

lo and behold...

2012 was the 100th anniversary of John Cage's birth, and my first year as a student at The New School. As a longtime visitor and new resident to New York City, I delighted in the simultaneous freedom and familiarity afforded to me by my newly chosen field. Cage was born in early September, and it seemed that every contemporary classical and experimental music group took it upon themselves to present an all-Cage concert of their very own that year. I took it upon myself to see all of them.

Sitting on the floor of Judson Memorial Church on Cage's actual birthday (Sept 5th), I heard So Percussion make their way through Cartridge Music, Child of Tree, and an incredibly memorable version of Inlets, a piece for water amplified by massive conch shells. To say that this concert blew open the possibilities of music to me is an understatement. I remember listening incredibly intently to the sounds these 3-4ft conch shells were producing, each percussionist rocking them gently back and forth in their arms. I will also fully admit to having experienced moments of extreme boredom and fatigue in this concert and others like it. Nevertheless, the object instruments of this concert fascinated me. I am sure there are dozens of pictures of these conch shells somewhere on a hard drive of mine, and of the cacti, tin cans, and contact microphones endlessly intertwined into Cage's lexicon. As a young percussionist who owed and continues to owe much to Cage and his ideologies, I wanted to dive headfirst into this music - in doing so, I also got swept up in his philosophy.

If I wasn't already, I was hooked as soon as I began reading Cage's lectures and writings. Reading his lectures in the time-coded, performative ways he wrote them was a game I played with myself to pass the time on the subway, a practice I found so meditative and immersive that I sometimes rode far past my desired stop. As I grappled with learning how to play and practice my instrument, Cage's lectures felt like an escape - a way to expand my knowledge and continue "practicing" a different skillset, removed from any real critique or difficulty. In retrospect, I wanted so desperately to separate myself from my peers, to identify with the downtown, avant-garde, Fluxus personalities of the 1960s, despite arriving from suburban middle-class New Jersey to a very different Greenwich Village than Cage or his contemporaries ever knew.

As part of the year's Cage-mania, I finally had the chance to read one of Cage's lectures out loud, in a performance. I accepted my role with diligence: studying the lecture, making notes, rehearsing my timings and articulations. As is a common pratfall in many rehearsals, I frequently started at the beginning of the 45 minute work, which now feels so familiar to me that I could likely recite the first two pages by heart. They read:

“Lo and behold the horse turns into
a prince, who, except for the
acquiescence of the hero
would have had to remain a
miserable shaggy nag.”
I have noticed something else about
Christian Wolff’s music. All you can
do is
suddenly listen
in the same way
that, when you catch cold
all you can do is
suddenly
sneeze.
Unfortunately —
European harmony.

Where it is:

but within us

like an empty glass
into which
at any moment
anything
may be poured
just something finitely something
or even
to be able to drink
a glass of water.
Unless some other idea
crops up about it
that is all I have to say about structure.
My present
way
of composing's
involved with the
observation
of imperfections in the paper
on which I happen
to be
writing

-John Cage, 45' for a Speaker

Later I learned that this lecture was a composite of other Cage lectures, a variety of pre-existing texts that had been obscured, distorted, and reconfigured through chance operations. What I had initially read as coy and smarm was, in fact, sheer coincidence: how else do you arrive at a phrase like "Unfortunately — European harmony"?

Random or not, these words are forever knocking around in my brain. In the opening moments of this lecture, Cage gives us parable, critique, meditation, irony, and analysis of process - and never all of any of it.

ecstasies(/ecologies) of influence

A handful of years and several schools later, I again found myself sitting on the floor of a performance space, unaware of the new epiphany barreling towards me. I had been invited to participate in a project called "Ecstasies of Influence" (EOI), an ambitious exploration of improvisation, artistic process, and the art of creation.

David Szanto's work focuses on gastronomy and the connection food has to our identities. In one of his discussion sessions for EOI, I witnessed some of the most personal and honest musical storytelling I've ever had the pleasure of partaking in. David's initial session with us was, in part, a re-enactment of a performance piece of his, painting his hand with a sourdough starter and then clasping our hands in his own. He spoke of his friend Gigi, a colleague who had died far too young of stomach cancer, survived by his starter and now, infused with all of us. We were given bread birthed from the starter, and we ate it with sharpened senses and an air of reverence.

In a subsequent discussion, David asked each of us to talk about the ecologies of our instruments in any way we wanted - already having expanded our notion of "ecology" through his sourdough. While the six other musicians in the room were people I had been acquainted with for some time, I had never heard any of them speak in this way - we often don't ask our peers about their connection to their craft. The improvisation session after this discussion was magical. Sonny Rollins gave an interview recently where he said "you can't think and play at the same time". I think the opposite is also true - I have very, very rarely had the chance to be able to truly dissect and discuss *how* I play, nor have I had the chance to listen to the same thoughts from my fellow musicians. There is always a different goal in sight - we bond through our shared devotion to an incredibly specific subset of music, but seldom have the platform to share our thoughts and feelings on the craft we have refined for so long.

I have always been drawn to making music with objects. Even when I first "chose" to play percussion in grade school, I was attracted to the age-old idea of "banging on pots and pans" - that anything could be used to make music. Throughout my education, percussion became my vehicle for understanding the world around me. I have learned to skateboard, repaired a reel-to-reel tape player, and worn a hazmat suit, all in pursuit of various pieces. I am continually uncovering connections between my craft and other disciplines, and this lifelong process of learning inspires me to continue making music.

After I spoke, David offered his thoughts - connecting my ramble on the histories and lives of found objects as instruments to new materialism and one material culture scholar in particular, Daniel Miller. As I began to read Miller's book "Stuff", a deep dive into the social lives of objects and how they define us, I felt that I had at last found what I was looking for.

I was once present for a keynote lecture by a famous percussionist, in which he expressed his gratitude, admiration, and advice for all of us who will eventually succeed him. He said,

"In the coming years, you'll hear a piece of music that blows away the cobwebs for you. You'll play a first performance that rewrites all of the rules. You will notice a sound so small and unimportant to the bigger world that it, practically speaking, doesn't exist - and you will take that sound, and make, if even for a moment, a cradle for it."

-Steve Schick

Maybe I haven't found that sound yet, or maybe I have found hundreds of them. Either way, I have been slowly and surely devouring the concepts of material culture, the histories and lives of objects, and incorporating them into my practice. Material culture, and "Stuff" in particular, serves as the persistent reminder that objects store, contain, and signal humanity. Stuff is the key to defining ourselves and our societies. Objects are important because we do not see them, we are not really aware of them - they are invisible in their familiarity. There is a humility to them, an ordinariness that allows them to embody our strongest feelings of ourselves, of home.

"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, one 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. The technique of handling materials is, on the sense level what structure as a discipline is on the rational level: a means of experiencing nothing. I remember loving sound before I ever took a music lesson..."

-John Cage, Lecture on Nothing

As Ecstasies of Influence drew to a close (I thought!), our work was to culminate in a final concert, a presentation combining our discussions, improvisations, and connections into a 30-45 minute work. As a now moonlighting Montrealer, I had driven back and forth between NYC and Montreal for each group session, a drive that I had become accustomed to throughout my master's degree and continued to traverse frequently. I had been trying to visit a small brewery called Suarez Family since its opening in 2016 - and yet, despite upwards of 50 trips back and forth, their limited operating hours and my overnight drives hours never seemed to intersect. Heading up to Montreal for the EOI concert with my friend and fellow EOI musician Felix Del Tredici, I finally hit the sweet spot - we pulled into the empty parking lot for

Suarez just as they opened, a slow winter weekday for them and a momentous occasion for me. I bought as many beers as I could move over the border tax free - a variety of their beautiful, crisp lagers, and some rarer and stranger bottles of blended sours, aged saisons, and barrel-aged oddities. I remember asking Felix which bottle would be best to gift to David - he read all of the descriptions and then said, "definitely this one":

Lo and Behold, 6% - Flanders Red Ale

"Notes of sweet vermouth, amarone wine, creme brûlée top, lyles golden syrup, dark bread crust, raisin, dried plum, dried sour cherry, dried cranberry, toasted orange peel, raspberry, black fig, wet wood, cellar. For those of you yearning for a beer with a dynamic malt character—this is your beer! Come check it out and hopefully you'll be as excited as we are.

We recommend drinking this one at cellar temperature. Anything colder is like listening to the MP3 version of a song instead of original pressed vinyl recording. You want to hear that beer sing."

-Suarez Family Brewing

The phrase "lo and behold" is revelatory, an unlikely situation with equal amounts predictability and surprise. It's a full circle phrase, both obvious and far-fetched. Imagine my surprise when David exclaimed "Suarez Family!" as I pulled the bottle out of my bag. Two years later, I still have a hard time processing the sheer coincidence and connection of this moment, in which David informed me that he, Gigi, and Taylor (Cocalis) Suarez all met and studied together at the UNISG master's program. I felt like I was living through the ending of Murder on the Orient Express.

I credit David with a huge shift in my practice - the ideas and framing he offered up to me have altered the purpose of the music I make, as well as my perception of it. Maybe the best way of putting it is that I knew what I loved, but I didn't know why I loved it. At the core of my favorite musical experiences and my favorite found objects are the most basic components of all: stories, trust, connection, humanity.

"...And so we make our lives by what we love."

-John Cage, Lecture on Nothing