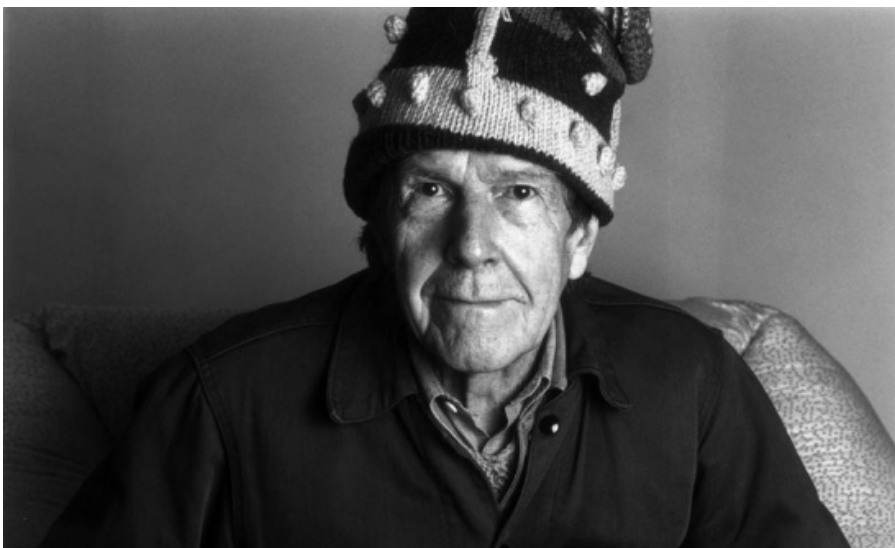


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## **Sense, Nonsense, and ...**

### ***Meditations on John Cage, Meaning, and Meditation***



#### **1. Introduction**

Structure and chance: These are reality's two opposite but complementary building blocks, and how we distinguish between them is fundamentally a question, respectively, of how intelligible or unintelligible reality is to us at any given moment in time. In the context of John Cage's creative work from the 1950s onward, chance operations were a means for breaking down any outworn structures and preconceptions present in his creative output. Terms like "indeterminacy", in this light, were possibly a response to then-fashionable deterministic and reductionistic trends in behavioral psychology and other disciplines, and such trends consequently risked generating an oversimplified conception of human nature and reality itself. While apparent complexity may have been the most immediate consequence of Cage's chance operations using the I Ching and other techniques, the attempt of this essay is to show - through examples from Western semantics, Buddhist thought, and Cage's own creative work itself - that the purpose of such chance operations was not merely to transform sense into nonsense but rather, to point up an ongoing dance between order and apparent chaos, thus giving rise to intelligible patterns that integrate the simple with the complex.

Cage espoused Eastern thought before the New Age and other movements of the past few decades had projected distinctly Western assumptions onto it and made it seem like little more than a fashion statement akin to the Orientalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Unfortunately, Cage

himself occasionally fell back on such Orientalist language, sometimes even using the dated and now-pejorative term "Oriental" itself<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, many of his ideas risk seeming somewhat quaint to those with a more firsthand, up-to-date experience of Asian culture. Cage drew on Buddhist and other forms of Eastern thought at a time when Buddhist language was still not well understood or well translated into appropriate English-language terms. Consequently, some re-exploration of Cage's work, Buddhist thought, and language in general is now necessary so that all three (as well as our own minds) may further evolve. It is quite safe to say that Cage himself would not have settled for anything less in this regard, so neither should we.

And arguably, such evolution is the true crux of the matter and of this essay in particular. Here, it is assumed that ongoing evolution is indeed possible through a grasp of patterns that are potentially intelligible to all people. Even if existence is an infinite mystery (as may be commonly asserted), the proper response to such mystery is to engage in an ongoing exploration of one's thoughts and senses rather than resign oneself to stagnation and ignorance in the name of some misguided notion of "surrender", a notion that is easily manipulated by dogmatists and authoritarian forces of all kinds. Strictly speaking, Buddhism as described in this essay refers to a non-sectarian means for investigating reality and how the mind perceives it. Here, Buddhism is certainly not meant to denote institutions or dogma (which may have their virtues but, at their worst, represent the harmful consequences that occur when certain individual or collective perceptions becoming standardized). On that note, nothing in this essay is written or to be taken with any dogmatic finality. Conversely, everything here is written with the assumption that readers will test out what they read for themselves. It is also assumed that future nuanced discussions can and will fine-tune anything written here. In some cases, regarding any given subject, the sources cited here may arguably speak even more eloquently and incisively than I do. In any case, those who first read then seek no further in actual practice risk letting the illusory power of linguistic signs take precedence over substantial communication, and in our highly virtualized society, such substantial communication is already in very short supply. An ideal (but possibly realizable) consequence of reading combined with further exploration would be the deepening experience of a mutually felt, mutually intelligible reality that still allows for diversity. In fact, diversity is arguably less viable as a goal in and of itself and more viable as a stimulus for human evolution on a physical and mental level. As implied above, such evolution is a crucial constant in all of our lives, albeit all-too-overlooked by present-day societal institutions normally called on to promote "diversity".

On a positive note, even when Cage's Buddhist insights were hampered by a then-fashionable (but still very limited) language, his exceptional creativity was nonetheless able to take what was valid about such insights and use them for deeper, unprecedented aesthetic exploration. His insights on words, music, and aesthetics in general are, by necessity, also insights about the physical senses and the mind, and such ability for life to inform art and art to inform life may be the best starting point for everything else that follows in this essay...

## **2. Cage and Zen**

John Cage, throughout his multifaceted career, applied chance operations and silence (or at least the illusion of it) to his use of sounds and words. In his musical compositions, such practices reflected a lifelong effort "to let sounds be themselves rather than vehicles for man-made theories or expressions of human sentiments."<sup>2</sup> Cage's starting point was largely a matter of picking up where his own musical mentor Arnold Schoenberg left off. Schoenberg, in the early twentieth century, freed Western music from adherence to the fixed tonal center assumed by Western tonality or modality, and this liberating effort eventually became systematized as dodecaphony, more popularly known as the "twelve tone" system. The popularly accepted term "atonality" (negation of any given note as a tonal center) was rejected by both Schoenberg and Cage in favor of "pantonality" (affirmation of all twelve chromatic tones enjoying equal time as the tonal center within a given composition). However, Cage then came to prefer Lou Harrison's term "proto-tonality,"<sup>3</sup> which posited the use of notes and sounds in a way unique to the needs of any given moment. "Proto-tonality", for Cage, applied something akin to a Zen-like "beginner's mind"

not only to each of the twelve chromatic tones but also to anything within the entire sonic spectrum, thus also potentially including microtonality and noises absent of any clearly defined pitch. In this light, allowing sounds to "be themselves" - instead of forcing their meaning into a dead end of finality - entailed allowing meaning in general to manifest from a fresh perspective and branch off into a multiplicity of directions, free from the bounds of reductionism or reification.

Cage delighted in the rawness (or, as he put it, the "activity"<sup>4</sup>) of seemingly nonmusical sounds that do not "say" anything in the same manner as words, which - having more consensus-dependent, attributed meanings - are therefore less inclined to "be themselves". Words, even as we use them, do indeed take on the air of being someone else's property and lend themselves neither to the intimately personal realm of nonverbal arts nor to the non-personal realm of nature. Cage frequently wrestled with this matter in his own use of words, and it was of great concern to him that this specter of "pre-established" meaning did not overshadow his audience's open-hearted, in-the-moment receptiveness to his own words. One can thus understand observations like the following, made by Cage with some disdain: "Implicit in the use of words (when messages are put across) are training, government, enforcement, and finally the military. Thoreau said that hearing a sentence he heard feet marching."<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, in order to disabuse his words of any hint of authoritarianism, Cage frequently resorted to moments of wry self-deprecation, as in his "Lecture on Nothing", which starts with the assertion that he has "nothing to say"<sup>6</sup> and is then punctuated throughout by the repeated refrain, "More and more we have the feeling that I am getting nowhere."<sup>7</sup> Toward the end of the lecture, he finally summarizes, "There is no point, or the point is nothing..."<sup>8</sup>

On a more general scale, Cage would also invoke the importance of the audience's role in completing the meaning of his work, as in the following observation: "We are not, in these dances and music, saying something. We are simple-minded enough to think that if we were saying something we would use words. We are rather doing something. The meaning of what we are doing is reinforced by each one who sees and hears it."<sup>9</sup> A point like this one was later reinforced in an interview with poet Joan Retallack, only two years before Cage's death: "...the final speaker is the listener. And how the listener is listening we don't know, because he or she hasn't done it yet. So we don't really know what the significance of anything is until it is heard. Isn't that true? That every person responds in their own way? It must be true."<sup>10</sup>

Such statements by Cage of course hint at Zen Buddhist thought which, like Cage's work itself, was still quite novel to Western audiences during his lifetime. And such statements possibly beg at least one question (asked as non-dogmatically as possible): Just how authentic was John Cage's own Buddhism? His primary connection to Buddhist thought was initially through a three-year course taken with Japanese Zen Master Daisetz Suzuki, possibly the most important person responsible for introducing Zen to the West in the early twentieth century. As a man well-versed in Western philosophy and a number of Eastern and Western languages through his own education from the prestigious Tokyo University and from the Western teacher Paul Carus, he was one of the first to attempt to make Eastern concepts palatable to others in Western terms. And as the first highly visible Zen ambassador of his kind, he possibly had mixed success in accomplishing such a task. Consider, for example, this observation by Dharmachari Nagapriya in his own critique of Suzuki's thought: "His removal of Zen from its living cultural and religious context and his elevation of it into something like the one true spirit of religion results in his neglect of the specific and particular forms of spiritual practice that Zen has generally offered. He is fond of recounting kōans and retelling stories that seem to show the unpredictable spontaneity of Zen masters but is short on guidance about how to proceed with their application."<sup>11</sup>

As Nagapriya points out, Suzuki's emphasis on Zen as an ineffable "direct experience" (to which, presumably, only Suzuki and a privileged few others had access) had a tendency, quite popular with religious dogma of all kinds, to deflect critical thinking and discourage verbal discourse other than his own. Consequently, despite the fact that Zen is supposed to be experienced "directly", his verbose but ultimately quite nebulous descriptions fostered a still-popular notion of Zen as a

practice perpetually shrouded in mystery. Such an unjustified notion leads to, among other problems, much needless and aimless floundering around on the meditation cushion, which is a common struggle among Western Buddhist practitioners, even today. This essay shall later try to show that a direct Buddhist meditation experience does indeed exist, involving discernible patterns by which all human minds operate, and keen observation of one's own thoughts and sensations is, ultimately and arguably, always the best way to determine if such patterns are legitimate or merely intellectual contrivances.

Yet another problem with Suzuki's approach to Zen is that, later in life, Suzuki came to favor Pure Land Buddhism, a highly ritualized, devotional practice emphasizing religious dogma and repetitive mantra practice in place of rigorous, direct investigation of reality. Consequently, there is some reason to question the extent to which Suzuki used Zen practice as an investigative tool himself. Suzuki moreover expounded heavily on both Zen and Pure Land Buddhism as distinctive embodiments of the Japanese mind, even though both are traceable back to other countries besides Japan. Even today, as evidenced by use of the Japanese term *zen* (traceable back to *dhyana*, a Sanskrit term that might be appropriately equated with "meditative absorption"), there is still the commonplace notion of Zen as something distinctly Japanese, and such cultural typecasting has been gradually righted, in more recent years, by Zen Masters such as Seung Sahn from South Korea and Thich Nhat Hanh from Vietnam.

This conflation of Zen mind with Japanese mind has moreover led to certain misguided notions about Zen Buddhism and Japanese culture both. In the same interview with Joan Retallack, for example, Cage made the following observation:

"...I do think there may be a difference between the Japanese mind and the Western mind. You've heard that, haven't you? It has to do with language - vowels and consonants. Apparently we process vowels and consonants on the same side of the brain. Did you know that? And the Japanese mind is different. They process consonants on one side and vowels on the other. The result is that nothing is meaningless to a Japanese mind (*laughs*). Isn't that marvelous? This is how it was explained to me. Whereas we only think things are meaningful if they come to one side of the brain. If they come to the other side of the brain they're nonsense. (*laughter*)"<sup>12</sup>

The above observation by Cage can in fact be traced, virtually point for point, back to rather spurious psychological research reported in 1978 by Tadanobu Tsunoda<sup>13</sup>. This research is now highly suspected to have involved autosuggestion among the Japanese and Western subjects who participated in it, and English translations of the reports for this and other research (involving, for example, how both ethnic groups processed music, the sound of crickets, and other phenomena) have been used to perpetuate numerous culture-centric (and possibly even ethnocentric) myths in other countries besides Japan.

Cage's unwitting perpetuation of such myths most certainly stems from an idealization of Japanese culture in the wake of his initial contact with Suzuki and with Zen in general, and some people, like John Corbett<sup>14</sup>, have sharply criticized the uninformed "otherness" that Cage projected onto his Eastern influences. Such myths and idealizations were arguably quite common during Cage's lifetime, when Japan had much more exposure to the West than vice-versa, and limited travel opportunities, combined with formidable language barriers, very possibly hampered any positive efforts to question such myths and idealizations. That being said, Cage did have much positive mutual exchange with a number of immensely creative Japanese minds, including Isamu Noguchi, Toshi Ichiyanagi, and Yuji Takahashi. While many of these artists were certainly familiar with their own culture and with Zen to varying degrees, it is arguably their exceptional creativity, combined with Cage's own, that made such exchanges so fruitful. Their Japanese ethnicity certainly did not make them intrinsically different from Cage or other Westerners in the way that they perceived meaning.

Possibly due to the nebulous language with which Zen was introduced to the West, John Cage's own descriptions of Zen concepts sometimes make it quite difficult to tell if he was being

deliberately cryptic or unwittingly inconsistent. Cage's use of "nothing" and "empty", of course, reflected his own life-affirming openness to and ongoing exploration of the unknown and very likely point back, respectively, to such Buddhist concepts as *mu* (literally "nothingness" but often used as a negating prefix in Japanese words, much like English "non-" or "un-") and *shunyata* (frequently translated from Sanskrit as "emptiness" but arguably better rendered as "openness"). Over time, however, as the avant-garde and Buddhism gradually gained passing familiarity with Western audiences, such notions of "nothingness" and "emptiness" may very well have become increasingly and mistakenly equated with, for example, Western notions of nihilism (a concept that is in fact quite categorically eschewed by Buddhist thought)<sup>15</sup>. In this day and age of ironic process theory (e.g. being told, "Don't think of a pink elephant" but thinking of one anyway), such denial of the authority of one's own words arguably comes across less convincingly and often does just the opposite of what it intends. That is, it tacitly reinforces such authority under the nose of the audience because attention is still constantly directed to the speaker's attempt at persuasive power, even when the speaker is not obvious or present, and even when the speaker is not actually communicating anything of substance. The social consequences of such negation-as-affirmation may range from the merely annoying (e.g., a bully who impulsively retracts his abusive comments and says he didn't "mean" anything by them) to the devastatingly fatal (e.g., saturation advertising of cigarette logos, whose banal pervasiveness makes them "unseen" by design, even when they are visible nearly everywhere). Nowadays, John Cage's empowerment of his audience's role in the meaning of his work also risks reaffirming Western pop psychology notions of atomistic individuality and subjective reality (as evidenced by such New Age and/or post-modern affirmations as "You create your own reality" and "Life is what you make it"), which are both a far cry from the egolessness underlying Buddhist explorations of illusion and reality.

In this so-called Information Age, it may consequently be worthwhile and necessary, in light of Western and other developments in semantics, to undertake a fine-tuned re-exploration of both John Cage's work and Buddhist thought so that a more enlightened understanding of what constitutes meaning and words may shine through in a way palatable to all cultures, not just East or West. Though not exhaustive, the following is a brief attempt to highlight what has thus far been done right (and possibly even fatally wrong) in the exploration of meaning and words...

### 3. Sense

What exactly are words? And how do we discern meaning from them? To many, answers to such questions would either seem too glaringly obvious or too ineffable to be worth serious attention. Around the turn of the twentieth century, however, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure tackled these questions in his own pioneering way and formulated answers of his own in his *Course in General Linguistics*, published posthumously.

For Saussure, the most basic building block of any language was something called a "sign", composed of two complementary parts: a "signifier" (made up of sounds or images) and a "signified" (made up of a concept associated with such sounds or images).<sup>16</sup> To describe the discipline devoted to the study of such signs, Saussure proposed the term "semiology" (later developing it what is now known as "semiotics"; both terms are derived from the Greek term *semeion* [literally "sign"]). Each sign had, in Saussure's terms, a "linguistic value", analogous to the value of monetary currency. Specifically, each sign is composed:

- (1) of a *dissimilar* thing that can be *exchanged* for the thing of which the value is determined; and
- (2) of *similar* things that can be *compared* with the thing of which the value can be determined.<sup>17</sup>

The first point, in short, states that a term must be different from the idea that it represents, in much the same way that a dollar would not be identical to the items that can be bought with it. The second point, on the other hand, states that a term must belong to a set of similar terms (i.e. "a common language") in much the same way that a dollar and a penny would belong to the same

currency while a franc would not. To what extent Saussure knew about Eastern thought is not known, but he would possibly have been quite surprised at how this complementary nature of similarity and difference seen in his work dovetailed, in some ways, with Zen thought about the general nature of phenomena. As Zen teacher Katsuki Sekida would have succinctly put it: "Things are separated, but they are in unhindered mutual interpenetration. Their individuality is preserved, and at the same time they are unified."<sup>18</sup>

Also resembling yin/yang complementary is Saussure's discussion of the "positive" and "negative" nature of, respectively, signs and their components. Such components, whether phonemes or ideas, have no intrinsic (i.e. "positive") linguistic value in and of themselves but only in their juxtaposition with each other: "Phonemes are characterized, not as one might think, by their own positive quality, but simply by the fact that they are distinct."<sup>19</sup> Soon afterward, he elaborates: "Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic *differences* that have issued from the system."<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the whole is greater than the sum of its "negative" parts, and the "sign in its totality" is ultimately "positive".<sup>21</sup> Despite the seeming complementarity of these "negative" and "positive" qualities, however, it shall be seen that Saussure did not quite harmonize these opposites as cleanly as one would have liked.

Much of the problem is Saussure's emphasis on the socially conditioned aspect of language while marginalizing the creative process that makes all language possible in the first place. Saussure, making some effort to account for the origin of signs, described them as "based on social convention".<sup>22</sup> A small portion of his writing, however, did touch on onomatopoeia in an effort to illustrate that some words very explicably sound like what they signify (for example, "cuckoo"), thus operating by what he describes as an obvious "motivation". Nonetheless, he went on to note that onomatopoeia only made up a small fraction of any given language and moreover translated in noticeably different ways across cultural lines. He cited, for example, how a dog's barking is represented as "bow-wow" in English and "wan-wan" in French. While acknowledging that non-onomatopoeic words also follow a "motivation" of some kind or another, he felt hard-pressed to elaborate this point further and quickly qualified that his written work was "not the place to search for the forces that condition motivation in each instance."<sup>23</sup> With some hint of mystification on his part, he later mentioned "the irrational principle of the arbitrariness of the sign",<sup>24</sup> and this "arbitrariness" had its own complementary relationship (affectionately described by him as a "see-saw motion") with the more "rational" quality that he called "motivation": "Within a given language, all evolutionary movement may be characterized by continual passage from motivation to arbitrariness and from arbitrariness to motivation."<sup>25</sup> Saussure most certainly envisioned this "see-saw motion" as some sort of dynamic process. The terms "arbitrariness" and "irrational", with connotations of an unfathomable mystery, nonetheless risk turning this complementary relationship into something static and not worthy of deeper investigation and furthermore imply some sort of intrinsic separation between an initial conception and whatever inspired it.

It is conventionally assumed, when inventing a new word or anything else, that one is the sole author of what one creates, but such an assertion is only true to the extent that something is created by no other person but oneself. This assumption that no one but oneself is responsible for one's creations furthermore leads, by a less-than-logical extension, to the notion that no other forces, human or otherwise, can be factored into one's creative act. In truth, however, even the freest, most conscious choice always has a subconscious undercurrent, and any intensive investigation of the subconscious mind has a tendency to break down the borders around one's conscious ego and connect it with everything else. Given the unavoidable role of the subconscious mind, it might be better to characterize the conscious self not so much as the sole author of one's creations but instead as the editor (or at most, the human co-author) of them. Consequently, rather than characterizing a creative act as "arbitrary" and projecting, on oneself or others, an inaccurate assumption of sole authorship (which can only hold true to the extent that the conscious mind feels separate or intrinsically different from one's inspiration), it is possibly more appropriate to investigate more deeply the forces that lead to any given creative act in the first place.

Because such concepts would have, at best, been only minimally available to him during his time, Saussure did not (and possibly could not) properly account for the possible role of the subconscious mind or synesthesia in the way that expressions are generated. Take the phonemes of something like "tree": Imagine that the consonant "t" corresponds to the trunk of a tree. The "r" sound (considered a consonant in English but treated as a vowel in a language like Sanskrit, for instance) could then conceivably correspond to the less rigid branches, while the "ee" vowel sound could conceivably correspond to the softer leaves. It may also be added here that English *tree* can evidently be traced back to Sanskrit *dru* ("tree"), so some argument may be made for commonality here, at least across Indo-European languages.

Granted, the above example is not meant to be a definitive explanation of how "tree" or any other term came into being. Nonetheless, all language requires some association of sounds with other sensations, often visual or tactile, and it may still make some plausible, intuitive sense to conceive of a primordial connection between certain aggregates of sounds and a corresponding aggregate of tactile sensations. In Saussure's time, psychoanalysis was still in its nascent stages, dominated by the reductionistic ideas of Freud rather than by the more wholistic ideas of Jung that appeared later, so Saussure would not have been inclined to consider the role of the subconscious as it related to his own nascent discipline of semiology. Had such an interdisciplinary approach been possible in his time, however, he might very well have seen "arbitrariness" to be a reflection of a subconscious (or supraconscious) motivation instead.

Given the above, it is also possibly worthwhile to explore how composers, throughout at least recent history, have attempted to tackle this issue of the co-mingling of the physical senses. Examples that immediately come to mind include the "egoless" music of Heitor Villa-Lobos (who used the New York City skyline and the mountains around Rio de Janeiro as means for composing melody lines) and Cage's works like *Atlas Eclipticalis* (which used star charts by astronomer Antonin Becvar as a translucent, variable template for a musical score) as well as *Ryoanji* (where a musical score was generated by tracings of stones from the temple rock garden of the same name in Kyoto, Japan). Such works are potentially useful tools for retracing one's steps back through the primordial process by which one sense is linked to another, and future creative works of a multimedia nature could very well attempt to explore this synesthetic creative process more deeply.

It should also be noted that a sign, as Saussure conceived it, is *not* the same as a word. To acquire the status of a word, the signifier and signified also need to combine with a more in-the-moment, context-based element known as the referent. "Referent", as a linguistic concept, did not yet exist in fully realized form in Saussure's work, but he touched on it in his mention of the "individual execution" of a sign<sup>26</sup>. Though the intimate, subjective experience that gives rise to a referent was certainly intelligible to Saussure, he was also evidently hard-pressed, as with his notion of "motivation", to integrate all their extra-linguistic ramifications properly into his codified frame of reference, so he quickly characterized this referent as being the domain of psychology while characterizing the sign as being more "social" and thus more properly the domain of semiology. It took a contemporary of Saussure, an American philosopher by the name of Charles Sanders Peirce, to elaborate further on this notion of the referent. As he stated, the sign "must be known to the mind first in its material qualities but also in its *pure demonstrative application*. The mind must conceive it to be connected with its object so that it is possible to reason from the sign to the thing."<sup>27</sup>

Subjectivity certainly had its place in Saussure's thought, but the then-prevailing (albeit oxymoronic) notions of atomistic human individuality and collective social unity – pervasive throughout Western science and Western religion both – possibly prompted him to believe that reconciling subject and objective experiences would be too unwieldy and daunting a task. It is thus quite possible that the insular nature of his newly developed semiology unwittingly made subjective, in-the-moment human experience seem like little more than a footnote, while the generality of signs, rather than the intimate specificity of words, evidently became quite adequate for him and his purposes. As he himself even stated: "...in the matter of language, people have

always been satisfied with ill-defined units."<sup>28</sup> The reality of the matter, however, is still unavoidable for all of us alive today: a sign cannot convey any true meaning on a moment-to-moment basis (i.e. "make sense") without a referent. *A word cannot truly be a word without any such referent, and lacking a consistently refreshed, fine-tuned awareness of what context is from moment to moment, signs may steadily take on much more intrinsic meaning than what they actually deserve and later become unwittingly elevated to the status of words.* It is thus quite important, in our own day and age, to consider the social consequences that Saussure's sweeping generalization may have had further down the line...

#### 4. Nonsense

The above discussion brings up at least one intriguing paradox in that the actual meaning of an expression becomes increasingly confused the more one attributes "intrinsic" meaning to it. In fact, failure to account for paradox or clearly identify it is, in itself, a source of such confusion. In *MUSICAGE*, Joan Retallack discussed with John Cage this often weak distinction between contradiction and paradox: "Contradiction shuts things down. It's logical gridlock. Paradox, I think, generates energy. It's a dynamic system that creates life out of the interaction of so-called opposites."<sup>29</sup>

Closer observation shows such "logical gridlock" to be quite arguably an identifiable, distinctive feature of contemporary society's most virtualized sectors, such as law and mass media. To give an example of the former, consider the scenario of a newly hired, rank-and-file employee who signs an "informed" consent in a business contract only to discover - possibly months or even years later - an utter minefield of regulations concerning proprietary information or trade secrets to which he or she was not initially allowed access. On a broader scale, there is the modern conception of democracy itself, founded on dual pillars of "equality" (that assumes no one will or should be marginalized) and "majority rule" (that necessary entails that some people will be marginalized). It may safely be asserted that true statements make further sense with further investigation, and such oxymorons as described above persist because of the sign-like, virtual nature of laws, policies, and regulations themselves, whose context is not so much investigated as "interpreted" by a duly sworn professional. Again, one may see such gridlock situations - where both sides of an oxymoron are deemed to be intrinsically and inviolably meaningful - as the unwitting consequence of the intrinsically "positive" nature that Saussure attributed to signs themselves. And the seemingly inflexible, constant nature of signs, caused as it is by reluctance to engage in ongoing investigation of context or referents on a moment-to-moment basis, is precisely what perpetuates such contradictions. Consequently, even fictional writing may ultimately have more credibility in people's minds simply because it carries no pretense of "final" meaning (and, as with well-written science fiction, may thus open people up to a wealth of future possibilities, which eventually pan out in actual reality).

With the virtual nature of present-day media, signs masquerading as words are all the more pervasive, and actual language *per se* is discreetly marginalized by what, practically speaking, amounts to a mere semblance of itself. Jean Baudrillard, in his 1970 book *The Consumer Society*, elaborated on this matter. Early on, for instance, he provided this exposition:

So we live, sheltered by signs, in the denial of the real. A miraculous security: when we look at the images of the world, who can distinguish this brief irruption of reality from the profound pleasure of not being there? The image, the sign, the message - all these things we "consume" - represent our tranquility, consecrated by distance from the world, a distance more comforted by the allusion to the real (even where the allusion is violent) than compromised by it.

The content of the messages, the signifieds of the signs are largely immaterial. We are not engaged in them, and the media do not involve us in the world, but offer for our consumption signs as signs, albeit signs accredited with the guarantee of the real. It is here that we can define *the praxis of consumption*. The consumer's relation to the real world, to politics, to history, to culture is not a relation of interest, investment, or committed responsibility - nor is it one of total



indifference: it is a relation of **curiosity**. On the same pattern, we can say that the dimension of consumption as we have defined it here is not one of knowledge of the world, nor is it one of total ignorance: it is the dimension of **misrecognition**.<sup>30</sup>

As Baudrillard further pointed out, advertising and mass media thrive on not being taken "too" seriously. That being said, it would still be fallacious to engage in outright dismissal of the signs generated by such media. After all, they are still meant to be "consumed", even if they do not demand conscious attention. Or, put another way, *for the same reason that signs cannot be intrinsically meaningful, they cannot be intrinsically meaningless either*. Consequently, the popular advice to "just ignore" unwanted media messages and slogans only serves, in the long run, to reinforce their role in the collective social psyche, because any sign forgotten or tuned out by the conscious mind eventually comes to rest in the subconscious later on. And if a sign is not found at one level of the subconscious, such absence can only mean that the sign has retreated to still another unexplored level of the subconscious. The capacity of signs to disappear from the conscious mind (without ceasing to exist altogether) ultimately popularizes the notion of reality as something that can be voluntarily tuned out, thus only serving to reinforce the impact of advertising and mass media even further. Consequently, *true meaninglessness can only be attributable to something that has never been encountered in the first place and never will be*. In this light, meaninglessness necessarily assumes the nature of the human mind to be fundamentally static and thus incapable of evolving, or only capable of evolving up to some known or unknown point and no further (ergo the implicit insult conveyed by in the characterization of oneself or others as "only human").

Unfortunately, the despondent tone in Baudrillard's writing hampers the effectiveness of his arguments, and in the end, *The Consumer Society* and other works have shown little or no way out of the preponderance of substanceless signs that still permeate and threaten to envelop our twenty-first century social conscience. Consider the unwitting missteps made by Baudrillard in his observations about pop art and the avant-garde (which do not necessarily have any intrinsic relationship to each other): Cage's ideal of "letting sounds be themselves", according to Baudrillard, "supposes an essence of the object, a level of absolute reality that is never that of the everyday environment, and which, in relation to that environment, constitutes nothing short of a surreality."<sup>31</sup> Here, Baudrillard has evidently projected onto Cage an assumption (perhaps Baudrillard's own?) that sounds, as "themselves" would have an intrinsically static meaning, neither changing with the surrounding environment nor evolving with the mind of the listener.

On this note, it is possibly worth comparing Baudrillard's observation with that of Douglas R. Hofstadter, who likewise takes issue with Cage's denial of art as a code to be cracked but also, ironically, ends up reaffirming much of Cage's original intentions: "...it is not true that there is no code by which ideas are conveyed to the viewer. Actually, the code is a much more complex thing, involving statements about the absence of codes and so forth - that is, it is part code, part metacode, and so on. There is a Tangled Hierarchy of messages being transmitted by the most Zen-like art objects..."<sup>32</sup> This notion of a "metacode" is significant and in fact possibly quite close to John Cage's original creative vision. However, in order to understand to what extent Hofstadter and Cage are both right, it might do well to examine the question of meaning from at least one other angle...

## 5. ....

Arguments for absolute, intrinsic meaninglessness, as stated above, are just as untenable as arguments for absolute, intrinsic meaning, and the reality of this fact possibly explains the increasingly anarchic social stance that Cage adopted in his later years, a stance not to be confused with intrinsic social chaos. Conventional wisdom states, "you can't get something for nothing." But conversely, slightly turning this statement around, "you can't get nothing from something" may also be just as valid. And as Cage himself discovered, the very act of seeking "nothing" - or dismissing something as "nothing" - stubbornly results in generating another "something" further down the line. Quite notable is Cage's frequently told anecdote - related in

*Indeterminacy* and many writings<sup>33</sup> – where he mentioned entering the Harvard University anechoic chamber in hopes of experiencing absolute silence only to be faced with the sounds of his own nervous system and bloodstream resonating in his ears instead. Incidentally, keen investigation of the texture of the ringing in one's ears is in fact a well-recognized form of Buddhist meditation in some cultures such as Burma<sup>34</sup>. Paradoxically then (as shown by such works as *4'33"*), any search for silence only serves to accentuate the process of listening itself. Elsewhere in *Musicage*, Joan Retallack affirmed Cage's realization by suggesting that "silence doesn't exist as an absence of sound, but ... is actually always filled with the presence of ambient sound," and this point eventually prompted her and Cage to entertain, as a compositional tool, the possibility of "turning the volume up on the silent world."<sup>35</sup>

Retallack's interview with Cage also brought up two very telling but complementary points in her discussion of his work. She noted, firstly, that it involved, "disciplines of attention ... to the extent that it involves heightened focus, ...excluding things, leaving certain things out" but also engaged "the challenge to return to life with open ears and eyes."<sup>36</sup> This persistent push-pull between, on one hand, selectively tuning parts of reality out and, on the other hand, openly but diligently tuning reality in actually corresponds quite well with two complementary forms of Buddhist meditation, *samatha* and *vipassana*.

*Samatha*, also known as "concentration" practice, refers to single-minded focus (in Sanskrit, *ekagrata* or "one-pointedness") on a particular object. By definition, it means tuning out all distractions and treating the meditation object – say, the ringing in one's ears – as a single and solid object and not as a combination of multiple sensations. It thus corresponds to the static, "grounded" aspect of one's sensory and mental experience and has the effect of calming and relaxing the body and mind. Consequently, this type of meditation, possibly the most widely practiced in numerous other contemplative traditions besides Buddhism, often fits most people's notion of what meditation is supposed to be, but this relaxing quality of concentration practice also has fundamental drawbacks. As the Burmese meditation teacher Sayadaw U Pandita has pointed out, the solidity and security generated by this concentration practice is temporary, illusory, and "does not at all mean that one gains an insight into the true nature of reality in terms of mind and matter. Kilesas [a Pali term corresponding to the Sanskrit term *klesa* meaning "mental defilement"] have been suppressed but not uprooted; the mind has not yet penetrated the true nature of reality."<sup>37</sup>

For this sort of penetrating awareness as described by Sayadaw U Pandita, *vipassana* – also known as "wisdom", "insight", or "mindfulness" meditation – is also necessary. In contrast to the "solidifying" effect of *samatha* practice, *vipassana* constitutes exploring and investigating the multiple, constantly changing, minute vibrations, pulses, and sensations that make up any given meditation object (even something as seemingly constant as the ringing in one's ears). Distractions, which are to be scrupulously avoided in *samatha* practice, are to be examined as keenly as possible in *vipassana* practice. And any "distraction", in this context, is eventually discovered to be merely something that is beyond one's current ability to track. Consequently, less moment-to-moment tracking ability basically leads to more distraction. One potential result of *vipassana* practice is realization of the interconnectedness of one object to any and all other objects, because all sensory and mental phenomena, however static they may initially appear to be, actually contain finer and finer rhythms of pulses and vibrations upon closer investigation. Thus, the initial object of meditation is merely a point of departure for realizing such interconnectedness of all things, and that the mind eventually comes to investigate the sensory and mental impressions making up all objects within one's experience, including the nature of the mind itself. *Vipassana* corresponds, then, to the dynamic, transformative, evolving aspect of one's experience and consequently has the effect of opening the mind up to multiple levels of meaning contained through what initially seemed to be isolated or static objects within one's experience. For this reason, it also corresponds to the shattering of illusions, which are always a consequence of solidifying one aspect of experience at the expense of all other aspects. As Daniel Ingram puts it (italics his):

"...when training in wisdom we actively work to increase the speed, precision, consistency and inclusiveness of our experience of all the quick little sensations that make up our experience, whatever and however they may be."<sup>38</sup>

This "insight" approach to meditation considers everything worthy of investigation, including experiences that otherwise seem boring or painful. In fact, such transformative investigation is exactly what Cage may have had in mind in *Indeterminacy* when he wryly observed, "In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting."<sup>39</sup>

While different contemplative traditions may mention a wide variety of meditation techniques, involving all manner of visualizations, mantras, and physical postures, it may be safely posited that such techniques, on the mind level, really amount to different variations and combinations of *samatha* and *vipassana*. The most telling evidence for this point is arguably our own moment-to-moment experience, because *the physical and mental objects in one's experience are always perceived as varying degrees of solid or not solid*, with "solid" or "static" objects merely being those whose perceivable sensations vibrate at a higher, less immediately perceptible frequency than those that are fluid or dynamic. Change is ongoing, and with this fact in mind, "solidity" may simply be what one perceives when the mind fatigues of tracking change. Likewise, stability may actually, upon sharper scrutiny, turn out to be a more gradual, incremental form of change that previously existed beyond one's tracking ability. Consequently, the only difference between stability and change may ultimately be a matter of the degree to which one tracks the pulsing and vibrating of one's thoughts and sensations. Pulses and vibrations, ranging from the gross to the infinitesimal, may very well be considered the building blocks of all reality, whether physical or metaphysical. Just how keenly one can track such pulses and vibrations? Daniel Ingram suggests that one to ten vibrations per second is a good starting point for investigating reality but also suggests that as many as forty sensations may become perceivable over time.<sup>40</sup> And in music, a skilled percussionist may also be able to perform drum rolls of twenty beats per second without sacrificing musicality (a term whose meaning may wholly depend on the sharpness of one's moment-to-moment attention).

Obviously, such matters necessarily raise further questions about the nature of "*the mind*" or "*our mind*" and the nature of the personal ego, arguably just a synonym for one's current comfort zone. And this comfort zone, when challenged through rigorous investigation of its apparent borders, frequently turns out to be less "solid" than it initially appeared to be. Such challenges to one's comfort zone (which, by necessity, should be done on one's own terms and at one's own pace) can obviously include activities like ongoing aesthetic exploration or insight meditation, which both actually function in quite similar ways. In so doing, one becomes increasingly aware not only of the minute sensory and mental impressions that make up one's own ego and experience but also of the permeating, pervasive space (namely, *shunyata*) that makes such impressions vibrant and not merely static.

What is often ignored, however, is that these static and vibrant aspects of experience are complementary to each other and can be perceived in an overlapping, quasi-holographic fashion, not just separately. Joan Retallack related a similar point to Cage when she drew an analogy between the artistic mind and the notion of a strange attractor in chaos theory. In Retallack's terms, such a mind, as a strange attractor, moves away from personal habit towards "constant change, though within a bounded system. Within an overall recognizable pattern there is constant change in all the details, which is why a complex system like weather, for instance, has large recurrent patterns but becomes less and less predictable as you try to pinpoint it locally."<sup>41</sup>

And contrary to common preconceptions about meditation, it might also be noted here that *samatha* and *vipassana* are not merely to be conceived of as purely religious, "monastic" practices pursued in isolation from everyday life patterns. Rather, they *are* life patterns, that is, *accentuated and intensified versions of what our minds are always doing anyway*. As stated above, *samatha*

corresponds to the static, seemingly solid aspect of perceived reality while *vipassana* corresponds to its dynamic, changing aspect, and the complementary nature of *samatha* and *vipassana* manifest in many complementary ways throughout all of perceived reality. Some examples that immediately come to mind include, respectively: friction and motion; reductionism and wholism; traditionalism and progressivism; composition and improvisation (including something like Cage's chance operations); and the ego in relationship to the enlightened mind.

As may furthermore be increasingly evident here, due to the complementary nature of the relationships mentioned above, the former part of each relationship also opens up potential for realizing the latter. Thus, the one-pointed mental concentration of *samatha* is a necessary starting point for the multi-pointed spatial awareness cultivated by *vipassana*. Likewise, the unenlightened ego (which solidifies and clings to a single definition of itself) eventually evolves beyond itself, through meditation or other experiences, to realize the fully enlightened mind, which in turn keenly comes to realize the unenlightened ego's seamless interconnection with the pulses and vibrations making up everything else.

Likewise, then, investigation of signs, coupled with a mindful awareness of their highly socialized nature, leads to recognition of the "real time" referent. Playfully homing in on this point, Cage followed up his "Lecture on Nothing" with a complementary "Lecture on Something": "It is important that this something be just something, finitely something; then very simply it goes in and becomes infinitely nothing."<sup>42</sup> Here, an interesting reversal occurs in that signs, which unwittingly became ending points for meaning in Saussure's hands, became starting points for meaning in Cage's hands.

Retallack, when speaking to Cage about his compositional process, noted that his later works evidently strived to render this starting point as infinitesimal as possible:

"You must make marks on paper that are in some way like writing on water. The marks on the paper are instantly transformed from traces of the process that brought them there into the beginning of an entirely new process for the performer and for the audience. So the moment they hit the page, so to speak, they glance off the page. Their nature has been transformed. They are not traces anymore. I mean 'traces' in the sense of a residue from an old process. They are emptied of that. They are the beginning of a new process."<sup>43</sup>

Such a process generates infinite future possibilities in much the same way that, analogously, infinitesimal friction (i.e., something arbitrarily close to nothing but *not* absolute nothingness) is a starting point for infinitely free movement through physical space, and this compositional process manifested through Cage's writing as well as through his music. Take the example of Cage's frequently used mesostic practice, which started with a vertically arranged column of letters acting as an anchoring point for his mind and whatever topic he chose to write about. The following excerpt (using "METHOD" as the column text) is from *composition in retrospect*:<sup>44</sup>

My  
mEmory  
of whaT  
Happened  
is nOt  
what happeneD

i aM struck  
by thE  
facT  
tHat what happened  
is mOre conventional  
than what i remembereD

After a certain number of  
(usually chance-determined) repetitions of this column text, he would then employ another chance

operation that involved taking lines from each repetition and adding them together to see what new meanings could be subsequently generated:<sup>45</sup>

iMitations  
 invErsions  
 iT remains  
 motives tHat are varied  
 deviated frOm  
 than what i remembereD

As shown above, Cage both played and worked with words. Much like the *I Ching* that Cage used for his various chance operations, this final reshuffling served as a form of divination. Far from being meaningless, this end result instead combines the familiar and the unfamiliar into a *multifaceted, textured meaning*. And, as firmly clarified by Cage in *Empty Words*, divination should not be interpreted as a deterministic fortune-telling process but instead as a way of emphasizing possibilities without pre-defining them:

"...chance operations are not mysterious sources of 'the right answers'. They are a means of locating a single one among a multiplicity of answers, and, at the same time, of freeing the ego of 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."<sup>46</sup>

*Empty Words* moreover showed Cage using another form of this divinatory mesostic, this time drawing on passages from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* with Joyce's full name used as the column text:<sup>47</sup>

whase on the Joint  
 whAse  
 foaMous  
 oldE  
 aS you

Jamey  
 Our  
 countrY  
 is a ffrinCh  
 soracEr this is

the grand mons inJun this is  
 the Alps hooping to sheltershock  
 the three lipoleuMs this is  
 thEir  
 legahornS

Jinnies  
 is a cOoin her  
 phillippY  
 dispatCh  
 to irrigatE the willingdone

Joyce's distinctive puns and portmanteau words - which also embody textured, multifaceted meaning across a wide range of languages, etymologies, cultures, and eras - obviously provided immensely fertile ground for Cage's own forays into metasense. As Cage noted, however, Joyce retained syntax in *Finnegan's Wake* even when doing away with spelling and other formalities. In *Art is Either a Complaint of Do Something Else*, where statements by artist Jasper Johns are followed by mesostics that intersect Johns' statements through each other as both vertical and horizontal text, Cage made further attempts to transcend the cultural bias of syntax. He and Joan Retallack discussed the following excerpt in particular:<sup>48</sup>

reserve i Think  
is perhaps dependent on real things i'M not willing to  
arts the terms

Cage spoke in to

Retallack in detail about the unexpected transformation of "arts" above from a noun to a verb (i.e. "to **arts** the tErms")<sup>49</sup>. As it turned out, Cage's playful multipurpose use of language echoed the function of many non-Western languages (notably Chinese and Japanese) wherein a given term or pictographic character may, by turns, serve as a noun, verb, adjective, or other part of speech. Even before the above poem was written, the apparent versatility of certain Japanese or Chinese expressions was quite intriguing to Cage, who spoke some French but had little familiarity with non-Western languages. As observed in the foreword to *M* (whose title was, incidentally, chosen after performing chance operations on the alphabet): "A poem by [Japanese haiku poet] Basho ... floats in space: any English translation merely takes a snapshot of it; a second translation shows it in quite another light. Only the imagination of the reader limits the number of the poem's possible meanings."<sup>50</sup>

"Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegan's Wake*", excerpted above, also showed Cage inserting something of a musical element into the text through a distinctive use of punctuation marks around the main body of the mesostic text: question marks and exclamation marks seemingly act as indicators of dynamics while parentheses, periods, and commas (or apostrophes?) possibly hint at rhythm. Their frequent orientation in directions greatly at odds with the horizontal lines of the text, however, also produces a raw visual element that seems to push the linear text beyond time itself (perhaps letting punctuation signs "be themselves"?). The foreword to *Silence*, written much earlier, possibly anticipated this aspiration: "[poetry] is not poetry by reason of its content or ambiguity but by reason of its allowing musical elements (time, sound) to be introduced into the world of words. Thus, traditionally, information no matter how stuffy (e.g. the sutras and shastras of India) was transmitted in poetry."<sup>51</sup> To sum up, Cage's work was not striving for vague or ambiguous meaning (which necessarily assumes a reductionistic one-on-one correspondence between a term and what it represents) but instead strove for a vividly textured meaning, arguably more "pan-sensical" than nonsensical.

This pushing of language beyond its limited conventional bounds has some parallel in Zen koans, as well, with their paradoxical use of words to transcend words. Particularly in Chinese culture, many koans took the form of a Zen master receiving a question from a disciple. One notable koan tells of a monk asking Zen master Zhao Zhou, "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" Zhao Zhou's Chinese answer "*Wu*" (also commonly rendered with the Japanese pronunciation "*Mu*"), ostensibly means "No" but also conveys something similar to "nothingness". The implication here is for sentient beings, whether a dog or oneself, to penetrate the illusory nature of the "somethingness"(sensory and mental impressions) of everyday experience. This koan is the first one in the *Mumonkan*<sup>52</sup> (which literally translates as "no-gate barrier" and uses the above-mentioned Japanese *mu* as its first syllable), and traditional commentary for this koan warns people to avoid not only the trappings of nihilism, which may normally be associated with this negative expression, but also to avoid any dualistic distinction whatsoever between positive and negative. Such effort is realized, as the commentary urges, by contemplating the syllable's sound itself, not merely its attributed meaning.

Incidentally, the Chinese syllable *wu* and the Japanese syllable *mu* both seem to function in a similar manner to the Sanskrit syllable *om*, used as a mantric syllable in both Buddhist and Yogic traditions. The very act of pronouncing such syllables, with their single "open" vowel and single "closed" consonant, steadily prompts both the body and mind into direct experience of the complementary static and changing forces that make up reality itself. Like mandalas, whose basic physical form (i.e.±) corresponds to what it signifies (i.e. "circular" space and the points within that space, as suggested by the perpendicular lines), these mantric syllables, with sounds directly extrapolatable into what they signify, might possibly constitute another example of meta-sense.

From the above, one question may arise here: namely, why use words at all? Quite possibly, in the face of Suzuki's own verbosity, Cage and other Westerners did not squarely address this question.

And the apparent ineffectuality of doing so may have occasionally prompted Cage to put words aside, thus resulting in his disciplined efforts to engage with music and other art forms instead. But words, accessing aspects of reality not available to one's immediate experience, do serve a very necessary function. In the early eighteenth century, long before Cage's time, Jonathan Swift satirically engaged this very question in *Gulliver's Travels*. One of Gulliver's voyages, for instance, takes him to an island where members of the educated elite strive to do away with words altogether. Gulliver (and Swift himself) both bemusedly relate the absurd consequences faced by the inhabitants as they attempt to communicate through the use of physical objects alone: "... many of the most Learned and Wise adhere to the new Scheme of expressing themselves by *Things*; which hath only this Inconvenience attending it; that if a Man's Business be very great, and of various Kinds, he must be obliged in Proportion to carry a greater Bundle of *Things* upon his Back, unless he can afford one or two strong Servants to attend him."<sup>53</sup>

This fundamental push-pull between using words and avoiding them altogether is, in fact, yet another theme frequently addressed by certain traditional koans. One, attributed to Zen Master Xian Gyan, tells of a man hanging from a tree limb by his teeth while a person on the ground asks him a particularly difficult Zen koan. If the man in the tree fails to answer, he devalues the person's question, but if he does answer, he falls to his death. Katsuki Sekida notes, in his own commentary on this and other koans, that such situations, however farfetched, are unavoidable by even the most advanced Zen practitioners when faced with those who understand very little beyond verbal terms: "In the most fundamental sense, from the viewpoint of the first principle of Zen, talking about Zen *is* nonsense. But to initiate the novice, it is absolutely necessary to talk about it."<sup>54</sup> . In another part of his commentary, Sekida also points out that Zen Masters "undergo all sorts of humiliations in order to lead others to enlightenment."<sup>55</sup>

Did Cage experience something comparable during his transition from predetermined musical structures to the chance operations of works like *Music of Changes*? When alienated from initial supporters like Pierre Boulez, Cage obviously may have been at a loss for an appropriate aesthetic language with which to render his own innovations palatable to others. At the same time, he may have seen the futility of such a task, and such a catch-22 possibly motivated the following imaginary dialogue with himself in "Experimental Music: Doctrine":

"QUESTION: Why bother, since, as you have pointed out, sounds are continually happening whether you produce them or not?

ANSWER: What did you say? I'm still ---

QUESTION: I mean --- But is this *music*?

ANSWER: Ah! You like sounds after all when they are made up of vowels and consonants. You are slow-witted for you have never brought your mind to the location of urgency..."<sup>56</sup>

Such a "location of urgency" was evidently a focal point for much of Cage's composition-related and performance-related work both and also remained a guiding principle for him towards the end of his life. Another conversation with Retallack may be useful here:

"Performance is so close to life that it isn't able to alter its nature once it's made the step ... once it's done. You know the material that Oriental calligraphy is done on is often very valuable --- very valuable silk, for instance. And it certainly is such that once you've made the mark you can't correct it; and you've either ruined or improved the silk! (*laughter*) So, it's dangerous ... to make an action. So, what do they do? They practice."<sup>57</sup>

In the same interview, Cage mentioned "sense of imminence"<sup>58</sup> and alluded to a koan involving Chinese Zen Master Nan-ch'uan. As related by the koan, Nan-ch'uan sees monks from the Eastern and Western monastery halls quarreling over a stray cat, and threatens, King Solomon-like, to cut the cat in two if none of the monks speak a word of truth to him. In so doing, he points up the life-or-death stakes that are involved through even the most frivolous expression.

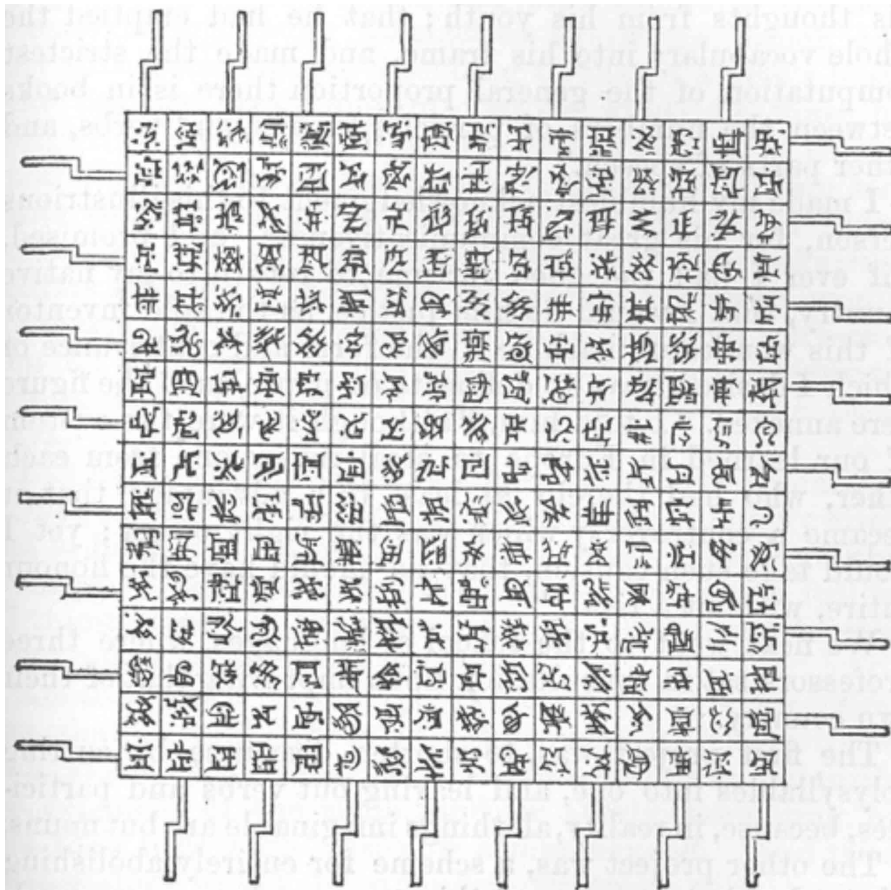
Analogously, *Music of Changes* and later works by Cage brought with them a number of unprecedented technical demands, evidently generated by contradictory results of the chance operations involved, and such demands were possibly his own way of pushing the serious performer into a position of "urgency" or "imminence". As stated by him in the preface to the score for *Music of Changes*, "the notation is irrational; in such instances the performer is to employ his own discretion."<sup>59</sup> Similarly, later composers went on to write their own indeterminate works, albeit often to a lesser degree. The computer-generated score for Iannis Xenakis' 1973 piano work *Evryali*, for instance, was intentionally written beyond the ability of human hands to play and thus required the performer to utilize his or her own "composer" sensibility while deciding which notes to omit or emphasize. It is also possible that such "urgency" and "imminence" informed some of Cage's more rarified creative activities, such as the edible paper made in response to hearing about poverty in Chile which forced some local people in Chile to eat scrap newspaper after food had become increasingly scarce.<sup>60</sup>

Regarding koans, it may again be important to clarify that, although certain possibly core paradigms may be described above, none of these descriptions are intended to attribute any definitive meaning to any given koan. True meaning in such case would arguably be a synthesis of any core paradigms with one's immediate, experiential realization of them following contemplation of the koan itself. And such realization must necessarily occur at the "location of urgency", when the koan is no longer a mere intellectual exercise. For the *mu* koan (but conceivably for any of them), Katsuki Sekida eloquently observed the following:

"When the student has caught hold of Mu in absolute Samadhi, he is told to recapture it in the light of reason. What has been intuitively known gives rise to subjective conviction, but it should be illuminated by reason so that an objectively confirmed understanding is achieved. An objectively confirmed understanding of Zen must be embodied in certain concepts and ideas. There are two ways of manipulating concepts: (1) it can be done as a purely mental exercise, in which we pile concept upon concept, or (2) it can be done by connecting every concept to our own actual experience. The former method means building up construction upon construction, like a tower of Babel, ending in total confusion; the latter is analogous to cultivating an orchard or a rice field, in which every plant is firmly rooted in the ground. It is this method that we adopt in Zen."<sup>61</sup>

In the same text, Sekida later described such linking of each sign to its in-the-moment referent as "language Samadhi".<sup>62</sup> Koan contemplation, as an investigative meditation practice, is consequently a way of exploring meaning in general. From this standpoint, any object is a potential koan if contemplated deeply enough. And given that true contemplation of any one object also involves breaking down the illusion of its separateness from other objects, such contemplation must eventually also entail contemplation of the nature of everything else. Consequently, koans may be considered useful mnemonics for training minds to penetrate the nature of all human experience, that is always more vibrant than it initially appears to be. Chance operations, when practiced with Cage's "urgency" or "imminence", may also transform composition, performance, and/or listening into opportunities that sharpen the mind to the richer texture of experience latently available in every moment. In our highly virtualized day and age, when the letter of the law still threatens to overshadow the original intent behind it and media messages stress signs over substance, postponing one's connection to this richly textured experience is dangerously easy to do. In the long run, however, virtual reality will either make good on what Baudrillard called "the guarantee of the real" or show such a guarantee to be false. Through work (and mindfully informed play) with words, sights, sounds, and every aspect of one's experience, such a "location of urgency" may be enthusiastically pursued right here and now rather than, grudgingly, when it is too late.





## 6. Conclusion

Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Course on General Linguistics*, observed that "the word is a unit that strikes the mind" and that such striking of the mind is "central in the mechanism of language".<sup>63</sup> There is (to use a distinctly Buddhist term) choiceless awareness at work here, and it can perhaps be posited that, in the same way that attempts at silence only draw increasing attention to ambient sound, attempts at meaningless only serve to generate layer upon layer of extra meaning, thus also calling attention to the physical and metaphysical space - the "openness" - that makes such ongoing evolution of meaning possible. Did Cage intend for his work to be a form of meditation? Regardless of how one answers this question, music, language, art, and meditation, when practiced diligently and pushed to their extreme limits, most certainly constitute different ways of prompting the human mind into doing the same thing: investigating the nature of reality through exploration of all of the sensory and mental impressions that make up one's experience. And the exploration of such sensory and mental impressions also necessarily leads to a fuller awareness of the space encompassing them. Words are neither capsules containing meaning divorced from personal interpretation (i.e. "meaning-full") nor are they hollow shells that can be haphazardly "filled up" with meaning according to the whims of one's wishful thinking (i.e. "meaning-less"). Intrinsic meaning and intrinsic meaninglessness both pre-emptively discourage the ongoing exploration necessary for true creativity of any kind. Meaning is thus more properly describable as a moving target. *It evolves because people evolve*, and keeping pace with both language and people is increasingly necessary on a moment-to-moment basis. Cage's own words, even in their most rarified moments of obscurity, still pointed up the function of all words: their ability to open up potential via a sort of ongoing divination process; their role as in-the-moment intersecting points between the past and the future; and their capacity to emphasize (but not isolate or define) focal points for human experience. With these above points in mind, words may be used in a way that eventually transcends more socialized trends towards reductionism and reification. Even when reducing words to mere syllables and phonemes, Cage showed that deconstruction could be a form of reconstruction.

In the same way that Cage and other composers eventually put aside the notion of atonality in

favor of pantonality and proto-tonality, it may eventually be obsolete to think in terms of nonsense and instead think in terms of meta-sense, or expressions that are "pan-sensical" or "proto-sensical".

Fortunately, even despite our highly virtualized society, language for describing reality has become increasingly more nuanced than the language of Cage's time. Chaos theory, though only beginning to gain widespread recognition in Cage's later years, was certainly intriguing to him. And although it has since become quite fashionable to invoke chaos theory in the realm of popular spirituality and other disciplines outside of science and math, many of its principles, such as topological mixing and sensitive dependency on initial conditions, have certainly challenged the conventional notion of reality as intrinsically unintelligible (i.e. "chaotic"). Consequently, it may eventually be discoverable by all of us that distinction between order and chaos chiefly hinges on at least two things: (1) pattern recognition and (2) the moment-to-moment accuracy with which one tracks one's sensory and mental impressions. Consequently, *although heightened attention may not always lead one immediately to order, decreased attention to reality arguably always guarantees the risk of perceiving chaos, so sharpening of one's attention should be counted among the top priorities of one's ongoing life activity.*

Meaning, fundamentally tied to the five physical senses and the mind, is more intelligible or less intelligible in relation to how keenly one perceives basic relationships between one complementary element and another: repetition and variation, similarity and difference, simplicity and complexity. Consequently, in this light, complexity may arguably be just an extension of simplicity, not something separate from it. And ultimately, the difference between simplicity and complexity may just be a question of how sharply one fine-tunes one's own pattern recognition skills and how meticulously one cross-references them with those of others. Arguing in favor of one academic discipline over another does not and will not change this reality. It will only change the language used to describe it, and every discipline - whether music, math, or anything else - has its share of distinctive patterns. Moreover, pooling one's intelligence and creativity with that of others has a long, fruitful history, as seen through such collaborations as Cage with Buckminster Fuller, Xenakis with le Corbusier, and so forth, and it has been shown, with quite transformative results, that the patterns of one discipline can line up with those of another.

That being said, chance operations will always have their place as a means for transcending the predictability of one pattern or another, and repeated exploration of what one now calls "chance" may make overarching patterns more intelligible later on. Such interplay between chance and structural patterns, due to the evolving, exploratory nature of the mind itself, is arguably bound to lead to heretofore unknown meta-patterns, as well. Amusingly, Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* also points up the absurdity of attaching overly intrinsic meaning to either chance or structure. During the same voyage mentioned above, Gulliver encounters a professor initiating a "Project for improving speculative Knowledge by practical and mechanical Operations"<sup>64</sup> by means of a peculiar device whose 16 × 16 square pattern of (possibly pictographic?) characters from the local language just so happens, as illustrated in the earliest edition of the novel, to bear an interesting resemblance to the 8 × 8 pattern of the *I Ching*. The professor assigns numerous assistants to each side of the device to turn handles, shifting the entire arrangement of characters with each turn, while other assistants then read each newly appearing arrangement of characters. Anything remotely resembling a sentence is immediately noted down and codified as factual information. Perhaps the important lesson here is to avoid tiring in one's exploration of either chance or patterns. An ideal end result of such tireless effort would be to realize chance that is less fatal or fearsome and life patterns that are less stagnant or predictable. In closing, it is hoped, from everything written above, that strengthening the mind to engage in such ongoing exploration of both would ultimately lead, for everyone, to a more fulfilling coexistence of the strangely familiar with the familiarly strange.

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1. For example: John Cage, "Four Statements on the Dance" in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press,

- 1979), 93.
2. John Cage, "Experimental Music" in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 10.
  3. John Cage, footnote to "Forerunners of Modern Music" in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 63.
  4. Cage, "Experimental Music" in *Silence*, 10.
  5. John Cage, "The Future of Music" in *Empty Words* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 183.
  6. John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing" in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 109.
  7. John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing", 119, etc.
  8. John Cage, "Lecture on Nothing", 125.
  9. John Cage, "Four Statements on the Dance" in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 94.
  10. Joan Retallack, ed., *MUSICAGE: Cage Muses on Words, Art, and Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 67.
  11. Dharmachari Nagapriya, "Poisoned Pen Letters? D.T. Suzuki's Communication of Zen to the West," *Western Buddhist Review*, vol. 5 (2010): Accessed July 23, 2012, <http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol5/suzuki-gentium.html>
  12. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 77.
  13. Tadanobu Tsunoda, "The Left Cerebral Hemisphere of the Brain and the Japanese Language." Translated by Takechi Manabu and Patricia Murphy. *The Japan Foundation Newsletter*, 6:1.3-7 (April - May, 1978), 3.
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  16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin (New York, NY: The Philosophical Library, Inc., 1959), 12.
  17. Saussure, *Course*, 115.
  18. Katsuki Sekida, trans., *Two Zen Classics* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2005), 67.
  19. Saussure, *Course*, 119.
  20. Saussure, *Course*, 120.
  21. Saussure, *Course*, 120.
  22. Saussure, *Course*, 68.
  23. Saussure, *Course*, 132.
  24. Saussure, *Course*, 133.
  25. Saussure, *Course*, 134.
  26. Saussure, *Course*, 17.
  27. Charles Sanders Peirce, "On the Nature of Signs," in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 142.
  28. Saussure, *Course*, 111.
  29. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 191.
  30. Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: Sage, 1998), 34.
  31. Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 117.
  32. Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1980), 704.
  33. For example: Retallack, preface to *MUSICAGE*, xxxiii.
  34. Daniel M. Ingram, *Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha* (London: Karnac Books, 2008), 34.
  35. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 207.
  36. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 175.
  37. Sayadaw U Pandita, *In This Very Life* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 1992), 50.
  38. Ingram, *Mastering*, 12-13.
  39. For example: Cage, *Silence*, 93.
  40. Ingram, *Mastering*, 41.
  41. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 74.
  42. John Cage, "Lecture on Something" in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 129.
  43. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 191.
  44. John Cage, *composition in retrospect* (Cambridge, MA: Exact Change, 1993), 5.
  45. Cage, *composition*, 6.
  46. John Cage, "Preface to 'Lecture on the Weather'" in *Empty Words* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 5.
  47. John Cage, "Writing for the Second Time through *Finnegan's Wake*" in *Empty Words* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), 138.
  48. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 11.
  49. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 62.
  50. John Cage, foreword to *M* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), x.
  51. John Cage, foreword to *Empty Words* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1981), x.
  52. Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, 27-30.
  53. Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, ed. Robert A. Greenberg (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), 158.
  54. Sekida, *Two Zen Classics*, 221.
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  56. John Cage, "Experimental Music: Doctrine" in *Silence* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 17.
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  58. Retallack, *MUSICAGE*, 305.

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62. Sekida, *Zen Training*, 99.
63. Saussure, *Course*, 111.
64. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 156.