

Uncaged: Buddhism, John Cage and the Freeing of the World

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Abstract

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John Cage is generally regarded as the most influential avant-garde musician of the last half of the 20th century. His music and its interpretation form one of the most important examples of Buddhist teaching in the West in the last 50 years. Of particular interest is his continuous exploration of the meaning of music, noise, sounds, silence, and the role of the musician/artist as a facilitator of their expression of their own "buddha-nature". This is compared and contrasted with the work of Soetsu Yanagi, the originator of mingei (folk craft) theory in Japan, whose framing of the roles of the traditional craftsman and the modern individual artist in terms of Pure Land Buddhism sheds light on issues of "self" and "other power" in creativity.

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"To carry yourself forwards and experience the myriad things is delusion; for the myriad things to come forward to confirm the self is enlightenment."

-- Dogen, *Genjo-koan*¹.

"One shouldn't go to the woods looking for something, but rather to see what is there."

-- John Cage.

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John Cage is generally regarded as the most influential avant-garde musician of the last half of the 20th century. Much of his work, including his most famous piece, 4'33" -- 4 minutes and 33 seconds of silence -- is not exactly misunderstood, but its implications have not been fully considered; even though Cage himself, over the years, in interviews and presentations scattered here and there, increasingly explored them. In this paper I want to argue that his music and its interpretation form one of the most important examples of Buddhist teaching in the West in the last 50 years.²

Background

John Cage (1912-1992) became involved in music during the late 1920s when he was in Europe as a young American. At that time, music was -- for him -- part of an entire avant-garde enterprise centred around a group of artists most notably represented by the magazine *transitions*, which promoted a style of mostly experimental literature and poetry associated with Dada, Surrealism, James Joyce, and related figures. Cage became enthralled with the musical experiments of George Antheil, Edgar Varese, and Italian futurists who were exploring ways of incorporating new sounds, particularly those of everyday: machinery, traffic, and emerging electronic sound. Cage returned to America, and began to experiment in his own way, taking cues from a variety of American avant-garde composers; but also associating with a figure like Arnold Schoenberg, from whom he took composition lessons.

In the late 1940's, Cage went through a series of personal crises, and at the same time he began to range far afield in various forms of "Eastern" literature, some of which were characteristic of a certain kind of postwar universalism -- e.g. C.G. Jung, Aldous Huxley, etc. Cage was particularly influenced by a sequence of individuals and works that he consistently thereafter referred to in various autobiographical statements.

The first was a woman, Gita Sarabhai, who became part of Cage's circle of artistic acquaintances in New York in 1948. At one point he asked her what her Indian teacher thought was the function of music. She replied, "the purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences." (Revill, 1992, 90) This quietist phrase stuck with Cage, as did a similar phrase from another colleague, Lou Harrison, citing a 17th century quote from an English musician, Thomas Mace, who said of the new-fangled sound of strings: "High-priz'd Noise...rather fit to make a Man's Ears Glow, and fill his Brains full of Frisks, &c. than to Season and Sober his Mind, or Elevate his Affection to Goodness."³

To anticipate -- according to Cage's biographer, Cage later defined "divine influences" as "all the things that happen in creation. There's nothing that isn't." (Revill, 1992, 90)

A second influence was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, of whom Cage seems to have learned through his acquaintance with Joseph Campbell and Heinrich Zimmer. It has been reported that what Cage learned from Coomaraswamy's book, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, was that "the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in the manner of her operation." (Revill, 1992, 91). It is mildly ironic that while the book canvasses various Eastern approaches to the imitation of nature, the actual phrase Cage remembered is a capstone from that quintessential Westerner, Thomas Aquinas:

In drama we meet with such definitions as *lokavritta-anukarana*, "following the movement (or operation) of the world....In China, in the third canon of Hsieh Ho, we have 'According to nature (*wu* 12777) make shape (*hsing*, 4617)....for the East, as for St. Thomas, *ars imitatur naturam in sua operatione*. (Coomaraswamy, 1934, pp. 6-10; also noted and discussed by Patterson, 2002a, pp. 195-7)

While Cage had -- as part of the avant-garde scene -- been exposed to a variety of Zen materials (see Patterson, 2002b, for a summary) in the 1940's, it is widely understood that it was his exposure to the famous lecture series of D.T. Suzuki held in Columbia in the early 1950s that provided for him the life-changing experience of Zen Buddhism. For the rest of his life, Cage referred to Suzuki as one of his primary touchstones, although it is hard to pin down exactly what he seems to have taken from Suzuki. Given his later Zen references (here again Patterson, 2000b), Cage probably was exposed to a Suzuki version of Hua-Yen Buddhism -- that is, a Taoist flavoured rendition of Buddhist interdependence.

Part of Buddhist teaching is that there is no permanent, fixed, invulnerable self to which one can retreat or which one can aspire to discover. This is involved with a deep vision of the world as fundamentally impermanent and constantly engaged in mutual causal interactions webbing things into and out of existence. A corollary of this is that all things are interdependent. It is possible (and this seems to have been Cage's interpretation) to argue that this is an equalitarian -- even anarchist -- position. This dovetailed with Suzuki's take on interdependence -- nothing is more important than anything else -- which could of course mean an equality of nothingness as opposed to an equality of everythingness. In his collection of essays, *Silence*, Cage makes one of his few extended references to Suzuki's teachings:

"In the course of a lecture last winter, Suzuki said that there was a difference between oriental and european thinking, that in european thinking things are seen as causing one

another and having effects, whereas in oriental thinking this seeking of cause and effect is not emphasized but instead one makes an identification with what is here and now. He then spoke of two qualities: unimpededness and interpenetration. Now this unimpededness is seeing that in all of space each thing and each human being is at the centre and furthermore that each one being at the centre is the most honoured one of all. Interpenetration means that each one of these most honoured ones of all is moving out in all directions penetrating and being penetrated by every other one no matter what the time or what the space.” (Cage, 1961, pp.46-47).

This “unimpededness” theme was reinforced by Cage’s reading of *The Doctrine of Universal Mind* (1947; 2nd edition: *the Zen Teaching of Huang Po: On The Transmission of Mind*, trans. John Blofeld, 1958).⁴ In the section entitled “The Chun Chou Record” it is said:

“The Mind is no mind of conceptual thought and it is completely detached from form. So Buddhas and sentient beings do not differ at all. If you can only rid yourselves of conceptual thought, you will have accomplished everything” (Po, 1959, p. 33).

In 1952 (republished in *Silence* in 1961, p.xii), Cage wrote:

written in response to a request for a manifesto on music, 1952	}	instantaneous		and unpredictable
	}	nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music		our ears are
		“ “ “ “ hearing “ “ “ “		now
		“ “ “ “ playing “ “ “ “		in excellent condition

—JOHN CAGE

“written in response to a request for a manifesto on music, 1952 [bracket]instantaneous[blank space]and unpredictable [3 lines of space]nothing is accomplished by writing [next two lines ditto except for “hearing”, “playing” replacing “writing”] a piece of music[bracket] our ears are now in excellent condition.”

That “each thing and each human being” was at the centre came to be a central theme in Cage’s Suzuki influenced Buddhism. He stated emphatically:

“I was straight from the classes of Suzuki. The doctrine which he was expressing was that every thing and every body, that is to say every nonsentient being and every sentient being, is the Buddha. Buddhas are all, every single one of them, at the centre of the universe. And they are in interpenetration, and they are not obstructing one another. This doctrine, which I truly adhere to, is what has made me tick in the way I ticked.....this doctrine of nonobstruction means that I don’t wish to impose my feelings on other people. Therefore, the use of chance operations, indeterminacy, et cetera, the nonerection of patterns of either ideas or feelings on my part, in order to leave those other centres free to be the centres.” (1966, cited in Kostelanitz et al, 2003, 225).

For Cage, sounds are also beings (Schwertsik on Cage, in Dickinson, 2006, 148) and as such, should be honoured, and free.

Honouring all things, refusing intention, and the embracing of the unpredictable -- these are the themes that would carry Cage forward.

Music and The Nature of Silence

Cage came into music at a moment when multiple streams of avant-garde innovation were jockeying for position. The supreme figure was Arnold Schoenberg (with whom Cage studied briefly), who had responded to the breakdown of classic tonality in Western music with the 12-tone system -- essentially replacing the previous common expectations associated with keys, modes, and their harmonic patterns by new sets of individually constructed, internally consistent “keys/modes” generated by the patterns established in the tone rows. While this appeared to free the composer completely from all rules, Schoenberg’s system was to all intents and purposes fully as controlling as the previous system had been, if not even more so (Schmidt, 2004, 164). It meant to enable the composer to do everything the previous system did, but with new musical elements chosen initially by the composer. Thus choice -- the free, willed choice of a sequence of notes forming a new key/mode -- was central to Schoenberg. Meanwhile, elsewhere in the music world, other figures were, as has been mentioned, experimenting with musical forms and sounds that had hitherto not been part of the Western palette -- Eastern music, jazz, blues, technological sounds (e.g. typewriters, police sirens), and the

emerging electronic sounds. Cage himself had carried out a range of these experiments through the 1930's and 40's.

Cage's experiments reveal him as someone who is working through a complex array of problems and solutions associated with many forms of musical innovation and the role of the contemporary composer. Examples of these problems and solutions include: the exploration of percussive music (percussion does not naturally fit into musical "keys" of any kind); the manipulation of modern sounds (for example, Cage's staged performance of twelve radios tuned to different stations); and the disruptive roles of accident and chance. Disruption and dissonance were a constant early theme in his work. A quintessential example would be the sudden appearance of the sound of a police siren in a piece of music: a siren not only interrupts the graceful world of settled music, but it speaks of a bustling new sonic world outside the walls, clamouring for inclusion, uncontrollable.

In retrospect, and following along with Cage's early career, one can make out the outlines of a research agenda of which Cage himself was only partially conscious: how to work with notionally unmanageable sounds in the creative framework of musical composition. One early, well-known musical "solution" that appeared on this agenda was the prepared piano, wherein a conventional piano has its strings doctored by the addition of nuts and bolts and springs and so on, so that when played, it gave out with unpredictable, and unconventional notes. Here control and unmanageability engage in interplay.

The movement to, and through Zen, clarified this agenda for Cage, and simultaneously brought him up against a central modernist avant-garde dilemma: how to "make it new". In 1948, just as he was beginning to explore Zen seriously, Cage in a public lecture confessed:

"I am frankly embarrassed that most of my musical life has been spent in the search for new materials. The significance of new materials is that they represent, I believe, the incessant desire in our culture to explore the unknown. Before we know the unknown, it inflames our hearts. When we know it, the flame dies down, only to burst forth again at the thought of a new unknown. This desire has found expression in our culture in new materials, because our culture has its faith not in the peaceful center of the spirit but in an ever-hopeful projection onto things of our own desire for completion." (Cage, 1948, 65)

In this statement, Cage very quietly, but startlingly, repudiates the whole dynamic of modernism in which he has been saturated for his whole previous life, and which saturates the whole world around him. He now sees that the search for “new materials” is only a part of a larger thirst, not just a search for something new, but a pathological demand for more and more things to control (“an ever-hopeful projection onto things of our own desire for completion”). Cage realizes that the artist who is supposedly in opposition to modern society is, in many ways, the epitome of it.

There is an unnerving quality about Cage that various commentators have tried to define, which has to do with the way in which he often seems to be quite naive, but nevertheless always seems to be in the right place at the right time, and hardly ever puts a foot wrong as he moves forward. It is like watching one of those cartoon sleepwalkers deftly avoiding catastrophe on a high building while spectators below panic.

Between 1950 and 1952, Cage began to integrate and push forward his newly acquired Zen understanding in extraordinary ways, culminating in *4'33"*. These can be divided into the three initially separate themes, already mentioned: the honouring of all things, the refusal of intention, and the embracing of the unpredictable. Cage plays with all three as if they are parts of a Rubik's cube, or a kaleidoscope that is continually being shaken. And in the end, strangely enough, they will at last come together in a new theoretical integration through the composer's radical rethinking of the role and nature of silence.

One initial step -- “embracing the unpredictable” -- is the arrival of chance in Cage's compositional process. Cage sees the use of chance as one way of refusing intention: as in the use of the *I Ching*, the only initial intentionality involved is to allow oneself to throw the sticks or the dice. Applying the results (in Cage's case, using the results as material for his music) is where compositional intentionality re-enters in strength. Note that this is a direct attack on the much more deliberately controlling process promulgated by Schoenberg, where the composer chooses and creates the “key/mode” universe to be followed.

In 1951, Cage premiered *Sixteen Dances*, followed by the *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra*, and then *Music for Changes* -- each increasingly structured through chance operations. Later, Cage characterised these operations:

Chance operations...are a means of locating a single one among a multiplicity of answers, and at the same time, of freeing the ego from its taste and memory,

its concern for profit and power, of silencing the ego so that the rest of the world has a chance to enter into the ego's own experience whether that be outside or inside. (Cage, 1979)

This stance is a form of “refusing all intention,” one possible interpretation of which is to allow whatever happens to happen on a larger scale. To do this Cage and his colleagues visited Black Mountain College in mid-1952 and instigated what would be the first of the “happenings” -- where participants simultaneously performed in whatever way they liked. The chance result was the clashing juxtaposition of reasonably ordered individual performances, giving each member of the audience his or her own choice of what to focus on as the performances unfolded.

In late 1952, in Woodstock, New York, Cage premiered *4'33"*. He first mentioned that he was working on “a piece of uninterrupted silence”-- “3 or 4 1/2 minutes long” -- that he hoped to sell to “Muzak Co.” (cited in Dickinson, 2006, p. 41, footnote 45) in his 1948 “Confession” (referred to above). This piece sat uncomposed until (according to Cage) he received “permission” to do it after seeing Robert Rauschenberg’s all-white canvases (Dickinson, 2006, p.41). However, there were also other influences, including a brief visit to an “anechoic” chamber at Harvard in late 1952, where Cage discovered that because of the sound of his pulse and a “ringing” of his nervous system, he could never, as a living being, be in absolute silence (Revill, 1992, 162-3).

It's clear that while *4'33"* had a variety of sources (for instance, the actual timing, divided into 3 sections, Cage determined, as was now his wont, by throwing the *I Ching*), and initial authorial purposes -- even as a somewhat juvenile parody of Muzak -- over time the piece took on a life of its own, with a range of implications and consequences that are still being felt. Whatever Cage originally thought he was doing, even he himself came to acknowledge in later years that it turned out to be his most important piece, and often remarked that he returned to it in some fashion every day.

Meditation upon the implications of the piece is somewhat like watching a series of mountain ranges loom up, one after the other. A first implication of the piece is that it foregrounds what had previously been background: that is, it celebrates the silence in the “spaces” between notes as a “composition”, rather than, say, percussiveness. But is that what it is “really” about? Immediately there arise new questions concerning, for example, framing and expectation: is this a “composition” or a “performance” at all? Does labelling something a performance make it

a performance even if nothing is happening (a musical variation perhaps on Marcel Duchamp's notorious identification of a urinal as a sculpture)?⁵ What separates out the silence before a performance, the performance, and the silence after a performance? Then a new range of implications appear: during the performance there was in fact no true silence; indeed, at early performances, and even today, there is all kinds of audience noise, some just normal background noise, and some deliberate. Is this sound part of 4'33" or something extraneous? And then an even more radical set of questions arises: maybe nothing is extraneous to anything else? Maybe every sound, every noise, is a potential element of a musical composition? Maybe every sound, every noise, is just music, full stop. All sound is to be honoured equally: every sound is Buddha-nature, or perhaps Music-nature.

Although some would disagree with this comparison (e.g. Theodore Adorno: see the discussion in Schweppenhauser, 2009, 107-8)) one could suggest that Schoenberg's "absolute music" -- which theorizes an infinite space ordered according to universally applied mathematical musical rules -- is Newtonian, while Cage's "everything is music" is Einsteinian (or perhaps Dadaist and Duchampian). Schmitt (1982) remarked concerning Cage:

“[The] suggestion that the world is at its foundation pluralistic is also made in the world of the very large by Einstein, who showed that there is no universal ‘now’ but only ‘here and now’ for the observer.” (Schmitt, 1982, 22)

4'33" similarly opens out into a Buddhist perspective. In an early lecture in Darmstadt, Cage responded to a student who suggested that some elements of a composition might be better than others, as follows:

“ [The student] was attached to sounds and because of his attachments could not let sounds be just sounds. He needed to attach himself to the emptiness, to the silence. Why is this so necessary that sounds should be just sounds? There are many ways of saying why. One is this: In order that each sound may become the Buddha” (Cage, 1961, 70).

Here Cage touches on a deep form of practice. He is sketching out a movement through which the student could enter into silence in order to free sound – because just as emptiness is both empty and full, there is no silence.⁶ But also it is the case that:

I saw art not as something that was considered a communication from the artist to an audience but rather as an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let the sounds be themselves. And in their being themselves to open the minds of the people who made them or listened to them to other possibilities than they had previously considered (Kostelanetz, 2003, 44).

In this sense, the sounds (as Buddhas) are themselves, in themselves, vehicles for enlightenment.

As one of Cage's earliest and most astute critics remarked:

"Cage may be the first composer in history to say that there is no such thing as silence....this means that the conventional 'pauses' of the past are as filled with sound as the music made by performers from a notated score....it is 'called silence only because it does not form part of a music intention'." (Johnston, [1962]1970, 146)

She goes on to say:

"Cage achieves this position through external (as distinct from subconscious or 'automatic') techniques -- methods of chance and indeterminacy -- which release him from his own psychology, taste, and permit the natural flow of impermanencies as they impress themselves on a mind empty of memories, ideas, and preconceptions; in short, empty. 'If one maintains secure possession of nothing (what has been called poverty of spirit) then there is no limit to what one may freely enjoy.' (Johnston [1962], 1970, 147-8).

"Silence" in Cage reveals not that silence is background to sound's foreground, nor that it can be occasionally foregrounded to sound's background -- long before Cage there were powerful silences in many great works of music that drew the listener's attention to their role -- but that there is a "ground" of which both are emergent properties and (before the mind goes to work on them) pre-dualistic.⁷

It is notable that in Johnston's quotation from Cage he refers to "poverty of spirit", a phrase with a long history, most powerfully instantiated in St. Francis of Assisi. Francis' humbleness and acceptance of whatever God gave him out of His Abundance resulted, famously, in the proto-

environmental ease of Francis' relations with the natural world. These relations were based on what I call an "ontology of abundance", a view of the universe as being fundamentally abundant and worth trusting, as opposed to an "ontology of scarcity", in which the universe is recalcitrant and needs to be forced to give up its resources. Traditional societies lived in a universe that had a primary ontology of abundance and a secondary ontology of scarcity (things became scarce when humans offended against the gods, and goods were temporarily withdrawn); modern societies live in a universe which they primarily see as scarce, and therefore requiring development, control, and necessary competition for scarce goods (e.g. the economic market).

This vision of scarcity requiring development is not only an engine behind economic growth, but it has an intimate relationship to the modernist art project of "making things new". We are required to make meaning out of a recalcitrant, often meaningless universe.

Cage's musical challenge is to deny this requirement⁸, and instead to work with -- and celebrate -- sounds as they are, without our own pushiness or neediness obscuring their integrity. Cage considers that purposiveness -- goal-setting -- gets in the way:

I frequently say that I don't have any purpose, 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* [italics in the original] increases. Therefore my purpose is to remove purpose. (Kostelanetz, 2003, 231).

His practice is thus, among other things, ontological, phenomenological, and, as his life and work progressed, increasingly political (Cage was well-known for his anarchist leanings and his later explorations in Thoreau, Buckminster Fuller, and Marshall McLuhan⁹). Cage also joins with philosophers such as Paul Feyerabend, who, in works such as *The Conquest of Abundance* (1999), wondered how, given a universe characterised by the incredible abundance of "trees, dreams, sunrises...thunderstorms, shadows, rivers...wars, fleabites, love affairs" (1999, 3), abstraction and the rise of science could "reduce abundance and devalue human experience" in ways that demean detail and situate the real world on a shadowy lower plane as compared to some higher, richer, other existence (Feyerabend, 1999, 17).

4'33" -- the breakthrough piece -- is only the first of the vast array of subsequent creations in music, art, literature, and dance that Cage went on to produce over the next forty years, and which this essay has no space to describe. They are generally categorizable as being in the same vein: anarchic, inventive, devoted to honouring all things, and actively,

artistically meditative in a way that (to paraphrase the Dogen quote from the opening of this essay) allows the things to come forward to enter into creation on their own terms. Cage says of his music:

I'm not making a machine. I'm making something far more like the weather. I'm making a nothingness. It strikes me as being aerial...." (Dickinson, 2006, 192-3).¹⁰

He further pointed out that he was very aware that he had no idea of what he was doing. He remarked about a film he made:

I don't know what I'm doing....I don't have any ideas.... tastes....feelings, I'm just doing my work, so to speak, stupidly. And it turns out to be beautiful. It's very hard to explain." (in Bernstein and Hach, 2001, 267).

It is not hard to see that Cage has put himself, in his own very disciplined, and hard- working artistic way, into the position of the Taoist man of no action (*wu wei*).

The Otherpowering of Sound

John Cage thus exemplifies one strategy for how to be a contemporary artist without succumbing to modernity, which is one of the reasons why he has been so influential for so many artists, and yet also often misunderstood. His experiments have been interpreted as simply more examples of modernist newness -- the wilder and weirder the better -- and their radical stance blunted. But there is something non-modern about Cage.

In a curious way, he echoes (and perhaps provides a solution to) a particularly relevant Buddhist diagnosis of the artist's situation in the modern world, though from the world of pottery, not the world of music. In a series of articles, later collected in *The Unknown Craftsman* (Soetsu, 1989), the Japanese theorist of folk art (*mingei*), Soetsu Yanagi, laid out a theoretical basis for the evaluation of traditional craftsmanship versus modern art, particularly focussing on ceramics. Yanagi was strongly influenced by the English Arts and Crafts movement (associated with William Morris and John Ruskin) and interpreted their teachings in his own way. Yanagi argued that traditional craftsmen were enriched more by the traditions to which they belonged than by any of the individualistic egocentricities of the "great artist". He chose as his exemplary examples of traditional art the Korean (and other) ceramics and textiles that were created anonymously for utilitarian purposes. These humble pots and clothings had a style, an honesty, and a quality that endeared them to (for instance) the founders of the Tea Ceremony.

Soetsu Yanagi's innovation was to frame these craft practices in the terms of Pure Land Buddhism. In at least Shinran's version of Pure Land Buddhism, there are two paths, the path of "self-power" (*jiriki*) and the path of "other-power" (*tariki*). "Self-power" was more or less the individualistic practice associated with Zen -- the personal struggle to achieve enlightenment. "Other-power" was much more humble: it was an admission that one was not strong enough or wise enough to achieve enlightenment by oneself -- one needed the "other power" of the Buddha (Amida Buddha) to carry one through. Of course, the secret truth here is that obsession with 'self' is one of the cardinal obstacles of Buddhism, and Shinran neatly turns the tables on other Buddhist practices -- if there is no self, then there is no other, and so power is just power. The self-effacing peasant throwing herself on the mercy of Amida is not so different from the noble monk.

Soetsu Yanagi argues that traditional craftwork is an example of "other power" and that the striving of the individual egocentric artist is an example of "self power" -- and he prefers the humble other power that shines out from the ancient objects he cherishes. He further argues -- in a direct echo of John Cage's own borrowings from Buddhism -- that Buddhism operates in a world before duality. He says:

"....from the Buddhist point of view, the 'beauty' that stands opposed to ugliness is not true beauty. It is no more than a relativistic, dualistic, idea. True beauty exists in the realm where there is no distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, a realm that is described as 'prior to beauty and ugliness'....In the *Muryōju-kyō* (Sutra of Eternal Life), the following statement is attributed to the Buddha: 'If in the land of the Buddha there remains the distinction between the beautiful and the ugly, I do not desire to be a Buddha of such a land.'"¹¹

This implies that (as in Pure Land Buddhism more generally) all beings are not only worth saving physically, but -- if one can put it in such terms -- also aesthetically.

The question Soetsu Yanagi did not explicitly address himself to -- though he was exhorted to by his colleagues (see the Introduction to *The Unknown Craftsman*, Soetsu, 1989, 96-7) -- was how the individual artist, not in a traditional society but in a modern industrial society, should conduct himself or herself. From the point of view of *mingei* theorists, the advice would be that the artist should learn from traditional craftspeople and should somehow "capture" their spirit -- but that is not a lot of guidance.

John Cage, in his own realm, provides an example of an artist who, working with similar concepts and materials, found a different (if related) path from his contemporaries. Cage's reliance on 'other power' was based on creative self-effacement. The important distinction to note is that he was not effacing himself before the musical tradition or its traditional materials, but before the artistic process itself, and its temptations towards egocentricity and control¹². The role of the conscious, contemporary Cagean artist is to know when to step out of the way, and when to step back in again, to make use of what has been given to one by the universe. It is a form of Buddhist artistic practice: freeing the world as art.

More could be said about Cage's relationship to practice and discipline. He notes:

"I chose those chance operations and I use them in correspondence to sitting cross-legged and going through special breathing exercises, disciplines one would follow if we were going inward, but as a musician I am necessarily going outward, and so I use this other discipline." (Dickinson, 2006, 205).

"Instead of representing my control, they represent questions that I've asked and the answers that have been given by means of chance operations. I've merely changed my responsibility from making choices to asking questions. It's not easy to ask questions." (Kostelanetz, 2003, 228)

Also:

"One of the incidental results of some of Cage's instructions to his musicians is the revelation of how hard it was (is) for musicians to actually improvise without falling back on expected patterns, stereotyped forms of innovation and surprise and so on. There is a discipline required by Cage's work that has eluded some players of his work and audiences as well (Pauline Oliveros on Cage, cited in Kostelanetz, 2003, 172)

That means a discipline in achieving freedom from one's graspings, ingrained habits, and intentions (Dickinson, 2006, 192) so as to achieve real improvisation (and not, say, what one thinks improvisation "ought" to be like). Otto Luening, in a 1987 interview about Cage, commented on the whole search for this kind

of emancipation: “The question is whether, as they probe deeper, they won’t find another discipline of a stern kind.” (Dickinson, 2006, 125). This deeper discipline might be called the Tao or the Dharma.

We get an echo -- and confirmation -- of all this in an anecdote told at the end of *The Unknown Craftsman*, in which the potter Shoji Hamada (who negotiated a creative life both inside and outside of the *mingei* tradition) is asked why he uses such a large kiln. He replies:

If a kiln is small, I might be able to control it completely, that is to say, my own self can become a controller, a master of the kiln. But man’s own self is but a small thing after all. When I work at the large kiln, the power of my own self becomes so feeble that it cannot control it adequately. It means that for the large kiln, the power that is beyond me is necessary. Without the mercy of such invisible power I cannot get good pieces. One of the reasons why I wanted to have a large kiln is because I want to be a potter, if I may, who works more in grace than in his own power.” (Soetsu, 1989, 224).

We might say, with pardonable licence, that for Cage, the whole world of sound was his “large kiln”.

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NOTES

¹ This is one of many possible translations of this critical phrase. Another translation: “Driving ourselves to practice and experience the myriad dharmas is delusion. When the myriad dharmas actively practice and experience ourselves, that is the state of realization.” Nishijima, Gudo & Cross, Chodo (2006), 27.

² There have been various extravagant claims and dismissals concerning Cage’s Buddhism, the most recent being Sor-Ching Low’s extravagant dismissal (2006). This article takes (what else?) a middle way.

³ Thomas Mace (1676) cited in McVeigh, Simon, 1992, “The Violinists of the Baroque and Classical Periods, *Cambridge Companion to the Violin*, pp. 47-8.

⁴ The second edition, 1958, is the only obtainable version. The first edition contained only the first part of the translated material, and has significant variations in translation, as can be ascertained from the use Cage made of the text in compositions in 1952, e.g. “Universal Mind” in the first edition becomes “One Mind” in the second.

⁵ Duchamp’s influence on Cage is legendary. As only one example, cf. Virgil Thomson’s remarks in Dickinson, 2006, 121.

⁶ “Having made the empty canvases...[Robert] Rauschenberg became the giver of gifts. Gifts, unexpected and unnecessary, are ways of saying Yes to how it is, a holiday. The gifts he gives are not picked up in distant lands but are things we already have....and so we are converted to the enjoyment of our possessions. Converted from what? From wanting what we don’t have, art as pained struggle.” (Cage, *Silence*, 1961, 102). Here Cage aligns himself with the extensive literature on the gift (e.g. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift*, New York, NY: Vintage, 1983).

⁷ In a Buddhist context it is worth noting that there are a number of koans and teachings that pivot on silence, including the 65th of the *Blue Cliff Record* (1977); as well as the foundational Zen moment when, in response to a query, the Buddha simply held up a flower, an act which only his disciple Kasyapa truly understood. (I owe the reminder of this tradition to the very helpful anonymous reviewer of this paper).

⁸ Cage: “Another basic principle, I think, is to choose abundance, rather than scarcity.” (Kostelanetz, 2003, p. 287).

⁹ For example, an interesting comparison of Cage’s insights to Thoreau’s championing of “co-existence” vs. Emerson’s championing of “control” can be found in Shultis, 1998.

¹⁰ Cage: “It’s less like an object, and more like the weather. Because in an object you can tell where the boundaries are, but in the weather it is impossible to say when something begins or ends. We hope that the weather will continue, and we trust that our way of relating dance and music will also continue (Walker Art Centre, 1981).” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNGpjXZovgk>

¹¹ Compare *Tao Te Ching*, Verse 2: “Everyone calls something beautiful only because of ugliness”. Cage: “What we are trying to do is to get them [our minds] open so that we don’t see things as being ugly or beautiful, but we see them just as they are (cited in Kostelanetz et al, 2003, 226).

¹² It may also be that Cage's version of "other power" may be his determination to "go outward" to the fundamental sound elements themselves, rather than inward to subjectivity. His "other power" may be what he occasionally referred to as the generosity of music itself -- the givingness of the elements.