

John Cage and 4'33"

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DOUTBLESS THE APPREHENSION THAT, IN ANY ONE OF THE TRADITIONAL ARTS AS WE know them, the possibilities for new and meaningful creation have been exhausted has been around since the Renaissance at least. Neo-classicism was an open admission that the New was not worth any serious effort, since the rediscovered Ancients had already said everything worth saying, given expression to every mode of perfection—all the most beautiful, most sublime, most moving artistic forms lay heaped at their happy-sandaled feet. This comfortably deferential structure of feeling was secretly informed by a deep well of anxiety before the rapidly changing nature of reality itself, as the world rounded, the number of cultures visible to Europeans increased vertiginously, and a new mode of production violently remade the living tissues of social life far beyond the ken of classical aesthetics. So it was that, despite the best efforts of conservatives in the Academies and elsewhere, the anxiety won out in the end.

The culture of the twentieth century is a fever chart of that anxiety. What we now call modernism staged a last-ditch effort to defy the deadweight of the *déjà-vu* and the *déjà-lu* with the clarion-call of the Novum, the untried, and the unique, but it was ever haunted by an avant-gardist admission of futility. The readymades of Dada told a more plausible story of the drift of modern culture towards the ersatz and the commodified, in an irresistible rising tide of stuff—overproduced, kitsch, and easily accessible—from which ‘art’ was never going to be able to distinguish

itself for long. The *dictionnaire des idées reçues* turned out to be a more reliable guide to modern culture than Mallarmé's *Livre* or Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire*. By the time John Barth sat down to write 'The Literature of Exhaustion' in 1967, he was stating the obvious about not only literature but the whole system of fine arts on the eve of their digital comeuppance.

There was, however, in this brief and thronging interlude between the dying embers of the Modern and nascent postmodernism, an unexpected rallying around a third option, often glimpsed but never comprehensively explored on its own terms. This was the idea that, as Auden had put it in 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats', 'poetry makes nothing happen'—which can of course be taken in two ways simultaneously. On the one hand, in a world governed by commerce, militarism, and two-party politics, the arts are practically futile—skulking in a depopulated valley of shades, playing Cassandra in a licensed madhouse, incapable of making any significant change. On the other hand, though, in a philistine positivist landscape of scientism and pragmatics, of rank Panglossian bad faith, the arts can still send a shiver of negation down the spine of alienated consciousness. In the ritualistic, quasi-cultic forms of observance fostered by their anachronistic *modi operandi*, the arts somehow ward off the fetishes of productivity and progress, and create temporary enclaves where Nothing itself is suffered to happen: a void puncturing the plenum of informationalised immanence, an abyss in the teeming marketplace, a vacuum at the heart of sense.

The avant-gardes anticipated this fealty to the Nothing, alongside their satirical adumbrations of commodity culture. Tristan Tzara's 'Dada Manifesto' is insistent that the purpose of this avant-garde is, precisely, nothing: 'DADA MEANS NOTHING', it trolls the reader; while Francis Picabia goes further still: 'Dada, [unlike Cubism], means nothing, nothing, nothing. It makes the public say "We understand nothing, nothing, nothing. The Dadaists are nothing, nothing, nothing and they will certainly succeed in nothing, nothing, nothing"'.¹ Huelsenbeck chimed in, anticipating and outflanking Auden's pessimism in a single spirited fillip: 'Dada means nothing. It is the significant nothing which has no meaning at all. We want to change the world with nothing, we want to alter poetry and painting with nothing, and we want to end the war with nothing' (Richard Huelsenbeck, quoted in Orlow 163). And Hugo Ball clinched this wily provocation with an ontological depth-charge: 'What is generally termed reality is, to be precise, a frothy nothing' (Hugo Ball, quoted in Elger and Grosenick 26). The paradox that all this nothing was volubly stated and restated, in various idiolects and tub-thumping affirmations, diminished the sincerity of the statement not an

¹ Tristan Tzara, 'Dada Manifesto' (1918) and Francis Picabia, 'Dada Manifesto' (1920), in Danchev (locs. 2702 and 3113 of 8051).

iota, and perhaps nobody felt this torsion as acutely as Antonin Artaud, who wrote obsessively about his desire to write nothing at all:

I began in literature by writing books to say that I could not write anything at all. My thought when I had something to write was what was the most denied me. ... I have never written except to say that I had never done anything, could do nothing, and that doing something, I was actually doing nothing. My entire work was built, and can only be built, on nothingness. (Antonin Artaud, quoted in Scheer 112)

This all marks a significant step beyond Flaubert's stated desire to write 'a book about nothing, a book without exterior attachments, which would be held together by the inner force of its style, as the earth without support is held in the air', since of course the Dadaist text would be held together by no style at all (Gustave Flaubert, quoted in Jameson 311).

It was thus one of the occult tenets of the modern avant-garde that, as Georg Grosz put it, 'The painter once believed in something, but now he paints only a hole without meaning, without anything—nothing but nothingness, the nothingness of our time' ('Nothingness' 90). But only after the Second World War did this become a critical doctrine in its own right, an article of faith for the numbed disciples of a *deus absconditus* who seemed to stare back at them from the billowing ashes of a mushroom cloud. There at the stricken heart of things pulsed an 'active void', a moral black hole with enough gravitational mass to swallow up the last fly-blown scraps of a routed humanism. Its serene prophet was Maurice Blanchot, who drew the consequences:

The writer finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, of having no means with which to write it, and of being constrained by the utter necessity of always writing it. Having nothing to express must be taken in the most literal way. Whatever he would like to say, it is nothing. The world, things, knowledge are to him only landmarks across the void. And he himself is already reduced to nothing. Nothingness is his material. He rejects any forms in which it offers itself to him, since they are something. He wants to seize it not in an allusion but in its own actual truth. He is looking for a 'No' that is not 'No' to this, 'No' to that, 'No' to everything, but 'No' pure and simple. For the rest, he does not look for it...: it does not exist, that is all; the 'I have nothing to say' of the writer, like that of the accused, encloses the whole secret of his solitary condition. (Blanchot 3)

And in his own mandarin way, albeit in another critical dialect, Theodor Adorno was saying much the same, drawing particular sustenance from that gaunt high priest of the null and void, Samuel Beckett.

Aesthetic transcendence and disenchantment converge in the moment of falling mute: in Beckett's oeuvre. A language remote from all meaning is not a speaking language and this is its affinity to muteness. Perhaps all expression, which is most akin to transcendence, is as close to falling mute as in great new music nothing is so full of expression as what flickers out—that tone that disengages itself starkly from the dense musical texture—where art by virtue of its own movement converges with its natural element. (Adorno 79)

It is this saintly, renunciatory return of art to the sheer materiality of Being, its defection from the utilitarian court of communication and sense, that endows the gestures of falling mute and flickering out with proper dignity and grace. And it is above all in music that the withering away of what used to hold works of art together—semblance, the fiction of an ordered totality—can be heard, a breaking apart and deliquescence of the very primal elements of organised sound.

Only insofar as these elements asymptotically approximate nothingness do they meld—as a pure process of becoming—into a whole. As differentiated partial elements, however, time and again they want to be something previously existent: a motif or a theme. The immanent nothingness of its elementary determinations draws art down into the amorphous, whose gravitational pull increases the more thoroughly art is organized. (101)

The great student of Schönberg articulates the conditions in which art must, today, to be true to its vocation and to preserve the promise of happiness against premature down-payments, 'converge with its natural element' in the dark pulp of amorphous decomposition. For if, on the one hand, 'There is nothing in art, not even the most sublime, that does not derive from the world; nothing that remains untransformed' (138); then, on the other, because today the world is false down to its utmost molecule, these transformations must be undone: to dust shall art return.

The three arch exponents of Valéry's maxim that 'God made everything out of nothing, but the nothingness shows through' (Valéry 503), during this vital period that stretched from the mid-1950s through to the end of the 60s, were Beckett himself, Mark Rothko, and another student of Schönberg: the American John Cage. All the avant-garde energies were preserved intact in Cage's approach to

composition, including the impish device of incorporating musical readymades, via mechanical reproductions:

For Cage, the classical tradition was worn-out kitsch ripe for deconstruction, in the manner of his intellectual hero, the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp. A record player squawking random bits of Beethoven or Shostakovich became the sonic equivalent of painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa or displaying a urinal as sculpture. (Ross 276)

The exhaustion of musical possibilities led, through this resort to cannibalistic and impious citation, to infinite possibility—at the sonic littoral where organised sound met the surf of pure noise and tapped the dark gulfs of silence impending everywhere. At this critical interface the distinction between ground and figure became radically undecidable, as the clang of hubcaps and brake drums merged with scratchy snatches of the great tradition, only to cede to the perduring silence that gives to each sound its specific salience and tone. ‘A sound’, he wrote, echoing Auden, ‘accomplishes nothing; without it life would not last out the instant’ (Cage, *Silence* 14). And, increasingly, *leaving space* around these sounds that accomplish nothing seemed the best aesthetic option. Taking inspiration from visual artists who were leaving more and more blank canvas and unfinished passages of raw material in their works and conducting the empty spaces of blank gallery wall back into the compositions themselves, Cage endorsed the same principle in musical composition:

An exhibition ... can dip into leaving a wall empty. And it's out of that emptiness, and not being put off by 'nothing' happening and when you see it, it really impresses you that hearing it, hearing the emptiness, becomes a possibility all over again. (Cage, *Musicage* 91)

His quip to an imagined interlocutor in a 1955 article on experimental music—‘Why don't you realize as I do that nothing is accomplished by writing, playing, or listening to music?’—his 1958 aphorism ‘I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY AND I AM SAYING IT’, and his critique of twelve-tone technique (‘There is not enough of nothing in it’) (Cage, *Silence* 17, 51) led ultimately to the great ‘Lecture on Nothing’, a witty apotheosis of the very tendency charted here. The section on material is especially interesting:

Now about	material:	is it interesting	?
It is and it	isn't	.	But one thing is
certain.	If one is making	something	which is to be nothing
,	the one making must	love	and be patient with
the material	he chooses.	Otherwise	he calls attention to the
material,	which is precisely something	,	whereas it was
nothing	that was being made;	or	he calls attention to
himself,	whereas	nothing is anonymous	.
what structure as a	The technique	of handling materials	is, on the sense level
	discipline is	on the rational level	:
	a means	of experiencing	nothing

(114)

What Cage establishes here is a point cognate to that raised by Adorno: technique itself, and the proper handling of materials, is a 'means of experiencing nothing'—it permits the material, which is always 'precisely something', to be drawn back down into the amorphousness and anonymity of Being itself, prior to all ontic determination and differentiation. 'Making something which is to be nothing' is the task of every artist, and that means delivering the material back to the nameless matrix of its origins in Hugo Ball's 'frothy nothing' of reality: an activity conducted under the sign of love. To love the material, through art, is to annihilate its status as a thing, a merely positive integer, and to commit it to flux, the inchoate, the void of its infinite and eventual potential.

It was in the 'Lecture on Nothing' that Cage offered a twist to his great maxim: 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it, and that is poetry as I know it' (51). Here we have, at last, the most developed statement of the tendency under consideration: not merely that saying that one has nothing to say is an endemic twentieth-century attitude toward artistic production, but that saying it, *saying nothing*, might itself amount to the aesthetic production one was contemplating in the first place. That *saying nothing*, letting the material be, lovingly and without the violence of transformation, might yet transform it into what it is not, and what no highly wrought work of art can any longer be: an intersubjective promise of happiness, poetry *sans* the poem.

When, on August 29, 1952, pianist David Tudor sat down and closed the piano's lid in the Maverick Concert Hall, Woodstock, New York, to perform Cage's 4'33", the notion that for that exact duration of time, *nothing happened*, is an idea teeming with implication and association. *Nothing*, in this case, must be sharply distinguished from silence, since as Cage put it later:

What they thought was silence, because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began

pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out. (Cage, quoted in Gann 4)

Nor can it plausibly be suggested that a musical performance did not take place, since all the ritualistic indicators of a recital were amply in evidence: a pianist seated, clearly invested with the status of virtuoso; a gathered audience attending closely; a program advertised and adhered to (4'33" followed Cage's *Water Music*, three brief pieces by Morton Feldman, Earle Brown, and Christian Wolff, and the First Piano Sonata of Pierre Boulez, inspired by Artaud; and preceded Henry Cowell's culminating *The Banshee*); and polite applause to mark the cessation of the event. Rather, the *nothing* of 4'33" consists in a momentous shifting of the aesthetic frame within the very concept of music itself, such that neither the performer nor the structured edifice of organised sound is any longer the centre or guarantor of that 'pure process of becoming' that vouchsafes artistic experience. Instead, the ear reaches for the aesthetic deep within the stochastic, elemental, amorphous thrum of embodied percipience that never resolves itself into anything in particular—any melodic or rhythmic residuum. *Nothing* names the subsidence of all positive notation into a dissolute network of limitless relations and noise, a background hum woven of chaos and delight: the primordial natural element out of which all music, all artistic experience, must emerge. Seventy years after Cage first erected a proscenium around it, this fabulous *nothing* still beckons us toward an acknowledgement of its power to pulverise, and so remake, the merely existent.

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