4’33”, Ancient Chinese Philosophy and Aesthetics

David Toop

FOR FIVE DAYS NOW, THROUGH EXTREME HEAT, THEN THUNDERSTORMS AND TORRENTIAL rain, I have struggled to write the first word of this essay. How ironic, some might say. An essay on silence incapable of making a single sound. Reminiscent, in fact, of poet Bái Jūyì’s comments on the *Dao De Jing*:[1]

> Those who speak
> Know nothing;
> Those who Know
> Are silent.
> Those Words, I’m told,
> Were uttered
> By Lao-tzu.
> If we’re to believe
> That he himself
> Was someone who Knew,
> Why did he end up
> Writing a Book
> Of Five Thousand Words? (Quoted in Jaivin 25-6)

[1] References to Tao and Dao, Taoism and Daoism, the *Laozi*, *Tao te Ching* and *Dao de Jing* are used interchangeably in this essay.

© *Australian Humanities Review* 70 (November 2022). ISSN: 1325 8338

This contradiction was a constant in John Cage's work. A prolific writer overflowing with speculations, theories, anecdotes and provocations, he struggled against language, or at least the syntax of written English. 'As we move away from [syntax]', he wrote in his Foreward to *M: Writings '67–'72*, 'we demilitarize language'. In the previous paragraph he shared observations on a re-reading of *Finnegans Wake:* '… I notice that though Joyce's subjects, verbs, and objects are unconventional, their relationships are the ordinary ones. With the exception of the Ten Thunderclaps and rumblings here and there, *Finnegans Wake* employs syntax. Syntax gives it a rigidity from which classical Chinese and Japanese were free. A poem by Bashō, for instance, 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' (Cage x).

Linguists, Sinologists and translators of poetry might find much to argue against in this passage, not least the suggestion that Joyce could have improved *Finnegans Wake* by taking away any semblace of story or structure from an already challenging text. *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, written by Eliot Weinberger with further comments by Octavio Paz, would seem to be the perfect illustration of Cage's point, that Chinese poetry was free from rigidity. Wang Wei's four-line poem, given titles such as *Deer Park* or *Deep in the Mountain Wilderness*, has certainly been translated as 'snapshots'—seventeen examples are given, written between 1919 and 1978—but as Weinberger's unsparing analysis shows, most of them wander away from the sense and spirit of the original poem, losing its evocative precision. Simple as it may have appeared to be, Wang Wei's poem was perhaps not so free after all (Weinberger and Paz).

Painfully naive as it is in parts, notably in its grave misunderstanding of what had taken place in China during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, Cage's Forward is interesting for the links he attempts to make between syntax, anarchy, noise and social utopianism. In 1952, he wrote, a group of composers of which he was a part—Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, Earle Brown and David Tudor—took steps to make a music which was '… just sounds, sounds free of judgements about whether they were "musical" or not'. One of at least two significant steps made by Cage in 1952 was, of course, *4'33"*, through which sounds (including Joyce's Ten Thunderclaps and rumblings) of all kinds whether intended or not by the composer or performer could enter and circulate. That was the theory of a supposedly silent interlude in the history of music, now attended by a proliferating circulation of analysis, origin myths and poor jokes.

Cage himself contributed to this corpus of knowledge, suggesting that Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings opened the possibility for him of a silent

composition in which sounds, like dust and shadows, might enter the space of the work as transparent mutability. There was an earlier experience of white painting, however. Between 1930 and 1938, Mark Tobey was resident artist and teacher at Dartington Hall in Devon, in the south-west of England. Bernard Leach, at Dartington as a potter, met Tobey and they became friends, later travelling to China and Japan together. According to Leach, Tobey gave free drawing classes every week at Dartington, open to all comers. 'Mark did not teach by any ordinary standards', he wrote, 'yet he taught everything, even by silence' (Leach n.p.). At Dartington, painting by an open window at night while listening to horses breathing in the near-silent field outside, Tobey created three paintings—*Broadway*, *Welcome Hero*, and *Broadway Norm*—the first in the calligraphic style that came to be known as white writing.

In 1938, John Cage took up a contract as a dance accompanist at the Cornish School in Seattle. There he met Mark Tobey for the first time, a meeting he later described as revelatory, in that Tobey opened him up to a new way of perceiving the world, simply from observing visual phenomena during a walk. Later, Cage visited an exhibition of Tobey's paintings. 'Attending Tobey's art opening', Ellen Pearlman wrote in *Nothing and Everything*, 'Cage noticed for the first time the setting sun reflecting on the white surfaces and the subtle changes of light. He saw that flat surfaces were not truly flat, but cracked and flaked with many fissures. Tobey had opened up Cage's eyes to the world around him' (Pearlman 38).

Conversing with Richard Kostelanetz about Tobey, Cage described the sense of seeing a field without boundaries:

> The individual is able to look at first one part and then another, and insofar as he can, to experience the whole. But the whole is such a whole that it doesn't look as if the frame frames it. It looks as if that sort of thing could have continued beyond the frame. It is, in other words, if we were not speaking of painting, but speaking of music, a work that has no beginning, middle, or ending, nor any centre of interest. (Quoted in Herzogenrath and Kreul 161)

According to Merce Cunningham, Cage first came into contact with Zen thought and practice through a lecture given in Seattle by Nancy Wilson Ross. The sense this gave him of how to proceed at a troubled time of his life was then consolidated by study with D. T. Suzuki, whose lectures at Columbia University commenced in the early 1950s.

4'33" is frequently characterised as a 'Zen piece'—the Wikipedia entry describes it as '… a reflection of the influence of Zen Buddhism'[2]—yet Suzuki's Columbia classes at that time covered not only his own book, *Essays on Zen Buddhism*, but also, according to Ellen Pearlman, '… Huang Po's *Doctrine of Universal Mind* as well as the Taoist writings of 'Kwang-tse' [Chuang Tzu] and 'Lao-tse' [Lao Tzu])' (Pearlman 50). Cage was already familiar with ancient Chinese philosophy through his encounter with and subsequent use of the oracular *I Ching or Book of Changes*. In around 1936 Lou Harrison had introduced him to the James Legge translation.

At the time, Cage found little use for what even Legge admitted was a puzzle not easy to unlock. Then in 1950, Christian Wolff gifted him the Bollingen two-volume edition, published by Wolff's father. Rendered into English by Cary F. Baynes from the German translation of Richard Wilhelm, this was the edition that became a countercultural touchstone during the latter half of the twentieth century. Timing is everything, and what presented itself at that moment in Cage's life was the potential of using the book's charts and hexagrams as a means of determining the structure of a composition through chance operations, from which emerged breakthrough pieces such as *Music of Changes* in 1951. Although Cage used the book primarily as a means of making decisions during the compositional process without resorting to personal taste or preference, there was the question of how much he engaged with its aesthetic style, ethical directives and political implications, or indeed turned to it for advice. 'It is unclear how much or how often he has resorted to its oracular functions', wrote biographer David Revill in *The Roaring Silence*. 'To Daniel Charles he said that he used it not only in his music but in everyday life, "every time I had a problem. I used it very often for practical matters, to write my articles and my music … For everything"' (Revill 132).

Rather optimistically, Kay Larson, in *Where the Heart Beats*, describes the consequences of this discovery in absolute terms: 'Each sound is free to be itself. Nothing can cling to it: no interpretation, no ideas; no anger, no hurt; no "masterpiece" judgement, no "not-masterpiece" judgement' (Larson 175). Cage made similar claims on many occasions, not least in the Forward to *M*, in which he identified 1952 as the year zero in which he began creating music of 'just sounds'. My initial feeling, reading such claims, is to question how wise it is to aspire to music in which sounds are only themselves, cling to nothing, stimulate no ideas or feelings, lack any kind of history or cultural identity. My second response is to question its possibility. In a certain sense I am reminded of reading the *Dao De Jing*, as I have for many decades, always finding resonance for my own practice, my own life, in these ancient, mysterious fragments from a remote culture. This

[2] *'4'33"'*, *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4%E2%80%B233%E2%80%B3>, 22 Aug. 2022.

returns us to poet Bái Jūyi’s playfully sarcastic comment, quoted above, on the contradiction of writing prolifically on a subject which defies articulation. In book 2, for example, there is this:

> In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day;
> in the pursuit of the way one does less every day.
> One does less and less until one does nothing at all,
> and when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone. (Lao Tzu 109)

Intuitively, I empathise with this passage while at the same time realising an acute awareness of my shortcomings, even the admission that though I am drawn to this passage I move completely in the opposite direction. Much early Daoist thought is suggestive of Cage’s ideas and his thoughts on music. In Volume II of *Science and Civilisation in China*, Joseph Needham (with the research assistance of Wang Ling) considered the term *wu wei*, a key Daoist term which he suggests has frequently been misinterpreted as ‘non-action or inactivity’. Needham’s interpretation—‘refraining from activity contrary to Nature’—allows more latitude for being in the world, though fails to solve the dilemma of what is, or is not, contrary to nature. He quotes from the *Huai Nan Tzu* (The Book of the Prince of Huai Nan, a compendium of natural philosophy):

> What is meant, therefore, in my view by *wu wei*, is that no personal prejudice (or private will) interferes with the universal Tao, and that no desires and obsessions lead the true courses of techniques astray. Reason must guide action, in order that power may be exercised according to the intrinsic properties and natural trend of things. (Needham 68-9)

Needham continued: ‘… I shall suggest that one of the deepest roots of the concept of *wu wei* may be in the anarchic nature of primitive peasant life; plants grow best without interference by man; men thrive best without State interference’ (Needham 70). This is in accord with Cage’s foraging and anarchist instincts, also his desire to let sounds be themselves. Numerous examples from Daoist thoughts and classical Chinese aesthetics read as pre-echoes of Cage’s practice. As Jing Wang notes in her book, *Half Sound, Half Philosophy: Aesthetics, Politics, and History of China’s Sound Art*, Chinese aesthetics and philosophy are a thus-far barely acknowledged influence on twentieth and twenty-first century music, sound art and listening practices. She writes, for example, of the concept of *huanghu*: the dim, evasive, noisy:

> Through *huanghu* appears the spectral world of *chimei wangliang* [demons and monsters] the eerie *qi* of mountains and water, the outer

> layer of shadows, a world of becoming, full of transformation, reincarnation, interspecies relations, in which anything from a vase, a candle holder to a tree or an animal, can transform, mix up, and disintegrate. Nothing has a set value; nothing owns anything forever. (Wang 154-5)

Cage's *4'33"* is considered to be the watershed radical gesture of twentieth century music and yet many examples of nothingness, emptiness and deliberate silence can be encountered in historical Chinese art practices such as painting and music. Take, for example, the literati screen painting known as a 'pure screen'. In his book, *The Double Screen*, art historian Wu Hung finds evidence for such plain screens in the work of amateur artists around 1360, particularly those who had withdrawn to hermitages during the turmoil of late Mongol rule. The pure screen, he writes, '… is humble in appearance and so it embodies a scholar's noble spirit; it is plain and white, and so it can reflect moonlight and resemble floating clouds, both traditional symbols of Nature and purity' (Hung 178). The white screen was sometimes shown as one of the objects of contemplation with which retired scholars might surround themselves. 'The quietness and idleness of the place that the artist admires in his inscription', he writes, 'therefore, must be conveyed by the empty house and its plain screen, which constitute a "hollow centre" in a restless landscape' (Hung 181).

I*n Praise of Blandness* by philosopher/Sinologist François Jullien is an examination of blandness as an important element in Chinese aesthetics, a neutrality that denotes potential, evokes an inner detachment, takes us to the limits of the perceptible: 'But it is precisely the bland that the arts of China reveal to us through their uncluttered spareness and allusive depths' (Jullien, *In Praise* 24-5). He gives the example of a stringed instrument played during ritual offerings to the ancestors, its strings boiled to produce a muted sound. 'Such sounds are all the more able to extend and deepen themselves in the minds of their hearers for having not been definitively realised', Jullien writes, 'and so they retain something more for later deployment and keep something secret and virtual within. In short, they remain heavy with promise' (66-7).

This promise reaches its extremes in silent music. Tao Yuanming, a poet who knew nothing of music, had at home an unadorned zither (probably a guqin) lacking strings. Whenever he drank he touched the instrument; that soundless physical contact was sufficient to express his feelings in the moment. 'The body of the instrument contains, within itself and at the same time, all possible sounds (the very image of the Dao)', Jullien writes.

> The mediation of strings and the effort of performance have been rendered useless—have even become obstructions … there is the

> gesture of caressing the zither, a gesture that is tentative yet very real, brought to life by the universal and unified movement of the fingering of an instrument. As such, it carries the potential of all of music’s musicality and alludes to the entire harmonic capacity of all possible sounds. (77)

Just as the pure literati screen that reflects moonlight recalls Rauschenberg’s white paintings, this touching of the instrument is reminscent of David Tudor, soundlessly lowering and raising the piano lid during his first performance of *4’33"* in 1952. From these actions, *4’33"* may possess a clear ‘beginning, middle … ending’ (from the point of view of the score and its enactor) but it lacks, as Cage said admiringly of Mark Tobey’s white writing paintings, a centre of interest. There is a connection here to certain styles of Chinese painting and their ‘world of becoming’ expressed through faintness, diffusion, and the Chan (Zen) style, circa thirteenth century, known as apparition paintings, their ink so pale that, in the words of Yukio Lippit’s essay on the subject, they possess a ‘… ghostly, tenuous quality that defies easy description or representation’ (Lippit 61).

François Jullien’s book *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting* comes closer to drawing the necessary connections between painting without marks, music without sound and the philosophical subtleties of Daoism that made such a paradox possible. This fresh perspective allows us to project such entanglements into the 1940s and beyond by offering a speculative interpretation of John Cage’s aspirations for *4’33"*, along with his convictions regarding the practice of music and its implications for a given society. Quoting this passage from the *Laozi* (*Dao de Jing*)—

> The great square has no corners
> … the great tone makes only a tiny sound,
> the great image has no form.

—Jullien has this to say:

> Understanding comes from what is not made explicit ... ‘The great tone makes only a tiny sound’ means that, as Wang Bi has just said, ‘greatness’ lies in avoiding the loss via disjunction that accompanies any coming about … And since the individuation of tone becomes a reality through the isolation of a particular and characteristic sound, the sound produced is no longer anything more than that. It is confined to being only itself and to competing with all the others, both shut off in its opposition and valid by its difference. In response, the Chinese musical tradition, inspired by the *Laozi*, will celebrate the great tone of ‘silent music.’ Inasmuch as this silent music is not yet broken up into

> distinct sounds—one in opposition to another—it allows them to coexist and maintains the full harmony among them. (Jullien, *The Great Image* 47-8)

David Toop has been developing a practice that crosses boundaries of sound, listening, music and materials since 1970, encompassing improvised music performance, writing, electronic sound, field recording, exhibition curating, sound art installations and opera. It includes eight acclaimed books, including *Ocean of Sound*, *Sinister Resonance*, *Into the Maelstrom*, *Flutter Echo* and *Inflamed Invisible*. His 1978 Amazonas recordings of Yanomami shamanism were released on Sub Rosa as *Lost Shadows*. Solo records include *New and Rediscovered Musical Instruments*, *Entities Inertias Faint Beings* and *Apparition Paintings*. He is Emeritus Professor at London College of Communication.

Works Cited

Cage, John. *Forward to M: Writing '67-'72*. London: Calder & Boyars, 1973.

Herzogenrath, Wulf, and Andreas Kreul, eds. *Sounds of the Inner Eye: John Cage, Mark Tobey, Morris Graves*. Tacoma, WA: Museum of Glass: International Center for Contemporary Art, 2002.

Hung, Wu. *The Double Screen: Medium and Representation in Chinese Painting*, Reaktion Books, 1996.

Jaivin, Linda. *The Shortest History of China*. New York: The Experiment, 2021.

Jullien, François. *The Great Image Has No Form, or On the Nonobject through Painting*. U of Chicago P, 2009.

—. *In Praise of Blandness*, Zone Books, 2008, pp. 24-5.

Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. D. C. Lau. Penguin, 1963.

Larson, Kay. *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists*, Penguin Books, 2013.

Leach, Bernard. *Tobey*. Ed. Maggie Giraud. High Cross House, Dartington Hall Trust, 1996.

Lippit, Yukio. 'Apparition Painting.' *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 55/56 (Spring/Autumn 2009): 61-86.

Needham, Joseph (with Wang Ling). *Science and Civilisation in China*, Volume II. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975 (1956).

Pearlman, Ellen. *Nothing and Everything: The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant-Garde 1942-1962*. Berkeley: Evolver Editions, 2012.

Revill, David. *The Roaring Silence: John Cage, A Life*. Bloomsbury, 1992.

Wang, Jing. *Half Sound, Half Philosophy: Aesthetics, Politics, and History of China's Sound Art*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

Weinberger, Eliot, and Octavio Paz. *19 Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*. Asphodel Press, 1987.