

Sound's Modest Witness: Notes on Cage and Modernism

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John Cage's work has been interpreted by various critics as representative of both modernism and postmodernism. Although scholars have focused on the aesthetic and historical dimensions of modernism, the subject can also be approached from the perspective of ontology. Specifically, Cage's work was premised on an absolute ontological distinction between an objective natural world and a subjective social world. This modernist worldview led Cage to think that he could eliminate the contingencies of the social in order to become a modest witness of the nature that was revealed through experiment. The Cagean discourse of modest self-abnegation—which we are accustomed to associating with his borrowings from Asian philosophy—reproduces a familiar dynamic of power in the West, in which the cultivation of self-invisibility is the key to epistemological and social power.

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This short meditation on John Cage's modernism has to do with ontology and virtue—a particularly modern ontology of nature and society, and a particularly modern virtue of modesty. Modesty brings to mind three meanings, the first having to do with limitation; a modest person undertakes actions that are not too ambitious. The second meaning has to do with moderation and humility; a modest person does not overestimate his or her role. The third meaning has to do with covering up in order to escape attention; a modest person avoids ostentatious displays of the self. Each of these meanings is brought into play by Cage's discourse and comportment, his manner of operation.

How is modesty a particularly modern mode of relating to the world? As many have shown, the scientific revolution of the early modern period established what the philosopher of science Bruno Latour refers to as the 'Modern Constitution,' a way of organizing the cosmos into a social realm of subjective values and a natural realm of

objective facts.¹ The modest witness is a scientist who does nothing more than create situations in which the natural realm can speak for itself, thereby supposedly eliminating the uncertainties and disputations of the social realm. This structure of knowledge production (and the ontology that conditions it) creates the basis for a figure like the modest witness, who (like the secular humanist, the flâneur, or the industrious bourgeois) is particular to the European modern period. Cage shares with modern science an investment in ‘the experiment’ as the foundational scenario for demonstrating modesty and allowing nature to speak. In both cases, the experiment is an event that is understood to generate a two-fold outcome: a subjective witness who has overcome the contingency of his situatedness, and an objective world that is self-sufficient and clearly readable. One is not possible without the other.

I’m interested in this combination of ontology and virtue because I think it tells a new and interesting story about how Cage is positioned in relation to discourses of modernism and postmodernism, a topic that has already been analyzed with great skill by a range of authors. In what follows, I will begin with a short survey of some of these critical writings on the question of Cage, modernism, and postmodernism, concentrating on the chance-determined and indeterminate works of the 1950s and later. I will then immodestly shift the discussion toward my own interest, ontology, with the intention of showing how Cage’s discourse of nature is premised upon a modernist cosmology that strictly divides social from natural affairs. I conclude by underlining what is at stake in the matter of ontological politics.

The idea that Cage’s work initiated (or participated in) a rupture of modernist aesthetics is repeated endlessly in commentary on the composer, with good reason (see Perloff, 2002). Set against a modernist artwork that was thought to be self-contained, formally pure, organically structured, and object-oriented, Cagean aesthetics advanced ideals that appeared radically different; fragmented, theatrical, and processual, his works after 1950 highlighted a kind of distributed authorship that was far less common in the art conventionally regarded as modernist. He seemed to value mixture over purity: ‘The fences have come down and the labels are being removed. An up-to-date aquarium has all the fish swimming together in one huge tank,’ he wrote in the 1970s (Cage, 1981, p. 179). Cage’s knack for blurring the boundaries between poetry, music, theatre, and dance was unfortunate in the eyes of avowedly modernist critics like Michael Fried, who found little of value in the space between individual media (Fried, 1967 [1998]).

Cage also used notation differently than his modernist predecessors and contemporaries. As Joaquim Benitez has pointed out, composers associated with the modernist avant-garde sought to fix their compositions in notation, which became an index of their intentionality (however inscrutable, in many cases; Benitez, 1978, pp. 65–66). In Cage’s indeterminate works (*Concert*, *Fontana Mix*, *Variations*, etc.), however, the score can be realized in any number of ways, leading to a future in performance that cannot be foreseen. Roland Barthes noted that such a proliferation of signifiers set Cage’s scores apart from more conventional—and, of course,

modernist—scores, because there was no requirement for a listener to make sense of the construction of the piece from its encoding (Barthes, 1985, discussed in Perloff, 2002).²

In addition to these aesthetic and formal considerations of Cage's work, other theorists have concentrated on the discourses and practices that constitute modernism/postmodernism as an opposition, 'a continuous and centripetal antinomy,' in the words of Georgina Born (1995, p. 64). In her groundbreaking anthropological study of IRCAM, Born provides a rigorous theorization of Cagean experimentalism as the postmodern negation of modernist music. Moving in counterpoint to modernism, Born observes, Cagean postmodernists favored more horizontal (or leaderless) socio-musical situations instead of the hierarchical power structures of serialism. Furthermore, in contrary motion to Boulez, Stockhausen, and the emerging international style of the 1950s, the postmodern composers moved increasingly toward techniques of noncontrol. Two important aspects of experimentalism further mark out its difference from modernist serialism for Born: its interest in nonwestern and popular musics, and its investment in the ritual of live performance (1995, ch. 2).

Cage's work is also viewed as part of an epochal shift from modernism into postmodernism, germinating in the 1950s but coming into full emergence in the 'new sensibility' of the 1960s. This is how critic Leslie Fiedler saw the 'revolution in sensibility' unleashed by the Beats (who, in his view, were not only anti-Christian, but anti-white and anti-humanist, too; Fiedler, 1965; see also Sontag, 1966). Plenty of other recent critics concur; Andreas Huyssen (1986), for example, writes, 'Against the codified high modernism of the preceding decades, the postmodernism of the 1960s tried to revitalize the heritage of the European avant-garde and to give it an American form along what one could call in short-hand the Duchamp-Cage-Warhol axis' (p. 188). One might find further support for the idea of Cage at the historical origin point of postmodernism in the classes in experimental music composition that he taught at the New School between 1956 and 1960. (According to Bruce Altshuler [1991], Cage was listed from fall 1956 to summer 1960 as teaching composition at the institution. In 1958, Cage's class was referred to as 'experimental composition'.) Among the students in this seminar were important Fluxus contributors including Jackson Mac Low, Al Hanson, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, and Allan Kaprow. Cage thus had direct personal and pedagogical links to a generation of artists who are often (and, perhaps, more comfortably) referred to as postmodern.

The collaborative nature of Fluxus performance should not be overlooked. The feminist challenge to the isolated ego of the masculine art hero was a major constitutive strand of an emerging postmodern subjectivity in the late 1960s (see Jones, 1998; Sayre, 1989); critics have also studied Cage's collaborations with Cunningham and Rauschenberg as another source for this new aesthetic disposition. (Claes Oldenburg cheekily referred to this transition as one from alienation to participation, or drunkenness to sobriety [quoted in Sayre, 1989, p. 103].) Branden

Joseph has similarly argued that, in pieces like *4'33''*, Cage resisted the possibility of a common model of subjectivity by creating a necessarily fragmented experience for his listeners. In these works, no position of audition is privileged; all are partial, situated, and unique (Joseph, 2003, p. 66). In his examination of the possibilities of Cagean subjectivity, Joseph extends the earlier work of Caroline Jones, who traced the ways that Cage used technological mediation and a discourse of silence to undercut the presumed sublimity of the postwar abstract expressionist ego. 'John Cage offered some of the first tools for its critique,' writes Jones (1993, p. 639). In response to the heterosexual, masculine, highly individualized, autochthonic, and eruptive creativity of this ego, Cage offered an altogether different subject, built on humility, discipline, and silence.

As Joseph explains, such a view of subjectivity has implications for how one understands Cagean politics in the context of the society of control (which, in the tradition of Foucault and Deleuze, is understood to follow from and intersect with classical and modern forms of power based on sovereignty and discipline). 'This impulse to create works that underline such a differential reception, that make each beholder aware of the role played by his or her individual history and subject position, is what forms the crux of the neo-avant-garde project initiated by Rauschenberg and Cage. Their work thus differs from that attributed to the historical avant-garde, for it relinquishes the attempt, common to dada and constructivism, to address or forge a collective political subject based on similarity, commonality, or exchange. For Rauschenberg, as for Cage, any collective subsumption of difference—whether advocated by the Left or the Right, for political mobilization or mass cultural conformity—was suspect' (Joseph 2003, p. 66). Cagean politics, therefore, responded to postmodern forms of power, and consciously resisted the terms of modern power and resistance.

It is important to remember, of course, that the individual unencumbered by group affiliations also has roots in European modernity—namely, classical liberalism. As I have argued elsewhere, a study of 'actually existing experimentalism'—that is, how Cage's work came into being, complete with disagreements, compromises, antagonisms, concessions, refusals, and modifications—yields themes common to the discourse of liberalism: autonomy, choice, the will to reason, justice as fairness, and small government (Piekut, 2011, p. 23). In this sense, Cage's politics represented less a break with modernist thinking than a continuation of its hegemonic political formation. Indeed, several scholars have detailed the many ways that Cage extended, rather than ended, modernism. Born, for example, raises an important point about the discourse of exegesis in modernism: 'Modernist art invests an unprecedented power in exegetical texts' (1995, p. 42). The role of theory and explication was pronounced in Cage's work, too. Born writes, 'the experimentalists remained theoreticist and determinist while searching for alternative philosophies—nonscientific and more social and spiritual—to legitimize and prescribe compositional practice. The music was still constructed in discursive texts. Cage, like Boulez, was also known as a writer and philosopher' (1995, p. 57).

Cage's intense friendship with Pierre Boulez, which began in 1949, provides another perspective on his modernist investments. The two shared an interest in matrices for organizing musical materials, as well as a commitment to expanding the sound complexes available to composers. Although Boulez would part ways with Cage when the latter moved decisively toward chance, Cage continued to develop new approaches to structure, pre-composition, and timbral complexity that he initially shared with his French comrade (see Nattiez, 1993). David Bernstein's work, in particular, has made this connection evident (2002).

Among the strongest tropes of modernist aesthetic discourse is the appropriation and disavowal of nonwestern influences (Torgovnick, 1990). Coco Fusco has given what is still perhaps the most compelling analysis of the avant-garde's investments in racial otherness. She writes, "Tristan Tzara's dictum that "Thought is made in the mouth" . . . refers directly to the Dadaist belief that Western art tradition could be subverted through the appropriation of the perceived orality and performative nature of the "non-western". In a grand gesture of appropriation, Tzara anthologized African and Southern Pacific poetry culled from ethnographies into his book, *Poèmes Nègres*, and chanted them at the infamous Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1917' (Fusco, 1994, pp. 149–50). One cannot fail to see Cage's interest in South and East Asian philosophy in this light, even if Cage was less interested in orality than he was in notions of nondualism and nature-centered spirituality. Writing in regard to reception of American composers, David Nicholls makes clear that Cage's relatively Eurocentric personal style and the covert nature of his nonwestern influences might partially explain his critical success. In contrast to such composers as Henry Cowell and Lou Harrison, who eschewed an overly personal style in favor of a wide-ranging and eclectic transethnicism, Cage 'became as much a part of European high modernism as were the techniques and the traditions [he] should in theory have been opposed to' (Nicholls, 1996, p. 589). At the same time, though, Born makes the important point that, however open to world music they may have been, many American experimentalists perpetuated a musical discourse in which the only participants were European or European American. '[T]he apparent pluralism and relativism of Cage and his *confrères* never precluded quite conscious bids to establish an American/experimental counter- (or complementary) hegemony to European modernism, a hegemony that for Cage was predicated on the ideological conflation of "America" with "the world,"' she writes (Born & Hesmondhalgh, 2000, p. 21).

Modernism's relationship to popular music was similarly fraught, and Cage's attitude toward the commercial sphere of pop culture was consistent with his modernist colleagues. In fact, the New York School and its immediate predecessors and successors rarely acknowledged the existence of the capitalist music industry. As Born has noted, only folk, ethnic, or world music were borrowed as sources or influences—rarely commercial pop. Cage's dismissive remarks about jazz, in addition to revealing a racial discourse of exnomination, can also be interpreted in this context of anti-commercialism. Indeed, Cage's enmity for the culture industry is laid bare in the closing section of 'Lecture on Nothing,' when he remarks, 'Record collections,

that is not music. The phonograph is a thing, - not a musical instrument Would you like to join a society called Capitalists Inc.? . . . To join you must show you've destroyed at least one hundred records or, in the case of tape, one sound mirror. To imagine you own any piece of music is to miss the whole point' (1961, p. 125).

Cage's socio-aesthetic position within traditional art-music institutions has rarely been in doubt, a fact that Lydia Goehr (1992) takes to illustrate how challenging and revolutionary advances in art practice usually suffer the same fate, namely, being folded back into the institutional tradition they were trying to upend (pp. 243–86). With *4'33''*, Cage may have wished to bring 'real' and 'natural' sounds into the concert hall, Goehr writes, but he maintained the formal constraints of concert-hall conventions; those constraints virtually guaranteed that any 'real' and 'natural' sounds would quickly cease to be so. Judith Lochhead (2004) makes a related argument about Cage's program for listening: the composer expected performers and listeners to hear sounds as only themselves, thereby asserting a mode of proper hearing, an impulse she identifies with modernist aesthetics. Therefore, if the 'post' in postmodernism is supposed to refer to a moment *after* modernism and its conventions, then the label appears to be an odd fit for Cage.

Another modernist aesthetic trait in Cage's work that has been identified by commentators is his technologism. The composer's clearest statements come in the late 1930s and 1940s in such texts as 'The Future of Music: Credo,' wherein he rhapsodizes about the ability of electrical instruments 'to provide complete control of the overtone structure of tones (as opposed to noises) and to make these tones available in any frequency, amplitude, and duration' (Cage, 1961, p. 4). Such statements exemplify Cage's excited optimism about the possibilities of musical technology: 'What we can't do ourselves will be done by machines and electrical instruments which we will invent' (p. 87). Although Cage and his circle developed low-tech, improvised, and artisanal uses of electronics, their commitment to new technologies and to framing their experimental work as quasi-research was shared with more institutionally grounded, highly funded modernism (Dewar, 2009).

The tone in which Cage delivered his praise for machines and electric instruments—'Experiment must necessarily be carried on'—raises another point about modernism, namely, its normativity and its teleological concept of history. Such pronouncements can be found throughout *Silence*. Cage's decision to use noise in his music, he writes, 'alters the view of history, so that one is no longer concerned with tonality or atonality, Schoenberg or Stravinsky' (1961, pp. 68–69). European music, as well as Charles Ives, is no longer 'urgently necessary' (p. 70). Flynt (1990) compares the contest between Xenakis, Boulez, Babbitt, and Cage to field the most radical music to the US–Soviet space race.

Cage often placed himself on history's leading edge, but many scholars use the history of the early twentieth century to make arguments about Cage's participation in modernism. Although his turn toward chance and spontaneity is often attributed to his encounter with Zen buddhism, Bernstein has argued for the relevance of the historical avant-garde—which he refers to as 'the most radical manifestation of

modernism'—to Cage's compositional output, identifying a consistent desire in the composer to bring us to a state of awareness about the chance dynamics of everyday life (2001, p. 9; see also Perloff, 2002). Indeed, Bernstein locates Cage at a pivot point between the historical avant-garde and the resurgent political art of the 1960s: 'John Cage was perhaps the most crucial link with the historical avant-garde after the [Second World] war' (1999–2000).

Nancy Perloff likewise calls attention to the ways in which Cage's aesthetic choices were influenced by his deep investment in early-twentieth-century modernism. Many critics might interpret the 1952 Black Mountain College happening as an important originary moment in postmodernist aesthetics: the event was non-centered (it occurred with no stage), collaborative, fragmentary and overlapping, mixed-mediated, and improvisatory. Perloff (2002), on the other hand, counters, 'In seizing upon Cage's theatricality and nonhierarchy as a source for postmodernism of the 70s, critics overlooked the emergence of collaborative and mixed media performance in Europe as early as the 1910s' (p. 65). Given this historical precedent, Perloff argues, it is just as instructive to see the 1952 event as a response to Cage and company's 1948 staging of Erik Satie's *Le Piège de Méduse* (1913) at the College. Cage's high estimation of the French modernist is well-known; his one-act comedy was produced as part of a festival devoted to Satie's music. Like the 1952 proto-happening, *Le Piège de Méduse* was a mixed-media piece that combined absurdist word-play and stage actions. Cage's early performance art event, then, can be linked backward in history just as easily as it can be connected to later developments in the arts.

Nicholls's (1990) scholarship on the early decades of American experimentalism makes a strong argument for contextualizing Cage within a nationalist modernism built out of shared, informal patronage circuits, pedagogical networks, and self-generated performance opportunities. A predominant characteristic of the whole movement was a tendency toward theoreticism and systematic approaches to technique, a tendency reaching its apex with the publication of Henry Cowell's *New Musical Resources* in 1930 (Cowell, 1930), but certainly present earlier in the idea of dissonant counterpoint that had been developed in the 1910s by Charles Seeger and taken up by Cowell, Carl Ruggles, Ruth Crawford, and even the young Cage.

This inclination toward composition using systematic organization of musical materials can also be traced to Cage's studies with Arnold Schoenberg in the 1930s. Michael Hicks has uncovered the historical details of this student–teacher relationship, disposing of some well-worn myths in the process. As Hicks (1990) argues, Cage had a largely unsuccessful experience with the master, but took away from these studies a commitment to devote his life to music, as well as a slight oedipal complex: '[E]ven as he assimilated his studies with Schoenberg into his new musical language, Cage continued to distance himself from his former teacher, asserting that his own music went further than Schoenberg's in the proper path of modernism' (p. 131). Bernstein (2001) has expanded on this historical work by detailing Cage's continuing use of precompositional techniques learned from Schoenberg.

Aside from these personal or aesthetic links to mid- and early-century modernism, Cage's apparent commitment to political and social change in his art has also been the subject of commentary. Bernstein (2001) (following Peter Bürger) identifies this theme as a central characteristic of early modernism, and particularly the historical avant-garde, and explains that it persists in Cage's work from the 1960s onward. He writes, 'Through his own works, and by promoting ideas drawn from Marshall McLuhan, R. Buckminster Fuller, and anarchist politics, Cage transformed the sociopolitical program of the twentieth-century avant-garde, redirecting its concerns to problems facing us at the turn of the twenty-first century' (p. 16). Always the incisive critic, Andreas Huyssen (1986) offers a more nuanced version of the same argument about the neo-avant-garde project, insisting that postmodernism hardly lacked a sociopolitical program (though his analysis of power and the postmodern does not yet consider the issue of control adumbrated by Joseph). '[T]he revolt of the 1960s was never a rejection of modernism per se,' he writes, 'but rather a revolt against that version of modernism which had been domesticated in the 1950s, become part of the liberal-conservative consensus of the times, and which had even been turned into a propaganda weapon in the cultural-political arsenal of Cold War anticommunism' (p. 190).

As previously mentioned, I have also made a case for the modern derivation of Cage's musical politics, though, unlike Bernstein, I argue for the relevance of a classical liberalism whose roots stretch back to the early modern period of the seventeenth century. As Cage's exemplary executor of indeterminacy, David Tudor was culturally flexible, individualist, autonomous, and tolerant (if perhaps unmindful) of others. In short, he was a representative classical liberal subject. Furthermore, during Cage's most political period, the late 1960s to the middle 1970s, the composer often voiced a view of small government congruent with liberal theory, which advocates for a government that exists only to the extent that it provides the right of a citizen to pursue whatever s/he might define as a good life (Piekut, 2011).

These studies (and others that I unfortunately do not have the space to consider) are concerned largely with matters of aesthetics, experience, and history. Often, these three themes overlap in various critics' treatments of Cage and his work. In terms of aesthetics, writers such as Perloff, Sayres, and Born all detail the many ways that Cage challenged modernist aesthetics: he dispensed with the clear boundaries of the autonomous work; he collaborated with humans and machines in a manner that distributed authorship away from a central figure; he combined media; he undermined the textual authority of the score. Other scholars—Bernstein, Nicholls, Hicks—find precedents for Cage's work in earlier moments, situating the composer in a broader modernist history. Still other writers, such as Born and Goehr, have focused on the way that differences between modernism and postmodernism manifest in Cage's discourse and practice. Born points to an important difference between the hierarchical authority of modernism and the more lateral socio-musicality of (Cagean) postmodernism, but she also acknowledges the discourses (theoreticism, technologism, the disavowal of popular music industries) that Cage

shared with his modernist confrères. Goehr has made clear that, for all the radical promise in his discourse, Cage remained firmly within the conventions of the work-concept, and thus did not move beyond the expectations of modernist composition.

Another way to consider Cage's relationship to modernism, one that has received relatively little critical attention, is through the category of ontology: how he divided the world into human and nonhuman, subject and object.³ Nature becomes a particularly salient term in this discussion, given its importance in Cage's discourse and in much commentary on his work (see Ingram, 2006).

The theologian Jeremy Begbie (2000) suggests that Cage's relationship with nature is one of his strongest modernist qualities. He argues that Boulez and Cage—his pair of arch modernists—'would appear to share *a distinct unease about the relation of the composer to the constraint of nature*' (p. 192). On the one hand, Boulez cleanly separates the figure of the composer from the raw materials of nature, isolating a 'sovereign constructive intellect' that 'brings order and meaning to the sonic world' (p. 193). And yet, as Boulez increases his control over the material, he faces the possibility of introducing an excess of order, which is, as the composer admits, 'equivalent to disorder' (Boulez quoted in Begbie, 2000, p. 194). The universe strikes back. On the other hand, Cage transforms the role of the composer from expressing to accepting. 'To be sure, here music is "freed," in a sense, but the cost is an evacuation (or near evacuation) of the notion of music as constructive, of the idea that human shaping could be fruitful and enriching,' Begbie writes. 'The dialectic between human will and nature's constraint is thus effectively dissolved' (p. 194).

One might counter that the binary thinking of dialectics was one of the main relational structures that Cage wished to escape, and Begbie indeed seems to miss this important point. He also has in mind a rather loose idea of the 'freedom' that Cage pursued, but the composer's approach to freedom was far more cautious. And yet, I think that Begbie gets at something essential. Cage must work so hard to remove the human capacity for intention from his creative process because he does not believe that intention is a part of nature in its manner of operation. In other words, humanity *is* essentially distinct from the natural order, but those qualities responsible for this distinction—intention, ego, will, memory, psychology—can be attenuated by the composer through the disciplined use of chance. Cage's compositional practice, then, is premised on an initial difference between the human and the nonhuman.

Like Begbie, Latour argues that the belief in a firm ontological distinction between humanity and nature is the central pillar of modernist thinking. This distinction comes in many forms, including human/nonhuman, value/fact, subject/object, society/nature, and contingency/necessity. Latour (1993) traces the origins of this cosmos-cleaved-in-two to the development of experimental science in the seventeenth century. 'Out there' is the natural, external world, a realm of objective truth and facts, unchanging and authoritative. Nature is indifferent. We may come to represent it more or less accurately, but its operations remain true regardless of our knowledge of them. 'In here,' on the other hand, lies the realm of human affairs, marked by negotiation and the fragile contingencies of the social. As philosopher

Graham Harman (2009) writes, ‘Modernity is the attempt to cleanse each half of any residue of the other, freeing facts from any contamination with personal value judgments, while liberating values and perspectives from the test of hard reality’ (p. 58). Other theorists, such as Stephen Toulmin and Talal Asad, have detailed the ways in which the emergence of facts and the idea of objective knowledge—as well as their co-constitution with categories like value and belief—were conditioned by the uncertainties of religious conflict and colonial expansion in the early modern period (Asad, 1993; Toulmin, 1990).

For Latour (2010), *nature* is a deeply ideological term, one that does not describe a portion of reality so much as create it. ‘Nature is not a thing, a domain, a realm, an ontological territory,’ he writes. ‘It is (or rather, it was during the short modern parenthesis) a way of organizing the division (what Alfred North Whitehead has called the Bifurcation) between appearances and reality, subjectivity and objectivity, history and immutability’ (p. 476). From this perspective, we might regard with suspicion any claim to ‘discover’ or ‘unveil’ nature. Although such a claim most frequently comes from an experimental scientist, one might just as reasonably examine the analogous claims of an experimental musician. According to Cage, his musical methodology laid nature bare: ‘An experimental action . . . does not move in terms of approximations and errors, as “informed” action by its nature must, for no mental images of what would happen were set up beforehand; it sees things directly as they are: impermanently involved in an infinite play of interpenetrations’ (1961, pp. 14–15). In what ways does a claim like this one indicate a modernist worldview? In drawing back the curtain to reveal the true nature of reality, to see things directly as they are, he promises the same certainty as his early modern forebears.

According to Latour and other historians of modern thought, the ontological politics of modern science and reason cultivated a discourse and set of practices that allowed some to make authoritative, objective claims about the world only to the extent that they supposedly eliminated the contingencies of the social, the subjective, the human. (We know, of course, that these knowledge claims are always and necessarily interwoven with subjectivities, contingencies, and socialities of various kinds.) In the laboratory experiment, as in the Cagean experiment, success is measured through the attenuation of the experimenter’s role. He must ask the right questions and then allow nature to respond, transforming himself in the process from instigator to witness.

In their well-known account of the beginnings of experimental science, Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer write of this early epistemological discourse, ‘A man whose narratives could be credited as mirrors of reality was a *modest man*; his reports ought to make that modesty visible’ (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985, p. 65). Modesty was likewise an important feature of Cage’s discourse, and it contributed to the authority with which he represented and imitated nature. He took pains to show that there were no hidden tricks or inexplicable inspirations in his compositional process, which the composer detailed transparently in his many explanatory writings. Cage professed humility in many ways, by pursuing questions rather than answers, having nothing to

say, and by going about his work ‘stupidly,’ as he told one interviewer in 1989 (Lohner, 1992). From his ‘sunny disposition’ to his professed ignorance of harmony, he created a position of theoretical innocence in his texts, following Meister Eckhart’s prediction that ‘our ignorance will be ennobled and adorned with supernatural knowledge’ (Cage, 1961, p. 64). The objective authority gained in this position is readily apparent in his dismissal of schooling: ‘Schools teach the making of structures by means of classical harmony. Outside school, however (e.g., Satie and Webern), a different and correct structural means reappears: one based on lengths of time’ (p. 63). Shapin and Schaffer’s (1985) description of Robert Boyle could just as easily have been written with Cage in mind: ‘Boyle’s “naked way of writing,” his professions and displays of humility, and his exhibition of theoretical innocence all complemented each other in the establishment and the protection of matters of fact. They served to portray the author as a disinterested observer and his accounts as unclouded and undistorted mirrors of nature. Such an author gave the signs of a man whose testimony was reliable’ (p. 69).

Although we customarily associate Cage’s thinking with a kind of Zen/Thoreauvian nondualism (see, for example, the important work of Christopher Shultis), it is also readily apparent that the aesthetics of this modest witness proceeded from the premise of a bifurcated cosmos. Indeed, just as he activated modernist and postmodernist tendencies in his music, Cage struggled to reconcile an attraction to nondualist thinking with the broadly modernist ontology that he brought to all of his work. For Cage, ‘in here’ included one’s taste, memory, intention, history, and ego, while ‘out there’ existed the favored qualities of chance, fluency, change, purposelessness, and disorder. In his aesthetic approach, which, as we all know, sought to imitate nature in its manner of operation, he wanted to attenuate those ‘in here’ things so that we—composers, performers, listeners—could get further ‘out there.’ As Bernstein (2001) has stated, ‘Again, the motivation behind this sort of activity was to bring art closer to the randomness that was seen to characterize real life’ (p. 12). Using chance operations, Cage ‘chained’ his ego so that it could not possibly affect his music (quoted in Revill, 1992, p. 152). Once the ego no longer blocks action, he wrote, ‘A fluency obtains which is characteristic of nature’ (Cage 1961, p. 37).

Performers, too, can move from the ‘in here’ to the ‘out there’ if the particularities of the social are brought under control. According to Cage,

each performer, when he performs in a way consistent with the composition as written, will let go of his feelings, his taste, his automatism, his sense of the universal, not attaching himself to this or to that, leaving by his performance no traces, providing by his actions no interruption to the fluency of nature. The performer therefore simply does what is to be done, not splitting his mind in two, not separating it from his body, which is kept ready for direct and instantaneous contact with his instrument (p. 38).

I would look past Cage’s exhortations to keep mind and body unified and to let go of one’s sense of the universal. His idea of body/mind unity still unfolds within the

greater division of society and nature, and individual senses of the universal can be eschewed only because they are subsumed in a much greater universality for Cage, namely, that of an objective nature and its manner of operation. As Latour (2002) might say, '[T]hose cultural differences make no real difference anyway, since, somewhere, nature continues to unify reality by means of laws that are indisputable and necessary ...' (p. 15). For this reason, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is immaterial for Latour. A postmodern aesthetic environment that highlights the individual subject position of each beholder nonetheless depends on a single reality to which each perspective is subject. As Annemarie Mol (1998) writes, 'Perspectivalism broke away from a monopolistic version of truth. But it didn't multiply reality. It multiplied the eyes of the beholders' (p. 76). Such a natural universality, of course, recapitulates the themes of underlying unity so important to the perennial philosophy that captivated Cage in the 1940s and colored his understanding of South and East Asian philosophy for the rest of his life.

Cage's compositional process after 1950 or so was mobilized not to gain contingency (in the form of chance or indeterminacy), but to lose it. In other words, chance operations and indeterminacy eliminated the contingencies of subjectivity—one person's taste, one person's ego, one person's idea of order—so that one could enjoy the necessities of objectivity—a universal nature, for everyone, in flux. In such a scenario, one escapes from multiculturalism into mononaturalism (Latour, 2002, pp. 14–15). The very fact that one must attenuate the social in order to realize one's position in the great unity of nature highlights the initial premise of bifurcation in Cage's cosmos.

I am certainly not the first writer to call attention to the air of necessity in Cage's aesthetics. As Cone (1960) once noted, the laws of chance yield connections between notes that are 'mechanistic rather than teleological' (p. 38).⁴ Cone's observation makes the most sense as it pertains to Cage's chance-determined scores, but I think it would be a mistake to conclude that the move to indeterminacy in the late 1950s releases Cage from the charge of mechanism. The composer thought that works that were indeterminate in regard to their performance achieved a closer match with nature in all of its complexity. In other words, indeterminacy went even further in applying the laws of chance to sound than did chance operations, and thus (for Cage) was a more correct and accurate reproduction of the dynamics of natural processes.

Begbie (2000) writes, 'Curiously, despite Cage's highly charged rhetoric of chance, speaking of his music, as with Boulez, one often has recourse to the language of necessity. The irony should not be missed: the struggle to be free of a supposedly oppressive ideological system (such as tonality) would seem to come close to resulting in two kinds of (oppressive?) necessity, the one the necessity of a particular mathematical system, the other the somewhat bland necessity of 'the way things happen'' (p. 196). The very blandness of this necessity tells us something about the extent to which, after many centuries, a modernist ontology has come to dominate thinking about the world. Cage could assume the role of sound's modest witness because of this long history of belief in an objective, universal nature.

In this short meditation, I have tried to understand how Cage cultivated a certain modesty. Among other things, modesty has to do with covering up or receding from view, not unlike Cage's 'Far Eastern animal who on a winter night getting sleepy pulls himself up into a tree letting the snow continue to fall so that he leaves no traces' (Cage, 1969, p. 115). Haraway (1997) labels modesty 'one of the founding virtues of what we call modernity.' This virtue, she continues, 'guarantees that the modest witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his objectivity' (pp. 23–24). Haraway's reference to modesty's remarkable power highlights what is at stake—not just ontology, but *ontological politics*. I take this phrase from Mol, who writes, 'If the term "ontology" is combined with that of "politics" then this suggests that the conditions of possibility are not given. That reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices.' Combining ontology and politics, she suggests, underlines the ways that reality is shaped by the actions of people, 'and the fact that its character is both open and contested' (Mol 1998, pp. 74–75; see also Law, 2002).

The problem with modesty is its self-invisibility, which causes open and contingent decisions about structuring the world appear to be closed and beyond dispute. When modest witnesses ventriloquize the objective world of nature, they dictate right actions while giving the impression that they are merely following a path of transcendental truth. In Mol's (1998) words, 'So they displace the decisive moment to places where, seen from here, it seems no decision, but a fact' (p. 80). The work of Haraway and others suggests that the Cagean discourse of self-abnegation—which we are accustomed to associating with his borrowings from Asian philosophy—reproduces an all-too-familiar dynamics of power in the West. Haraway (1997) writes, 'This self-invisibility is the specifically modern, European, masculine, scientific form of the virtue of modesty. This is the form of modesty that pays off its practitioners in the coin of epistemological and social power' (pp. 23–24).

In his lectures and writings, Cage presented himself as sound's modest witness. But in the terms of his compositional practice—that is, in what he actually did to create his music—I think the story is more complicated, perhaps too complicated for this modest collection of notes on the composer's relationship to modernism.⁵ Despite all of his talk about removing the self from the world, we see and hear the difference he makes everywhere in his music: asking questions, choosing sounds, modifying or amplifying nature's utterances, and so on. What I mean to say is that despite Cage's rhetorical embrace of a deep split between nature and society, a notion that is threaded through so much of his discourse since 1950, we find the zones rampantly overlapping in his practice. This observation is consistent with Latour's analysis of modernism, which, he argues, is characterized as much by the interanimation of the categories 'nature' and 'society' as it is by their discursive separation. Therefore, the ontological 'messiness' of Cage's practice is not evidence of a postmodernist

sensibility, but rather reveals another facet of a deeply elaborated modernism that is self-contradictory along the discourse/practice divide.

Notes

- [1] I draw, in particular, on Haraway (1997); Jay (2004); Latour (1993); Shapin and Schaffer (1985) and Toulmin (1990).
- [2] Rainer (1981) makes a similar argument, but in politicized terms: if Cage disrupts signifying practice itself, he also takes away the means to effect change in a discourse that is imperialist and patriarchal.
- [3] Barry, Born, and Weszkalnys (2008) have detailed the ways that ontology serves as a critical orientation for emerging modes of interdisciplinary inquiry.
- [4] Timothy Morton (2007) makes a similar point, p. 102.
- [5] For an extended analysis, see Piekut (in press).

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