is not simply one point of view, but a regulative principle governing all points of view. In the worst cases, theory is rejected altogether (since theory is supposed to only pertain to universals) , and critical engagement degenerates into a banal sort of descriptivism or reporting of "personal experiences." In our opinion, this sort of subjectivism represents a variant of the constitutive ontological yearning for a lost plenitude, presence, or fullness which would like to deny difference and renounce alterity. Far from preserving tolerance and democracy, such views are predicated on the abolition of difference and alterity. Such a view is that of the beautiful soul in that it denies that holding any position involves the affirmation of some principles and the rejection of others. To be is to affirm. To affirm is to select. To select is to exclude.”

³⁸ Cage in an interview with David Cope, 1980, *Conversing with Cage*, 229.

Deleuze offers an image of this creative approach in “The Exhausted,” his piece on Samuel Beckett in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. While the essay’s concern is largely literary, it offers considerable insight to the link between *need* and creativity in Deleuzian philosophy; it is perhaps Deleuze’s clearest text on the relationship between need and modes of imagining possibility, modes of imagining which resonate with Cage’s own depiction of a nonstandard constructivism. Deleuze’s account hinges on his contrast between the tired man and the exhausted man, or the man capable of only of choosing between *possible* options and the man capable of grasping the thought-without-an-image that can stir the difference lurking within and beneath habit-circuits and, therefore, can grasp the capacity for creating the new. The tired man still strives for a *possible* goal, still engages in a struggle. “When one realizes some of the possible, one does so according to certain goals, plans, and preferences,” Deleuze argues. The tired man is still engaged in an antagonism, he sees himself as striving *against* something else. He is still attached to need, still directed by utility, still enmeshed in functions and circuits of reaction and anticipation. “[T]he realization of the possible always proceeds through exclusion, because it presupposes preference and goals that vary, always replacing the preceding ones. In the end, it is these variations, these substitutions... that are tiring.”³⁹ Simple tiredness entrenches you in an endless cycle of need and goal-oriented aspiration – and the goals remain forever out of reach and are only ever approached in disappointment and resentment.

The exhausted man, however, sees the matter of potential differently. No longer

³⁹ Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 153.

capable of striving for a goal, he is traversed by vague feelings of potentiality made sensible only on the condition “that one renounce any order of preference, any organization in relation to a goal, any signification” – and, indeed, any habits of need or desire that would constitute a fixed identity or sovereign subjectivity. The exhausted man is free of the possible – he has *exhausted* the possible and, in the process, exhausted himself. The exhausted man is the man beyond need, beyond intention, beyond purpose. But he is not simply passive, but is filled with activity “for nothing.” “Yet one does not fall into the undifferentiated, or into the famous unity of contradictories, nor is one passive: one remains active, but for nothing,” Deleuze writes. “One was tired of something, but one is exhausted by nothing.”⁴⁰ Cultivating exhaustion, rather than mere tiredness, requires tremendous work: it is the work of clearing convention and repressing habit, the very conventions and habits that make our subjectivity possible.

“Only the exhausted person can exhaust the possible, because he has renounced all need, preference, goal, or signification,” Deleuze contends, echoing Cage’s demand for intentional non-intention and purposeful purposelessness. “For [the exhausted man], what matters is the order in which he does what he has to do, and in what combination he does... things... when it is still necessary to do, for nothing.”⁴¹ This is the “highest goal of art” – to present the image, sonorous, visual or otherwise, not as *object* or as vessel for communication but as a catalyst for transformative *process*. Only by moving away from the familiar, the policed, the preferred, and the goal-directed can we hope to aspire to a

⁴⁰ Deleuze, “The Exhausted,” in *Essays Clinical and Critical*, 153.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

genuine creation and the manufacturing of new eyes, new minds, and new people. Only by capturing the event in its genetic capacity can we aspire to create without a model, to go beyond our needs-driven imagination and delve into the creation of that which we have not seen or dreamed of. It is a call to tactical ignorance, self-sabotage. It is not a question of knowing, or communicating knowledge to an uninformed populace. It is not enough to say “there is no such thing as silence” or “to have done with judgments of God,” but instead we are required to continually strain the boundaries that habit and routine draw. To exhaust the possible such that one no longer knows what a person can here, how individuals can relate, how the world can transform itself – not just to protest or project, but to move in an objective state of indeterminacy. We are called to be among the undecidable, the indiscernible, the not-yet-connected, in order to see what can emerge (even beyond our capacity to imagine). As Artaud said, creation is a call “to write for the illiterate-to speak for the aphasic, to think for the acephalous. But what does ‘for’ mean? It is not ‘for their benefit,’ or yet ‘in their place.’ It is ‘before.’ It is a question of becoming. The thinker is not acephalic, aphasic, or illiterate, but becomes so.”⁴²

Such a process of creation requires two moments, one subversive and one perverse. The subversive moment antagonizes the order of habit, of policed conventions and accepted norms. We conspicuously do away with the debt to the composer or abandon the conductor’s podium in order to illuminate the way in which models mask the play of difference or the always-underway self-modification of the world. The work-as-object yields in its authoritative force and opens a space for freedom. Against the model

⁴² Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*, 109.

of dominance and standardization, a first impulse might be to seek refuge in “personal freedom,” to celebrate the releasing of our personal intentions – themselves formed from and formed in the likeness of models, standards, norms, and morals: a brute, individual anarchy. But Cage and Deleuze retain sobriety, rules, and regulations. Those who take recourse in a kind of performance libertarianism adopt an ironic stance to the “major” version of performance (the model of performance to which we are asked to accord – reproduce, reproduce, reproduce). They carry the corpse of the model with them, tied to its presence-absence even as they claim freedom from it:

I frequently say that I don’t have any purposes, and that I’m dealing with sounds, but that’s obviously not the case. On the other hand it is. That is to say, I believe that by eliminating purpose, what I call awareness increases. Therefore my purpose is to remove purpose. It’s very simple to show, and we’ve already talked about it. If I have a particular purpose, and then a series of actions comes about, and all I get is an approximation of my purpose, then nothing but a sort of compromise or disappointment can take place. And perhaps that still takes place when my purpose is to remove purpose, namely, I see that I haven’t really done it. But at least I’m going along in that general direction.⁴³

What is required in the place of simple inversion is a kind of active paralysis that allows for the production of the unanticipated. It is this over-full moment of potential when routinized orders of behavior and perception have been suspended, when actions of have shed their conventional functions, that *potential* in its suspenseful indeterminacy can be sensed – provided it isn’t immediately disrupted and recaptured by a *telos*. It is not simply a passive stance, but an active one, an active *exhaustion of the possible* requiring the greatest sobriety and the greatest risk. Cage’s famous maxim “I have nothing to say

⁴³ Cage in conversation with Roger Reynolds (1962), *Conversing with Cage*, 231.

and I am saying it” is not a call to passivity or a demand that we demur to any state of affairs whatsoever. If anything, most states of affairs are overcrowded with habit-policed significance or overgrown with “meaningful” “communication.” In order to reach back into the field of potential-without-image, we must *actively suspend* the incursion of habit into our actions. Politics – the policed realm of acceptable opinion – is the order of social habit, cliché, the sleep of invention; in order to open it to invention, it must be suspended and actively so. The emphasis in Cage’s slogan has too long been placed on the “nothing” and not on the activity of “saying it” – what is necessary is to discover the means by which we can actively say something that is yet no-thing, how we can emit signs whose function can only be determined *after* their production.

In his essay on Deleuzian politics, Jérémie Valentin emphasizes the political consequences of these two figures, the tired and the exhausted. “The one who is tired” – that is, the one participating in field of choice as it appears from within identities and representations – “is more likely to mount the barricades and mobilise the masses for the sake of the ultimate overthrow of the established order.” The exhausted man, by contrast, has rendered himself not simply passive but has actively rendered himself open to potentials *beyond* the existing field of choice. He “confronts the depletion of the possible with the sobriety of the man that plumbs the resources of the virtual,” suspending his habits through rigorous physical and mental exercise in an attempt to grasp something that cannot yet be articulated or to be traversed by something that can not yet be represented. It is this activity that separates the exhausted man from simple passive nihilism – he is not simply accepting what comes his way, but opening on to an unpredictable future. To act in exhaustion is not simply to do nothing, but to vigorously

clear existing, clichéd intentions, desires, and pleasures in an effort to see what might emerge beyond them.⁴⁴

From the perspective of what already exists, Cagean/Deleuzian politics might indeed seem impossible or far-fetched. Indeed, it has a different relation to possibility in general. It is banking on the world's self-generative power to exceed what is possible, that is, what has been tested, regularized, standardized, and entered into convention; it is an attempt to express an openness of relation between the things in the world, the ability of the world to express its own reserve of surprise, its processual self-becoming, if our actions are left open enough to partake in it. Such a politics begins with the world as it exists but seeks to expand from it – it “pertains to the openness of the interaction rather than the interaction per se of its discrete ingredients.”⁴⁵ It is the hope that de-regularizing the situations in which find ourselves will open enough space for relations to self-complicate and for something new, perhaps something better, to emerge. Above all, it is a refusal to accept the present situation, the present state of affairs, as all that exists in the world – the world's open-endedness is accepted as not just wishful thinking, but as *reality*. “I believe that everything communicates, that I communicate just as well by saying nothing as by saying something,” Cage insists.⁴⁶ To actively say no-thing is a

⁴⁴ Jérémie Valentin, “Gilles Deleuze's Political Posture,” in *Deleuze and Philosophy*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, 194. “‘Zourabichvili points at the subtle but decisive difference between ‘ne faire rien’ (doing nothing) and ‘faire le rien’ (making the nothing) – between passive nihilism and nihilism defeating itself by itself – and it is, in my opinion, the latter that best captures the essence of Deleuze's political posture. It problematises the field of the possible, without ever articulating a plan in view of a telos.”

⁴⁵ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 225.

⁴⁶ Cage in conversation with Regina Vater (1976), *Conversing with Cage*, 278.

gamble, a leap to be handled neither recklessly nor arbitrarily, but with the sobriety of the exhausted man.

* * *

Cage as Deleuzian Philosopher

It is often said of Cage that he is a philosopher, not a musician. Typically, this is meant as a disparaging remark, a means of denigrating the quality of music while retaining a backhanded respect for interesting, if impractical, ideas. But this dismissal is ill-considered at best – if he is a philosopher, he is a most unusual one. Cage rarely does the work traditionally associated with philosophy. He is unconcerned with seeking eternal truths. His thought does little to reduce the chaos of the world to orderly laws. Both his thought and his music have little to do with logic and nothing to do with developing powers of prediction. He offers little in the way of moral prescriptions or concrete analyses of pressing political problems. Instead, he seeks quite the opposite – thought and music that celebrate and proliferate the singular rather than the general, that displace comfortable categories and moral questions, and that seek the emergence of the unpredictable, the alien, the disruptive. In place of prefiguring how we should live, what we should think or hear, Cage's music approaches a more radical aesthetic and political question: what is possible for us to do, think, and hear once we have displaced our identities, goals, and familiar pleasures?

It is best to think of John Cage as a philosopher, provided we place him among a

special class of philosopher – a philosopher of *process itself*. Cage’s writings, interviews, and his music itself are properly philosophical attempts to think through the world’s open-endedness as such: they are ways to capture a sense of the structure of the world’s capacity for infinite renewal. Brian Massumi describes the goals of this approach thusly: “What philosophy tries to articulate are *contingencies*: potential relational modulations of contexts that are not yet contained in their ordering as possibilities that have been recognized and can be practically regulated.”⁴⁷ It is an attempt to bring forth the conditions under which something new can emerge. These are the conditions, for example, in which a new sound (a sound yet-unheard, unanticipated) can cut through the filters of habit, in which a new potential can be wrung from a tired instrument, or new interactions between human beings can spontaneously emerge from within the well-policed bounds of standardized interactions. It is the precise, non-objective thinking of the conditions of creativity, a creativity always-already at play in the world.

The only way to allow this free play of creation to work itself out is to provide the conditions for a complex act without predetermining the conclusion – in other words, to grasp the field conditions of production without specifying a final product. This doesn’t require recklessness and it certainly can’t be willed within the realm of doxa, “free choice,” or opinion: it requires vagueness and precision, or, rather, a precise vagueness, or a precision that is specific to vagueness. Therefore, Cage’s work is necessarily *speculative*, pertaining that which does not yet exist. In order to extract a sense of potential for things not-yet-actual, it has to sever itself from the order of what

⁴⁷ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 240.

exists; it is a-functional from the perspective of the present order, but pre-functional from the perspective of what is to come. As such, it constitutes what Deleuze and Guattari call “resistance to the present” in *What is Philosophy?* – and it is this resistance to the present that allows for the ability to summon “a new earth and a new people.” As the rigorous study of that which overturns the present, Cagean-Deleuzian philosophy is properly *revolutionary*, provided revolution is in no way attached to an expected outcome. It is speculative revolution, the thinking-through of the potential for constant newness:

As concept and as event, revolution is self-referential or enjoys a self-positing that enables it to be apprehended in an immanent enthusiasm without anything in states of affairs or lived experience being able to tone it down, not even the disappointments of reason. Revolution is absolute deterritorialization even to the point where this calls for a new earth, a new people.

Deleuze and Deleuze Guattari’s utopia is not a static state of heavenly order, but the merger of the plane of immanence – the event of events, the process that is the world – with the present milieu. It is the continual enactment of deterritorialization, of unrooted and unbound creative production: “The word utopia therefore designates that conjunction of philosophy, or of the concept, with the present milieu-political philosophy (however, in view of the mutilated meaning public opinion has given to it, perhaps utopia is not the best word).”⁴⁸

Cage himself insisted that his music-philosophy was deliberately, tactically *useless* – divorced from practical politics needs as commonly understood. Yet he insisted that it could feed useful activities or give rise to important, singular, life-changing

⁴⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 100.

novelty. In performance, philosophy, understood as thinking change *as such*, re-intersects with world-as-it-is to properly political ends; performance is the aesthetic-political activity “of using philosophy’s offer of resituating self-difference to produce global self-organizing effects.”⁴⁹ Cage outlines conditions under which something unforeseen might occur; the performer puts these potentials into action, passing from pure speculative philosophy into action. A musical action occurs – a tweaking of an existent context, perhaps just enough that an ear is struck by a new sound and senses a new potential. Such a striking is not communication – no message is transmitted – but a modulation of potentials: the chance that a new sound can manifest a new way of engaging with the world, as all sounds (even those previously unheard) are signs of potential action (including actions not yet anticipated). The performer’s object is to bring the speculative into being, to actualize a virtual potential, but to stop short of convention or signification – he or she must allow the act to retain its own philosophical fringe, its ability to stimulate unforeseen responses in its new context. Not communication, but a conductivity of potential and a willingness to allow an event to pass beyond a margin of control, in order to let it operate on its own in the world – or, rather, through the world. The performer places the listener on the edge of understanding without embedding that understanding in the present circuits of anticipation/reaction. He or she places the listener at the edge of sense, perhaps a new sense, which could serve as a new orientation in the world. Cage’s philosophical compositions give us potential in a form that is thought-sensed, while his performers aspire to give us a feeling for the structure of potential in

⁴⁹ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 243.

sensible material.

Radical music and radical politics share this strategy: modulate and wait, tweak and evaluate. They are pragmatic, in that they demand active experimentation upon the real of our environment as to stimulate potentials already at work, but they can never fully determine the outcome of its efforts. This is the trade-off one must accept to participate in an aesthetics-politics of change: one can only *catalyze* the world's spontaneous reorganization without fully forecasting it, but such catalysis could not occur without your active participation. What one loses in assuredness of outcome, one gains in the capacity to generate a change far greater and wide-reaching than one could anticipate. The comparatively low stakes of obscure experimental art stand to generate much broader effects once events pass from the original context and self-vary in their circulation; seemingly minor inventions of new social relations, similarly, could cascade into broader revolutions. Like all actions whose outcomes are unforeseen, there's a chance that they could feed-forward into something greater – and a chance that they might not. Without experimentation, without the production of zones of indeterminacy, however, you are only likely to end up with more of the same.

If these goals seem cold or inhuman, it is because they are. They demand that we surpass the habits that constitute our humanity. Cage's aesthetic-political philosophy orients us toward music and a life beyond perceptual and emotional cliché, beyond hope or even love. Deleuze's remarks on Spinoza could just as easily be written about his composer contemporary:

He did not believe in hope or even courage; he believed only in joy, and in vision. He let others live, provided that others let him live. He wanted only to inspire, to awaken, to reveal. The purpose of demonstration... is not to command or even to convince, but only to shape the glass or polish the lens for this inspired free vision.⁵⁰

If life is to be as art, it is in this sense – in accord with the creative power of an abstract impersonal becoming-different passing through the world. But becoming-different is not just passing through the world – it is the world itself. Living in “imitation of nature in her manner of operation” is not to live in accord with any already-existing balance of needs, nor to live in the hopes of eliminating suffering, but to join in the production and potency of this creative power. It is possible to see this goal as detached or cruel but only if viewed through the dulled lens of “personal” life, life as expressed in our subjectivity, the knot of habits acquired through chance and the constraining demands of bodily need. It is possible to see both Deleuze and Cage as contemptuous of the real needs of people; Cage himself recognized that potential in his own thought:

Our minds are already changed (and they know it: that’s why they call us cold and dehumanized); what remains to be done is to find out what tools are at our disposal and how to use them so that our objective is never seen in the distance but rests continually inside each one of us, so that whenever one goes, as he will, in all directions at once, it with him will go polymorphically.⁵¹

The challenge is to reconsider the form of hope, even in times of ever-growing hopelessness: the seemingly endless threat of economic and ecological apocalypse, the twin co-operating burdens of infinite “communication” and rapidly constricting horizons

⁵⁰ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 14.

⁵¹ Cage, *A Year From Monday*, 130.

of possibility for imagining a world other than the one that already exists, the deadening bonds of compromise and forced pragmatism. Hope tied to a goal is likely only to meet the fate of compromise and disappointment, and it is in bad faith that we approach the world as we might approach the transcendent work of the great master – from the position of pre-assumed disappointment, eager for compromise, tied to the bonds of actual frailty and a belief in their inescapability. If Cage seems particularly apolitical, it is only from this position of default compromise (the defining feature, perhaps, of our supposed post-political landscape). To refuse participation in the business of political compromise isn't to withdraw from politics or to abandon hope, but to search for that the element within hope that can be separated from projections of optimism or pessimism: an untimely dimension within hope. This dimension is an antidote to resignation even as it is a poison to identity – it is the openness to what we cannot expect from our present position. Whatever state we are in is not eternal. We need not be bound by the horrors we face, no matter how insurmountable and entrenched they seem. What we can do immediately is seek new connections, test new pathways for hearing, thinking, and feeling in the hope that they might manifest changes beyond our limited hopes and dreams. Cage and Deleuze ask us to think and feel the margin of variability that our thoroughly rational despair or lofty hopes prevents us from sensing. What is necessary is to embrace the component of every situation, musical or political, that escapes the present bounds of understanding and explicate its consequences – to develop a sensibility that can detect the form of potential embedded in that which escapes recognition.

Here we find a new definition of nature, one that should give us a new outlook on “nature in her manner of operation.” Nature is not a reserve of stable forms or ideal

balance, but the reality of pure process – an always-operating excess of potential making continual ingress on the things of this world, the process-of-all-process whose limit is the point where ordering and dissolving become indistinguishable from one another. Nature is the halo of “something more” haunting even the most routine, most habitual encounters. Against all attempts to discipline it, nature continually inflects even the most rigorous attempt at repetition with difference – naturing nature, “a radically inhuman ‘subjectless subjectivity’ as endlessly generous in its giving as capitalism is manic in its taking (if capitalism culturally rejoins nature, it is with a change of polarity).”⁵²

But the explicating of these potentials should not simply occur reckless or arbitrarily, even if they arrive via impersonal, chance-inflected channels. They must be coupled to a process of evaluation that is not moral – not defined by adherence to any standard currently in existence – but ethical and experimental. It is a matter of finding how much our sensory experiences, our personal bodies, and our political bonds can withstand, what measure of transformation they can tolerate. It is always the search for the edge of what any body can tolerate, what threshold it can approach, what transformation it can sustain, what events can bend it and what events threaten to break it. Bodies aspire not to an eternal perfection of form, to the stability of an ideal model, but to feel the very difference that constitutes the world in its potentiating indifference, its inhuman potency. “A mind that is interested in changing,” Cage reminds us, “is interested

⁵² Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 238.

precisely in things that are at extremes. I'm certainly like that. Unless we go to extremes, we won't get anywhere."⁵³

There is a difficulty, however, with Cage's political concept. The primary mode of domination would no longer be the hierarchy of the model and series, but the micropolitical power of capitalism itself – a power that performs its own operation of disorganization and reorganization of the subject, opens it up to flows only to map them back onto itself. Many of Cage's specific programs – the propagation of credit and the increasing abstraction of money, for instance – have been the primary modes of social control in late capitalism, modes of control that have little to do with the kind of sovereign powers and centralized control that Cage feared. Disorganization for its own sake is no guarantee of our freedom from systems of control, nor are all the world's modes of self-organization going to present us with tolerable forms of life. What is necessary at all times is an immanent mode of evaluation; not to ask whether we are right or wrong, organized or disorganized, but what degrees of freedom an assemblage makes possible, what avenues of possibility it excludes. It is not enough to sit still or to self-regulate against the world's unfolding, nor is it enough to disorganize along suicidal lines. Imprecision dissipates an action's potency by dissolving back into the streams of habit; it is not enough to be merely chaotic. What Cage demands is just enough order to seize a potential for becoming other – and that order should serve to cultivate a climate in which an equality of *potential* is available to as many bodies as possible:

⁵³ John Cage, interview by Cole Gagne and Tracy Caras (1980), in *Conversing with Cage*, 227.

All we ourselves need to do is abandon our ideas of competition and competitiveness – which is the essential way of *non-acting* – for an infinity of possibilities to open up... That's what I am trying to accomplish in my field: an ecological music. A music that would permit us to inhabit the world. And I mean the whole world, and not just a particular part of the world. The world in its entirety, and not separate fragments or parts of the world. The world recognized at least for what it is.⁵⁴

Cage's political critics are not wrong; there is a place for struggles for greater material equality, for "justice," for freedom from repressive pain and spirit-dulling drudgery. But these struggles should be a precondition for the permanent revolution to come – a politics apart from a regulating image of humanity, a politics that incorporates the human and non-human in processes of individuation no longer bound to a presumption of what humanity can or should be like. Then we will have access to a strange freedom greater than we can imagine; not just freedom from restriction, but a freedom to nurture and cultivate potentials for variation, to discover new modes of pleasure and the means to create new subjectivities. It is a project that calls on political, philosophical and aesthetic practices as three interlinked modes of relating to the world as process, a project that can work to undermine our current systems of enslavement and one that will be rendered most intensely in their absence.

⁵⁴ Cage, *For the Birds*, 215-16.

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