

**Art & Life:  
John Cage, Avant-gardism & Technology<sup>1</sup>**

by Martin J.C. Dixon, Glasgow

–1–

There is a sense, or many senses, in which John Cage was, during the 1960s, *losing his ear for music*.<sup>2</sup> Not only is this reflected in Cage's relatively low output at this time, but those pieces that he did produce have, even by Cage's standards, only a minimal 'musical' content. If there were personal or circumstantial reasons for this, they do not interest me as much as trying to examine the legitimacy, meaning and the performability of these works – and here I am thinking of works such as *0'00"* and *Musicircus*. James Pritchett has difficulty with this period and in his Grove article he attempts to place it somewhat in parentheses, marked by what he sees as a slackening of Cage's 'commitment to music' and a deepening of his commitment to political and social matters. Pritchett suggests that the pieces composed during this period served a purpose for Cage in that they were 'informal', occasional and fitted the demands of his lecture tours and performances. The impression is that Cage was marking time somewhat until, at the very end of the 60s, with the Satie arrangements, he returned to composition proper.

–2–

I have no particular desire to challenge this view or take sides in the debate as to whether Cage's reputation is best served by emphasising his music compositional output over his other interests. Rather, all I would wish to add here is that if we pass over this period in relative silence we certainly miss the opportunity to gain insight into a body of work whose political and social content is paramount; but, what is more, we should be conscious of the fact that the historical conditions which allow music to open out, to transcend itself and strive for an enhanced sense of political engagement and significance are actually rather rare. The 60s was one such period and

---

<sup>1</sup> (Editorial note: This paper was given at Cage 2002: 90/10, a study day to discuss, perform and listen to John Cage's music. It took place on Saturday, 21 September 2002 at the Music Department of the University of Southampton. The day aimed to mark Cage's 90th birthday and the 10th anniversary of his death.)

<sup>2</sup> John Cage, *A Year From Monday* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1968), p. 112.

I am concerned that we take seriously both the utopian politics that were espoused at this time and the part that artistic practice played in the formation of this utopianism.

–3–

Cage's mood at the beginning of the 60s was clear. In the foreword to *A Year From Monday* he writes:

*“My ideas certainly started in the field of music. And that field, so to speak, is child's play. (We may have learned, it is true, in those idyllic days, things it behooves us now to recall.) Our proper work now if we love mankind and the world we live in is revolution.”*<sup>3</sup>

–4–

Revolution is not a word that comes easily to our lips these days, there being no significant constituency within Western society that is calling for, or is expecting, fundamental change. There is no widespread belief in the West that anything other than the continuation of the same free market economics is even required. The 1960s were of course profoundly different in this respect, where both the mood and the opportunities for some sort of radical change were seemingly abundant. The prospects and desire for revolution, especially amongst the student populations of America, Britain and Continental Europe, were real. The presence of the word in this context should not surprise us unduly, therefore, but in Cage's case the conditions that permitted a properly revolutionary activity to arise from *music* are intriguing. Cage's transition from musical concerns to social ones arose from the fact that there came about a distinct constellation of factors whereby there was nothing keeping the aesthetic and social spheres apart. I want to try and account for the *plausibility* of this transition. To do this, I want to consider the objectives of avant-gardism as such and alongside this outline the status and expectations that were being placed upon technology at this time. Cage's insight was to recognise that both avant-garde artistic practice and advanced technology had developed in such a way that he was presented with a unique historical opportunity which, if art and technology were successfully harnessed, had the potential to revolutionise all aspects of society.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cage, *Year from Monday*, p. xi.

## Art & Life

At the most fundamental level, avant-gardism takes issue with the fact that art and life remain separate; it strives for synthesis of the two or what Peter Bürger has described as the *sublation* of art into life.<sup>4</sup> And the claim that art and life no longer need to be thought as separate is, of course, a central tenet of Cage's compositional practice. The avant-garde is, in this respect, the enemy of traditional art, and especially of a tradition – like that of modernism from which it springs – that maintains and proclaims its autonomy, its inwardness, its commitment to the work, to the sites, institutions and rituals surrounding its performance and reception. Avant-gardism denies the moments of beauty, transcendence and aesthetic epiphany, however mediated, that might arise from the quiet and private contemplation of the closed work. This tendency would be common to all avant-garde movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century – Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, the Beatniks, Fluxus, Arte Povera, Pop Art, Minimalism and arguably some recent British sculpture (aka “BritArt”).

Avant-gardism attempts, therefore, to throw open the work to the world outside it by laying claim to materials that hitherto were considered extraneous to or beneath the aesthetic domain – tins of soup, urinals, bottle racks, bus tickets, silence, environmental noise, unmade beds – all become valid material. Cage's delight in the interruptions that real life makes to our expectations and plans, including our expectations of art, is the dominant theme of his writings. Chance, as a compositional technique, also causes the interruption of the work and the work to interrupt us.

Cage took the disinterested contemplation inherent in aesthetic experience – as it is traditionally understood – and extended it to all phenomena thus massively increasing what in our environment could be understood to be beautiful. The ‘idyll’ of art is, therefore, only a proving ground for a sensibility that, once acquired, can bear witness to the excellence of *all things*. We are grateful to music for helping us develop such a sensibility, but we honour it by dispensing with it, as Cage writes: “*We open our eyes*

---

<sup>4</sup> See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Micheal Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984).

*and ears seeing life each day excellent as it is. This realization no longer needs art though without art it would have been difficult to come by.*<sup>5</sup>

–8–

### **Technological Utopianism**

The move from the child's play of music to social revolution is, seemingly, what the recent history of music, and Cage's music in particular, has made us ready for. But we must also take into account the fact that the life into which this artistic sensibility was to be extended was (and is) subject to a dynamic of its own. The 60s was marked by an increasing optimism and idealism regarding the possibilities of technology to alleviate material and physical suffering, to transform the nature of work and leisure time, to democratise, to transform the nature of interpersonal communications, to dominate and control the natural environment in almost every respect.

–9–

One of the most influential figures at that time was Marshall McLuhan. As many of you will know, set out in McLuhan's best-selling book of 1964, *Understanding Media*, was the slogan that the 'medium is the message'. What this slogan basically summarises is the idea that the *real* social and ideological consequences of a given technology or media are given in the medium itself and not in the information it purports to convey or in the purpose it was designed to carry out. This impact will be as "a change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs"<sup>6</sup> and the book, gives occasionally astute analyses as to how certain technologies or media – the clock, the printed word, clothing, the motor car, the telephone, the phonograph, television and so forth – make their presence felt in a culture, and the ways in which they condition discourse, mental disposition, attitude and life rhythms.

–10–

McLuhan identifies 'electric' technology as overcoming the paradigms associated with earlier mechanical technologies, and with this come utterly new, unforeseen and hitherto ill-understood effects. In contemporary society we spend increasingly less time engaged in activities which have tangible material consequences, rather a premium is placed on the production, movement and consumption of information. What is more, the exchange of information is instantaneous; if the train and motor car subdued separation and distance, generating in their wake suburbs and stressed

---

<sup>5</sup> Cage, Diary, LXII, *A Year From Monday*, p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (MIT, 1994), p. 8.

commuters, electric communication technologies finally abolish distance altogether. Electronic media enable a massive extension and amplification of ourselves, of our bodies and senses. “*We have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace*”.<sup>7</sup> Electric technology, as opposed to mechanical technologies, are decentralising, they cut across any and all boundaries, and permit the “*utmost discontinuity and diversity in spatial organisation*”.<sup>8</sup>

–11–

If the sensibility produced by avant-garde music breaks through into a life which is in the process of being profoundly altered by electric technology, a life form speeded up immeasurably, de-centred, if our capacities, our knowledge, senses, energies are being transferred to and heightened by external media, if the relationship between our senses is being readjusted, the consequences could be extraordinary. What is more, the artist has a unique role in investigating the impact of media since it is they that have invested in and explored changes to sense perception to the greatest degree.<sup>9</sup> What Cage recognised was that changes of perception and thinking that once took place at the level of the individual could now take place socially, and the anarchy of the Happening needed to be confined to a local event but could take place on any number of levels and be set on a potentially world stage.

–12–

The changes of scale, pace, and psychic, sensory and communicative reorganisation that modern technology ushers in, provides the most diverse circumstances in which a sublated artistic practice could flourish. As Andreas Huyssen has pointed out, it is nonsensical to imagine that art can attain its sublation into life unilaterally as it were, such a transformation would only be plausible in a circumstance where all pertinent spheres and discourses – political, scientific, philosophical and so forth – were similarly disposed for radical change.<sup>10</sup> At least during this period of technological and political optimism, there were in place factors which render Cage’s utopian political message of the period more than just plausible, but compelling.

---

<sup>7</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> See Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories – Marking time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 98.

To ground this a little, take the example of *0'00"* whereby an activity of a single performer, engaged in the act of fulfilling an obligation to another, lasting any duration, is subject to amplification. It is a piece designed to demonstrate the thesis 'that everything we do is music', it is also highly pragmatic, giving Cage some time to catch up with his correspondence; there is also, in outline, an ethical event here, the willingness to serve the *other* in some capacity. But the role of amplification in this is decisive: without amplification, this is not yet an event, a spectacle. Amplification extends the performer's body in space, it exteriorises and re-presents the activity via an electronic medium. In McLuhan's terms, amplification achieves a resolution change in our perception, it maximises – even to an absurd degree – the *sonic definition* of the activity. The density of experience and quantity of information associated with an activity is thus intensified, and the distribution of information to our senses is skewed in the direction of the aural, a new dimension to the activity is discovered, changing the content of the experience utterly. As such, *0'00"* is fine exemplar of the principle that the medium is the message.

As I need hardly point out, the kind of revolution that Cage was envisioning did not take place, and what is more, utopianism, like revolution is no longer an acceptable subject for political discussion. The elimination of utopianism from social thought, politics and art is by no means a cause for celebration, as neo-conservatives would like to think. The loss of a discourse on utopia has profound implications for conservative thought as well, resulting a lack of direction, a narrowing of ambition and presents us with the difficulty of how we are to conceive of the future.

In this context we should briefly touch on another utopian thinker, Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse's most well known work *One-Dimensional Man*,<sup>11</sup> also published in 1964 and also a best seller, was also concerned with modern technology, though his analyses strike an altogether more cynical tone than McLuhan's. His basic assumption, like the other members of the Frankfurt School, was that modern technology had reached a sufficiently advanced stage of sophistication that it could in principle attain the goal of true human emancipation, we could, in principle, establish a utopia. What

---

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man – Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 1964).

critical theory needed to establish was why society had failed to recognise and grasp this opportunity.

–16–

His thesis was that advanced capitalist society had been highly effective in containing all forms of speculative and critical thinking, a kind of thinking that could drive such technological progress in a truly humane direction. Society had become one-dimensional in that it suppresses all actions, aspirations or ideas that cannot be validated by dominant forms of rational justification. Media, advertising, consumerism and public institutions integrate individuals into the capitalist system, stabilising and sustaining it.

–17–

What society lacks is a space from which to project human aspirations and potential, it lacks a space from which to begin a critical reflection on society. Traditional culture was a key resource in this respect, the distance that the bourgeois artistic traditions kept from the wider world is to be considered a source of strength, likewise the private aesthetic experiences and reflections of the subject contain a truth which public discourse lacks. The avant-garde's condemnation of traditional culture is therefore highly worrying – it does the work of one-dimensional society by closing down and shaming those that persist in appealing to the transcendent and to the true, convicting them of elitism and self-indulgence. And if art and life have been united, might this simply be under the totalising principle of operationalism – all things must be held accountable in the same manner and must answer to the question 'what ends does this serve'.

–18–

For Cage in the 60s, there was still a discursive and praxial space which was able to accommodate a language of utopianism. We should not shy away from this, any more than we can be sure of what this utopianism and the works associated with it really amount to today. In opening art to life, art is made deeply vulnerable, should political events take a turn for the worse. Ours is an age of diminished expectations, and the contemporary avant-garde, while still complaining of a boundary between art and life, has no political subtext and makes a straw man of the traditions it opposes. The modern art gallery and concert hall is not a place where we expect to be shocked by truth or epiphany, we do not even expect to undergo something as reactionary and outmoded as an aesthetic experience; rather we are merely presented with easy to decipher, mildly provocative objects about which we can, if we please, have a quick

chat and talk of the radical in this context is facile. Avant-gardism is not universally relevant, at its best it demonstrates to us our hesitancy and reluctance to countenance anything other than what prevails within our society, at its worst, it might be that all that is on show are the banal revelries of a happy consciousness and a deluded ratification of an ideology that we are reluctant even to call by its name.