

**The Cage Dialogues:
A Memoir**

William Anastasi

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Edited by Aaron Levy

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“The idiots! They were making fun of you...”

John Cage

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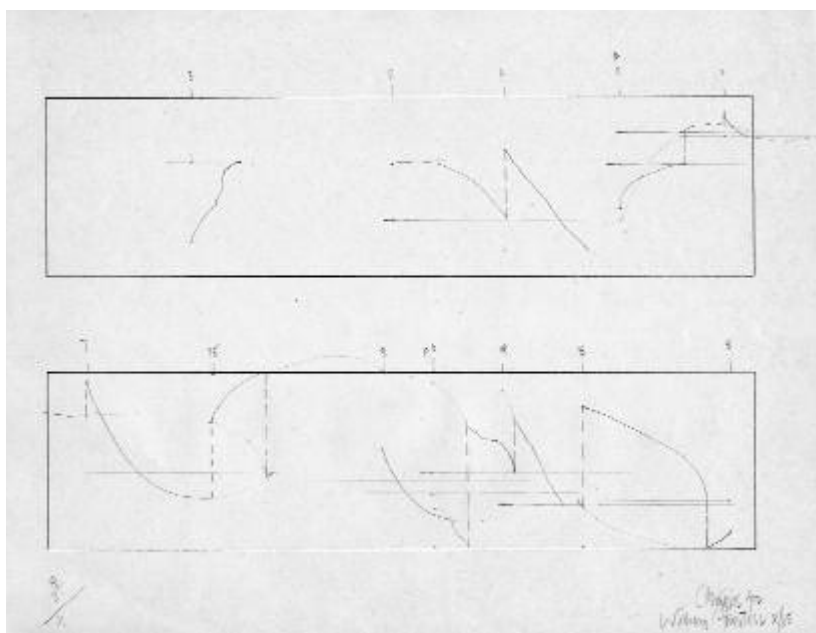
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John Cage, *R/1/2* [80] (pencil on paper), 1985

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Caged Chance
William Anastasi

Now I go alone, my disciples, You, too, go now alone... You revere me; but what if your reverence tumbles one day? Beware lest a statue slay you.

Summer I have become entirely, and summer noon! A summer in the highest spheres with cold wells and blissful silence: oh, come, my friends, that the silence may become still more blissful!

—Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche

I first met John Cage in 1965. I was readying the exhibition *Sound Objects* at the recently opened Dwan Gallery, New York. Virginia Dwan telephoned and asked whether I would like to donate a drawing or other small work to the Performance Art Group. I was unfamiliar with the name. She had heard they did excellent work helping forward-looking performance artists get public exposure. Each year they would offer donated art for sale to raise funds. I said I'd be glad to contribute. The following week she called again and asked whether I'd be in my loft a certain afternoon after five—if so, someone from the Performance Art people would come by to pick up my drawing. So it was arranged. When the time came the elevator buzzer sounded. I went down and found that the person who had come for the drawing was John Cage.

I had never met Cage but had seen him on stage at the Town Hall 25-Year Retrospective Concert in 1958. I was also familiar with his appearance from photographs reproduced on the liner of a recording I had of his *Fontana Mix*. He introduced himself and I learned that he was one of the “Performance Art people”—in fact had been one of the organization’s founders. He said that he had heard from Dwan that I was about to have a show titled *Sound Objects*. She had told him that these were sculptures that made sounds. He was interested, if there was the time, in seeing and hearing them. We went up and looked and listened.

I was planning to exhibit thirteen works—eleven in the main gallery, two in the back room. The first work Cage looked at was an enormous environment, a to-scale reconstruction of a window in a wall looking out on an airshaft at my previous apartment, on East Eighth Street. The soundtrack had been made there too—a recording of eight hours of New York airshaft sounds as they had wafted in through the window. For the environment I had taken the window from the studio and replaced it with a new one.

The *Sound Objects*, similarly, were everyday utilitarian objects that “remembered” the last sounds they had made before they were retired and claimed for this exhibit. There was a pick-ax, for example, that had been used to dig up earth from an empty lot on the Lower East Side. I had put the earth into a clear vinyl bag with a speaker resting on it; they both were suspended from the ceiling next to the pick-ax. The same electrical wire that transmitted the recorded sound of the digging to the speaker held the piece up. Cage responded warmly to the works, but had a question: Were the sounds from each work to be heard individually or simultaneously? I told him that when I presented the proposal I had planned to have them playing together continuously, but as the opening date approached, Dwan asked whether I might be persuaded to change this part of it because she was hoping to place the works individually in collections. If the sounds played simultaneously, collectors

or curators would get the idea that they were meant as a single environment; and she wanted them to think of each piece as an entity. I had reluctantly agreed because her worry seemed valid. As a result, I was working with an electronic engineer to design a switching mechanism that would permit the sounds to go off sequentially. I described to Cage the difficulties I was having with this idea, and he suggested that I go back to my original idea. Since the duration of the various sounds ranged from a few seconds to a few minutes, he was excited about hearing the random mixture that would result. He said, for example, that the sound of a glass jug smashing against a cinderblock—about three seconds in duration—would be an ideal percussive staccato to the sound of a pneumatic drill digging up a section of Broadway, which lasts for several minutes.

During this first meeting Cage asked about other works involving sound. I showed him a series of “blind” drawings, accompanied by the sounds of their making; and he saw and heard *Microphone*, a work from 1963 in which a tape player plays a recording, made in a soundproof closet, of the sounds of its own mechanism. Cage was enthusiastic and said, “You could call this a recording of the recorder recording the recorder.” He added, smiling, “It sounds like Gertrude Stein, doesn’t it?” Almost twenty years later he would encourage me to exhibit this work at PS1 in Queens.

I continued to go to see Cage in performance, but I did not approach him afterwards, on stage or backstage. In fact I did not talk to him again for twelve years.

In late 1977 I had a conversation with Alanna Heiss, the founder of PS1 in Queens and before that of The Clocktower, an alternate space for art and performance in Manhattan. I told her of a then unrealized performance work, *You Are*, that I had first proposed to The Museum of Modern Art ten years earlier. It was a companion piece to the exhibition *Six Sites*, which I had shown at the Dwan Gallery in April of 1967. That show consisted of large silk-screened paintings, each of them a literal rendition, slightly reduced in scale, of the wall on which the painting was hung. *You Are* needs a quartet of participants: a narrator, a court stenographer, a speed typist, and a “page stapler.” The recipe reads: *A narrator describes the audience for ninety minutes; a court stenographer takes down the narration; a typist types up a longhand version of this from the shorthand notes; a “page stapler” fastens each page when ready to a wall at eye level.*

The main impulse for the piece had to do with hearing vis-à-vis reading. It gave the audience slightly delayed access to a written version of what they had just heard live. Also, experience had shown that the stenographer, typing at her shorthand machine as fast as the words were spoken, used a phonetic code system. Turning this quickly into English, the typist would have to type out a phonetic version of any unfamiliar word. This added a chance element that enriched the experience. I recall, for instance, a narrator saying “gesticulating” and the longhand version giving us “just tickulating.”

Alanna asked if I would do three evenings of *You Are* at The Clocktower. I suggested performances on successive evenings and said I’d like to engage as the narrator on each respective evening an artist, a writer, and a composer. Remembering my meeting with Cage in 1965, I called him, reminded him who I was, and asked whether he would consider being the narrator for the third evening. He recalled our meeting and invited me to his home on Bank Street to discuss particulars. I showed him the recipe for the piece and spoke a bit about its genesis. He said he’d be happy to take part.

The composer’s evening was the last. Both the artist and the writer I had engaged for the first two evenings—Les Levine and Carl Keilblock—had described almost exclusively what their sense of sight had perceived,

downplaying their other senses. John and I agreed that he should describe mainly what he heard at the expense of his other senses. Here is the typed version of the first three minutes of Cage's narration as it appeared on the wall of the gallery. The unfamiliar name belongs to the shorthand typist who arrived a minute late, forcing the speed typist to type directly, as well as she could, the beginning of Cage's narration:

Day 3 8:00

It's 8:00. i will attempt to describe what I hear in this room where you and i we are. i hear some people walking and some others are talking. i just said hi to anne major who has arrived a little bit late. just before she sat down she made a very interesting sound with the rubber sole of her shoe. and just now another one moving the chair. the sound of the machine she is using is extremely quiet in comparison with your type writer.

8:01

an acoustic situation is extremely complicated. there are so many thing happening for instance the sound of this clock. Its almost as though it were boiling, throbbing, and all the walking continues. do you have a cold? do you need some kleenex? what?

8:02

now I hear the voice of my friend maryanne amashe. you hear it. of all the sounds i hear i am growing more and more fond of the one of this clock. that's a nice one. the situation im in is somewhat impossible, because in order to hear i must be quiet. but in order to narrate which im obliged to do, i have to speak and when i speak my attention isnot on what im hearing. so that my mind is divided between listening and saying. what im already noticing is that the sounds that are closest to me are the ones i hear that take my attention

though the sounds of people talking—that was interesting
that sounded like a bottle opening. its not its a staple
gun. beautiful.

During that first visit to Bank Street, after we had settled the logistics of *You Are*, John asked whether I played chess. I said I did, but hadn't for some time. He said, No matter—would I like to play some time? I said I would.

I called for the first time at noon a few days later. Cage was free at five. I don't remember who won that first game, but I do remember that we played a second, and that we had each won a game when we quit. Before I left, as we were discussing the game just finished, John's partner Merce Cunningham returned from holding classes and rehearsing his dance company. We were introduced. I asked him whether he played chess; he did, or at least knew the moves, but he played seldom—John was much the greater enthusiast. We three talked awhile, then Merce went to his bath. John and I parted with no further plans for chess.

A few days later, having errands downtown, I called around noon and asked John if he had time for a game. He did, again at five o'clock. We played again. I would soon become conscious of a hallmark quality in John's personality: he did not like to say no. If he could, he loved to say yes to whatever he was asked. This seemed almost instinctual, or at least a life position long in place. In a short time I was calling him around noon any day when my schedule was cooperative. *Do you have time for a game* became a mantra. From the start, with few exceptions, the answer was yes.

He [Duchamp] looked a little bit like a painting by Velazquez; with an almost rouged look that suggested a disappearance of health. So I said to myself, you must hurry up and be with him as much as you possibly can. (laughs) Which I did. I went up to Teeny first—still not wanting to disturb him—and said, Do you think Marcel would teach me chess? And she said, Well, ask him! So I went up to him and said, Would you consider teaching me chess? And he said, Do you know the moves? And I said Yes. He said, Well, come any day you like. (laughs)

—John Cage, in Joan Retallack, *Musicage*, 1996

My studio at that time was in Washington Heights, sometimes spoken of as part of Spanish Harlem—about 150 blocks north of John's studio/home. But with the art stores and art world mostly downtown, I was often there on business. And even if nothing called me there, if John's schedule was cooperative, I'd make the trip. An important part of the reason for this was that I was in the habit of making "blind" drawings on the subway, and I had long since noticed that a day when I made one of these usually turned out to be a pretty good day across the board. So it was good for me to get on the subway. Just as important, when I visited John I usually felt I was learning, whether or not we were chatting.

John once told me that when he and Duchamp played chess, Duchamp would get angry if John made a beginner's blunder, saying, "You don't *want* to win!" John admitted that this was close to the mark; the truth was, he said, he just wanted to be with Marcel. Certainly there were parallels in my situation with John. The difference was that I *did* want to win—in fact, introducing me to a visiting friend, John once jokingly remarked, "This is Bill Anastasi—he's Sicilian, he likes to win." (I quickly learned that John liked to win too.) Still, whether or not I won, being with him was unquestionably what was important.

What started with those telephone calls in 1977 soon became daily chess at five. It eventually became virtually automatic. One day after our games I said,

"John, since we manage to play so regularly, and since the telephone is the bane of your existence, how about if I simply show up at five, unless you call saying that you can't play?" His immediate response: "Oh, yes, that's much better." By that time I had been given a house key in case something kept him out of the studio until after five. On only one occasion did this fail to work out as planned, when Teeny Duchamp, Marcel's widow and a close friend of John and Merce, had come into New York either unannounced or, through a mixup, unexpected by John that day. He discovered in the early afternoon that he was supposed to be somewhere else at our game time. He had called but I too was out. He left a warm and unnecessarily apologetic note.

Friends would beg me to bring a tape recorder to our games. It was unlikely that John would have objected, and I was tempted; but I decided not to, feeling that spontaneity would suffer, at least on my part. I did once make an open-mike audiotape of a four-way conversation between John, Dove Bradshaw, Sandra Gering, and myself, in preparation for an exhibition at Gering's gallery, *William Anastasi, Dove Bradshaw, John Cage, Tom Marioni, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Tobey*, in 1990. The works were all from John's collection and all chosen by him for the show, and the conversation is about his thoughts on those

choices. The publication includes a transcript of a taped conversation between John and Richard Kostelanetz on the same subject.

I also made a videotape of John once, I think in the late '70s. I asked him if there were authors he found funny; he said there were and mentioned Peter DeVries (1910–93), a writer whose humorous short stories I knew. I next asked if he would sit in a chair reading to himself an unfamiliar story by that writer while I videotaped him head on. He agreed, and this became my favorite tape: John reading and every once in a while smiling or laughing.

Since John and I played virtually every day, the psychological dynamic between us eventually became more important than our relative chess strengths. It didn't really happen that John would win a game or two and then I would win a game or two; it was a case of streaks. When I was on a winning streak, the longer it went on the more confident I'd become; I would begin to think I "had his number," as John once put it. Then, usually in a game where my position was strong, I'd make the kind of error that overconfidence brings. The streak would be over. This typically meant the start of a winning streak of John's. We often joked about this overconfidence phenomenon—we were of course both aware

of it. John once told Merce, "Bill and I know each other's chess game so well that it's almost obscene!" We intimately knew each other's strongest line of play, so it often came down to this: Will he play the line that we both know is his strongest, or will he try to confuse me by playing one that we both know is not his strongest?

John was entertaining in chess. When I made a blunder, gifting him what should have been a plainly won game, he could be marvelously funny; and he could be even funnier when it was he who had thrown a game away. He also had a habit of blatantly telegraphing what he thought of his position once we had arrived at the mid-game or endgame. If, as I pondered a tough move, he thought his position was solid, he would start uttering exclamations, apparently to himself, in non sequitur German, or pidgin German: "*Vos ist dott? Ach tung! Das ist der mond!*" On the other hand, if he made a move but then had second thoughts, or if he believed his position hopeless, he'd shake his head and break into fairly correct but questionably pronounced Italian: "*Troppo, troppo male!*" he would moan, or "*Calamitoso! Disastroso!*" The matching of language to perception was completely consistent, but the words and phrases had quite a variety. On occasion, pretending to get serious, I'd say, "John, you know you're telegraphing exactly what you think your position is. If you were a *real* chess player you'd at least sometimes reverse the procedure just to throw me off." Of

course he never did. But when I sometimes imitated him in this, I *would* quite obviously reverse the assigned languages from his accustomed signification. Understandably, if I then said “*Calamitoso!*” he would reply, “Yes, you mean for *John!*”

One day, in the midst of one of John’s winning streaks, he said something that was so out of character, at least in my experience, that I put it into my journal verbatim and in documentary fashion:

John: Bill, I think I’ve finally caught on to something about your game and I think there’s no reason why I should ever lose another game!

[laughter]

Bill: [laughing] John, them’s fighting words!

This was John in an unheard-of posture. Even though he was speaking humorously and in high spirits, I believe that at that moment he did indeed believe that he had fathomed something about my game that would make me dependably vulnerable. In fact our win/loss ratio did not change after this exchange, nor did the pattern of streaks.

The remark tells of a certain kind of steady confidence that John sometimes showed in other circumstances. An example far away from chess has to do with a dessert my partner Dove Bradshaw and I used to serve. It was a kind of sherbet made in a mixer with soy milk and various fruits, frozen bananas always among them. John and Merce loved this concoction and John asked for the recipe. A critical part of the preparation was to take perfectly ripe bananas, peel them, place them in a plastic bag, and freeze them solid at least overnight. This and the rest of directions were so simple that we hadn’t written them down; but John said that he could easily remember them. After a chess game perhaps a week later, John said, “By the way, Bill, how again is the sherbet made? It just doesn’t work.” I asked what he meant: “Well,” he said, “I can’t manage to peel the bananas.” Confused, I said, “You can’t peel the bananas? What do you mean? What kind of bananas are you buying?” “Maybe our freezer is colder than yours,” John replied, and he went to the freezer and took out three bananas frozen rock solid *in their skins*. I laughed, and told him he’d forgotten one detail of the instructions: the bananas had to be peeled *before* going into the freezer. John was not laughing, yet he was not embarrassed either; he was merely nonplussed. He was different from most where ego was concerned; he wasn’t threatened by laughter at his expense. And if it took him longer than expected to understand where he’d gone wrong with the bananas, it was because his attention to detail was usually so strong. When the nature of the

error registered, he laughed harder than I had. And if he told the story to someone else, he would laugh more than they would.

As the chess series went on, a new element came into play. If I had difficulty breaking one of John's winning streaks, I would, after much resistance, humbly hit the books, or more specifically a single book: *The Most Instructive Chess Games Ever Played*. A friend had given me this volume long before, and I had hardly looked at it, but now I discovered that if I played out one of these games in the morning, or even just the first dozen moves, I would almost always win that day's play. It was quite magical and it still mystifies me that it worked so well. Since my knowledge of the game was far below that of the masters whose games the book published, I never felt I was actually learning much from their intricately planned anticipatory moves. I think it was rather that the replaying of these games put my mind into a certain chess mode, which had more to do with my subsequent success than any strategy I might have absorbed.

I don't remember telling John about my studies, although I may have eventually. But he too hit the books if he was having difficulty ending one of my streaks, and the difference was that he made not the slightest attempt to conceal it:

when I arrived, there on the table with the chessboard would be several books on chess, with one or two lying open. I was obviously more vain—I was probably hoping he would think I had turned my game around by improved concentration or self-discipline. Both of us always blamed our chess failures on general impatience or a single precipitous move. We seldom played with the clock, though I campaigned for it, having found that my success rate improved when we did. But John felt that chess was more enjoyable, less hectic and competitive, without the clock, and I had to agree. Still, I would joke that playing sans clock was not chess, it was wood-pushing, reminding him that both Duchamp and the chess genius Jack Collins agreed with this judgment—it may, in fact, have originated with one or the other of them, although more likely it's ancient. John and I had visited Collins in his Lower East Side apartment, sometimes with Dove. In his seventies at the time, a tiny man in a wheelchair, he was a wonderful and gentle soul but had a sharp sense of humor. He had taught Bobby Fischer and other prodigies. John and I tried to learn what we could from him, but our visits were more social than chess-driven.

Around 1980 Dove and I met up with John in Brussels, at the home of his Belgian friend and supporter Muriel Errera and her teenaged daughter. After a couple of days socializing we rented a car and I chauffeured John, Dove, and a tape recorder to the Waterloo battlefield to collect sounds for his *Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, a work he was preparing inspired by Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. John's first extravagantly ambitious idea was to record the normal sounds at every geographical spot mentioned in the *Wake*. A student of the book soon told him that there were literally thousands of these. Accepting that his first impulse was impossible he submitted the list to chance operations to whittle it down to a manageable number. Then he made up an itinerary that fit his existing schedule.

As we approached the site, I found myself wondering how John would decide what sounds to record. Where would he place the microphone? Or where would he ask *me* to place it, since he had expressed hesitation about how to operate the tape recorder? Would he use chance operations in some way? I visualized him perhaps hanging the microphone on a sign announcing the site. When we arrived, however, we found no sign or monument but only a farm with a barn and farmhouse. I recalled from Stendhal's chapter "The Guns of Waterloo," in

The Charterhouse of Parma, that the battle actually took place on farmland: Stendhal describes "a piece of tilled land that was being ploughed up in a singular fashion"—that is, by cannonballs landing. John suggested turning in to the farmhouse, so I did and pulled up by the large barn, with open doors. Hardly had we opened the car doors when dogs started barking, goats started bleating, cows started mooing, geese started cackling—a full-throated symphony. The farmer came out and said *bonjour*. He and John started to talk, John in his serviceable French with its unembarrassed American pronunciation. Meanwhile the mammalian/avian chorus decided that we were okay and gradually piped down. By the time John and the farmer seemed to be winding up their conversation, the background was as peaceful as when we had first pulled in. When this dawned on John, I heard him repeating to the farmer his reason for coming and making clear that he loved the sounds he had heard when we first got out of the car. The farmer in effect said no problem. He disappeared into the barn, and trudged out seconds later cradling a young calf in his arms. All hell broke loose again, only louder. John turned to me gleefully, practically stepping on his words: "Start the recorder!"

Thinking about this later, it seemed clear that John's initial decision had stemmed from his reading of *Finnegans Wake* and that his second had been to use chance to delimit the sites to be recorded. When he arrived at the site,

though, he acted on personal preference. He may also have been influenced by another consideration. He had often remarked that wherever you went you heard birds and airplanes, an “omnipresence,” in his word, that was evident whenever he set about collecting environmental sounds for a piece. Behind the timing of his “Start the recorder,” then, was his love of aural variety and complexity: he had found something too marvelous to be left in Belgium. Discussing this later with John, I shared with him some lines I had come across in *Finnegans Wake*: “So you did? From the Cat and Cage. O, I see and see! In the ink of his sweat he will find it yet” (563.18).

In 1984 Dove and I were jointly invited to take the posts of artistic advisors to the Cunningham Dance Company. We did so and each of us designed sets and costumes for various stage works and one television work choreographed by Merce. Over the years, because of this and other such social and career commitments, John and I played chess not only in his studio or mine but in Paris, Angers, Fontainebleau, Amsterdam, Brussels, Frankfurt, Boston, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Middletown (Connecticut), Purchase (New York), and other cities. My journal tells of more than 8,000 games between the autumn of 1977 and August 11, 1993, when John had the stroke that led to his death. We talked again and again about how chess seemed to do something positive for our day. Was there something about the alpha rhythms being rearranged? We

didn't know. But in plain lingo chess seemed to take us away from where we were for an hour or so, and that was important.

Some months after John's death I received a call from Joan Retallack, a writer whom I had never met but who had taped extensive interviews with John and was putting together a book from her transcripts. My name came up repeatedly in these conversations, usually in connection with my “blind” drawings and my published writings about Duchamp and Joyce vis-à-vis the eccentric French playwright Alfred Jarry. She asked if I would be willing to look over the parts of the conversations where I or my work was discussed, and to comment where necessary for her book, eventually published by Wesleyan University Press as *Musicage* (1996). I agreed. When the material arrived I was astonished to discover that John's views regarding Jarry's influence on Duchamp went beyond what I had said to him on the subject. Here is a section of the earliest interview transcribed in the book:

JR: In the years that Duchamp was answering questions about his art by saying, “I breathe,” or “I like breathing better than working,” and conspicuously playing chess . . . not visibly doing Art—(*phone rings*)

JC: Isn't that [the phone] terrible? Maybe we should stop it.

JR: We know now that during that period Duchamp was working on *Étant Donnés*, he had gone-

JC: He was underground. Now it appears—Have you seen the article by Bill Anastasi about [Alfred] Jarry and Duchamp in *Artforum*? [William Anastasi. "Duchamp on the Jarry Road," *Artforum*, September 1991] It shows that Duchamp's work, as far as subject matter goes, comes from the works of Jarry, that his ideas, so to speak, were not his own... but came from another person. (*laughs*) Isn't that interesting? And yet no two people could be more opposite in feeling than Jarry and Duchamp, in my opinion. I have *never* been interested in the work of Jarry. It just doesn't—I can't—what is the expression?—cotton to it? (*laughs*) Whereas I can't get along without Duchamp! (*laughter*) I literally believe that Duchamp made it possible for us to live as we do. He used chance operations the year I was born—do you know the story?—and I asked him how was it that he did that when I was just being born, and he smiled and said, "I must have been fifty years ahead of my time." (*laughter*) Isn't that marvelous? So his ideas may not have been his own. Say they all came from Jarry. This disturbed me at first. But they have been so transmuted by leaving Jarry and going to Duchamp that I don't think there is anything to worry about. (*laughter*) There seems to be a link with Duchamp's experience in the arts in Paris

when he was young. It's very striking. It was at that time that the *Ubu Roi* was played in Paris [It premiered in 1896 and was performed again in 1898]. (*pause*) You know that Jarry died as a result of taking too much dope, which you would never associate with Marcel.

JR: Interesting that these seeds were planted in Duchamp's mind as an adolescent. They certainly bore strange fruit! (*pause*) I've always felt that I don't understand *Étant Donnés*.

JC: Or any other work!

JR: Yes... true, *but!* (*laughter*) *Étant Donnés* seems to me discontinuous with the other work.

JC: It seems almost the opposite.

JR: Yes.

JC: *But*, what is marvelous is that the opposites are not opposite. And that's part of what we call the spirituality—art in life.

JR: How do you think of *Étant Donnés*?

JC: I think of it as being the opposite of the "Big Glass," hmm? The experience of being able to look through the glass and see the rest of the world is the experience of not knowing where the work ends. It doesn't end. In fact, it goes into life. Whereas you have to look at *Étant Donnés* from a particular position, and you can only see what Duchamp put there for you to see. In fact, you can't see it other than one way—the way he

prescribed. So it moves all the way from not prescribing anything to prescribing everything. That makes a great gamut.

JR: Or two sides of a coin?

JC: Now that we know through Bill [Anastasi] that both the “Big Glass” and the *Étant Donnés* come from books of Jarry, hmm? In detail—what are we going to think? Let’s just say there are certainly other things that one could take out of Jarry, hmm? (*laughter*) But Marcel *deliberately* took these things that would lead on the one hand toward utter openness and on the other to utter closedness.

The next mention of me in the book bears on Duchamp:

JR: Did Marcel Duchamp use chance operations in the same way you do in the visual arts?

JC: No, I think every person who uses chance operations does it in their own way. And that it’s natural in the field of the visual to do them in a simple way. For instance, Marcel put differences in a hat, on different slips of paper, and pulled one out; chose that action—pulling something out of a hat. Bill Anastasi does what he calls “blind drawing” by simply closing his eyes and drawing.

The next two mentions return to Jarry:

JC: . . . I don’t *want* my choice to be evident, hmm? I want to be at the point that Marcel so frequently talked of. He talked of the need for disinterestedness. In the finding, in the signing of a found object—to choose as a found object something that you neither like nor dislike, hmm? He wanted his choice to be colorless, hmm? Empty. I asked Marcel if he had any relation to the East, to Eastern philosophy, because so much that he said and did was more like, say, Zen of Eastern philosophy in some form than it is like Western thought. And he denied any connection with it. Just as he said, the artist must go underground, I think that even if he were involved consciously with Eastern philosophy, his answer would have been that he had no connection. [*“Every word I tell you is stupid and false.” “All and all I’m a pseudo, that’s my characteristic.”—Marcel Duchamp, quoted by William Anastasi.*] My tendency, in anything I do, is to let people know what it is I’m doing, hmm? . . . I think. At least I think I’m telling as much as I can about how I behave. (*pause*) I think he may not have done that. And in particular, the reason that I’m confirmed now that that was his way of behaving, is Bill Anastasi’s finding that all of the subject matter of Duchamp came from Jarry.

JR: Which is something Duchamp never –

JC: Never exposed. He kept it a secret. [Actually Duchamp did refer to Jarry as “a great man” in one interview. I have come across no encomium from him of equal strength for any other near contemporary.—William Anastasi] And one of his goals was to go underground—which is an Eastern goal—to be a white animal, in the winter, when it’s snowing, and so to climb up in the tree, knowing your footsteps are covered by the snow—so nobody knows where you are! (laughs) That’s one of the ideals. Another is to find emptiness! To search for the ox, and having found him, to realize that you’ve found nothing. (laughter). . .

JR: . . . do you find Marcel’s work humorous?

JC: Yes. And even more so now that we are told that it comes from Jarry. That is almost—well just imagine!—for an artist of his importance and position with respect to other people’s art, to not have had that aspect of his work original, hmm? To have rather taken it from someone else, this work. That’s unheard of!

JR: Well, what about Shakespeare? And Joyce’s use of the *Odyssey*, and all of Joyce’s other sources in *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*—

JC: Well, yes, that’s marvelous. And he [Duchamp] must have said that to himself. He must have said that to himself.

JR: It doesn’t seem odd to me. The ideas, the substance from Jarry—it’s in a way another category of readymades, no?

JC: So, it doesn’t seem odd to you.

JR: No.

JC: Well I’m going to tell Bill [Anastasi] this. It seems odd to Bill.

The wonderful thing about this last section is that before the period of this interview, which took place between October 21 and 23, 1991, John and I had had many conversations on this identical subject. I myself had cited Joyce and Shakespeare, among others, as examples of geniuses who openly used the ideas of others as raw material in their own work. Most marvelously, I had specifically told John that I believed that Duchamp *must* have viewed the works of Jarry as a sort of readymade, as Retallack similarly concludes. I had never told John that I found this odd. Either this had not registered with John, though, or he had simply forgotten it.

Shortly after *Artforum* began editing my first article on this subject but before the issue containing it was published, I heard from John’s assistant, Laura Kuhn (now the head of the Cage Foundation), that John had said, “Bill must not do this.” The reason being that “Teeny thinks Marcel came up from the ground whole.” It occurred to me that John as much as Teeny had that idea about Marcel, despite Duchamp’s own insistence that every artist cannot help but be a product of his time. John and I had discussed various aspects of the question

of Duchamp vis-à-vis Jarry before I gave the article to the magazine, but I had never volunteered to let him read it and he had never tried to dissuade me from publishing it. He knew that the article had been commissioned (by *Artforum's* then editor, Ida Panicelli) and that I had agreed. He did try to gently guide me away from this “research,” though. He would say, “Bill, you are first of all an artist. Are you sure you want to use this much of your energy going into another artist’s works?” I said it was something like a hobby. He replied, “Well, maybe you use it the way Duchamp used chess.”

Joan Retallack’s interview with John took place one month after that first article was published.

Cage’s Humor

John quoting his Aunt Marge shortly after she got her first automatic washing machine: *I’m sorry, but I love that washing machine more than I love your Uncle Ed!*

He found extremely funny Mark Twain’s remark “Wagner’s music is better than it sounds.”

In our home once, Dove was talking about my rigorous Catholic upbringing. She was sort of poking fun at the fact that despite my professed agnosticism, as she saw it there was a deep layer that would always be Catholic. John seldom told a set funny story but I think Dove’s jibing prodded him. He knew that she had been raised a Christian Scientist, with their conviction that all ailments are mental rather than physical, and this must have inspired the story: A conference of clerics from all faiths is about to get under way in a large auditorium. The audience is seated, the moderator is at the podium, but before he can start he sees a rabbi near the back waving his hand. The moderator says, “Is there something we can do for you?” The rabbi says, “Yes. Is there a Christian Scientist in the house?” A clergyman from the middle of the hall stands, saying, “I’m a Christian Scientist.” The Rabbi replies, “Would you change seats with me, I’m sitting in a draft?”

I had read a biography of W. C. Fields. I repeated to John an anecdote near the end of the book: a close friend of Fields was visiting him in the hospital near the end. He said, "Bill, if you had it to do all over again, is there anything you would have done differently?" Field's first response was no, but after thinking a little he added, "Well, it might be interesting to know what it would have been like without the booze." John may have laughed harder and longer at that than I can recall on any other occasion. To me this story hadn't seemed *that* funny, but it obviously hit a special chord in John. I recalled him having told me, early in our friendship, that he had no moderation, particularly where drinking was concerned. He said that if he was not drinking at all for a spell, that was one thing; but if he was drinking, he didn't seem able to do it moderately.

The only time John told me he was going to do something—or in this case *not* do something—and then failed, drink was involved. At the end of one of the Merce Cunningham City Center seasons, John celebrated to excess. He had to be helped, almost carried, home. We played chess the next day and John brought up the previous night's mischief, as he put it. In the conversation that followed, which was more emotional on his side than usual, he finally said, "Well, I wanted you to know that I have decided to give up drinking for good."

The particular wording struck me: John knew that serious drinking had not been one of my demons. I had told him about trying, as an experiment, to get drunk one New Year's Eve, at age nineteen: I downed enough mixed drinks to do the job, but found that I became more controlled than I had ever been. If someone asked me a question, they would get the right answer, but only after an interminable wait while I calmly processed the matter with my curtailed resources. And I drove a wife, a newborn baby, and a one-year-old son home safely at four in the morning—it just took three times longer than usual to get there.

I did not like that part of it, but there was another part of it that I *did* like. For the first time in my life I felt that I had become two guys—and I *liked* the other guy. In fact I liked the other guy very much. This may have been behind my decision to end the exploration without further ado. I woke the following morning with no noticeable hangover, thinking, "I never want to be that sober again in my life!" It may be that John's knowledge of this history was behind his unexpected phrase, "I wanted you to know." He would sometimes make a jovial reference to the difference between us in this area.

John did stay on the wagon for some years after that morning, but eventually, on a trip to Europe that ended in a reunion with Teeny Duchamp and Richard Hamilton, he did have a drink, and more than one. I picked him up at the airport

when he returned. (Sometimes I would do this if we had been on the telephone—we would in fact play chess the day of his arrival from Europe or California.) I learned something that day about John's way of relating an uncomfortable message: when I walked up to him in the terminal, even before he said hello, he said, "Bill, I had a drink." Later he told me about his celebratory get-together with Teeny and Richard. He drank for a while after that, then got sick again, on a similar occasion to the Merce event, and at the next dinner, and the next, and the next, I noticed he did not drink. As it turned out, he now *had* given up drink for good. He never again repeated this intention to me, though, but something about his manner when drink was around made me think it was so.

One day we were talking about our different habits. I said that I had learned something from him that had caused a change in me: if I decided that something was good for me—"healthy" physically or mentally—I tried to embrace it. And after a while, if I succeeded in moving in that direction, whatever it was seemed to become beautiful or poetic to my perception. John immediately replied, "I don't believe that!" And I said, "I know you don't, John, but I still learned it from you." He laughed at that, but I thought it was true then and still do.

John did not smoke, but said that for years he used to go through four packs a day. He described his method for quitting. He had mentally divided himself into two people: one had given up smoking, the other was not aware of having done so—*yet*. Whenever John felt the urge for a cigarette, he would say to himself, "That must be the fellow who doesn't yet know I've given them up." Then the one fellow would remind the other that he had in fact given them up, and that would be the end of it until the next urge came along. I told John that by way of coincidence my father had smoked four packs a day for years and had also given it up cold turkey. John wanted to know how, and I told him: my father was constantly vowing to quit because he had a chronic hacking cough and was painfully thin and often unwell. He was forever convinced that the pack he was working on would be his last. But then, before coming to the last cigarette, forgetting his vow, he would by force of habit shout, "Bill, go next door and get me a pack of Philip Morris." One day, on the verge of repeating this waltz, he caught himself in mid-shout. And he said to himself, in effect, "Not this time—remember, this was supposed to be your last pack." With that he put the partly used pack into the bedroom dresser drawer, where it languished for years, a *memento mori* of his smoking years. Hearing this history John said, "Your father's technique for stopping wasn't very different from mine."

In 1977, when the chess games started, John and Merce had recently started to follow the macrobiotic diet. I was told how John had been walking downtown when Yoko Ono passed by in a car. Thinking he looked terrible, she told the driver to stop, got out, went up to John, and asked what the matter was. "Everything!" John replied. He told her about some of the physical difficulties he was having, including arthritis pain that had him taking fifteen or sixteen aspirin a day. Yoko said, "John, I'm going to come over and show you a regime that I'm sure will help you." This was the macrobiotic diet. John embraced it enthusiastically and found that it did succeed, in a very short time, in diminishing all sorts of physical complaints.

John seems to have been a consummate artist in everything he did, including the preparation of meals. At home back then, Dove and I were eating an unexceptional Italian-influenced American diet. Like most people we simply followed our tastes, without giving health too much thought. But going to John's for dinner was a revelation. Driving back home afterwards we would find ourselves marveling. "That food is supposed to be *good* for you? It tastes better than what we're making, and we're not particularly thinking of *that* question." So we soon found ourselves changing our eating habits. Before long we were

confirmed macrobiotic advocates. Many of the recipes we followed were John's.

John would do most of his shopping on Friday mornings at Tillie and George's on East Sixth Street. The proprietors, an entertaining and charming old couple, would come in on Fridays from their farm in New Jersey, opening the store on just that one day. Not long after we took up the macrobiotic diet I started picking John up at eight every Friday morning to go together to this tiny store. We liked to arrive at opening time, before the best produce disappeared.

We had all been meat-eaters previously, but no longer—though we could on this diet eat anything that flies or swims. We talked a lot about how much better all four of us seemed to feel now, and how, far from being a sacrifice, we enjoyed our food better than we had. John and I wondered about fruitarians and strict vegetarians. I recall a conversation around this time about how meat-eaters sometimes seemed to betray a barely disguised anger toward vegetarians. I had seen a full-page ad placed in a newspaper by a steakhouse with a large headline that read something like "Making vegetarians angry since 1910." I suggested that they might resent vegetarians without knowing it because they considered them virtuous. One of us cited George Eliot: "Nothing is more unforgivable to our friends than our virtues." Or could it have been instead that eating what amounted to the garnished cadavers of fellow

mammals brought with it some unconscious guilt?

Whenever anyone brought up the subconscious John was apt to want to change the subject. He seemed more tolerant about the unconscious, although we joked that neither of us really knew the difference. I recall his misquoting Rilke as having said "Psychology, never again." (The real source is in Kafka.) On this subject one of us recalled that Joyce's niece was a confirmed vegetarian whom Joyce actually tried to bribe into eating meat. In *Ulysses*, John remembered, Bloom is introduced as a meat-eater and then some: "Mr Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine." One or the other of us also recalled, though, that a hundred or so pages later we are auditors to an extraordinary stream of Bloom's consciousness that you might see as second thoughts on the subject:

After all there's a lot in the vegetarian fine flavour of things from the earth garlic, of course, it stinks Italian organgrinders crisp of onions, mushrooms truffles. Pain to animal too. Pluck and draw fowl. Wretched brutes there at the cattlemarket waiting for the poleaxe to split their skulls open. Moo. Poor trembling calves. Meh. Staggering bob. Bubble and squeak.

Butchers' buckets wobble lights. Give us that brisket off the hook. Plup. Rawhead and bloody bones. Flayed glasseyed sheephung from their haunches, sheepsnouts bloodypapered sniveling nosejam on sawdust. Top and lashers going out. Don't maul them pieces, young one.

Hot fresh blood they prescribe for decline. Blood always needed. Insidious. Lick it up, smoking hot, thick sugary. Famished ghosts.

Ah, I'm hungry.

A number of our conversations about Joyce centered on his citation of ideas put forward by Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico as the two most notable sources for *Finnegans Wake*. John was certainly in sympathy with Bruno's remark that "no man can know the true or the good unless he abhors the multitude," although he would have phrased the sentiments more gently.

We sat together once in the audience of a dance performance. The décor, including the lighting, was by a celebrated designer in the field, but I made an uncomplimentary remark about it—and John, with a pained expression, said

"Yes, isn't it dreadful!" I responded predictably, "True, but the audiences seem to love it." John turned and replied with great emphasis, "That doesn't make it *one—bit—better!*" Of the most famous Pop artist of the period, he said, "I've never been drawn to his work." Of the next-most-celebrated Pop artist of the same period: "I don't think of him as an artist but as an art historian." John saw Pop art as a simplification of aesthetic concerns; he preferred the complexity of Dada, its forerunner. He saw modern times as increasingly complex and thought Pop was moving in the opposite direction. Another minority position of his was his preference for the works of Mark Tobey to those of Jackson Pollock. He had known both of them, though Tobey much better; he had found Pollock importunate and even described himself once crossing the street when he saw him coming. This is the only example I can recall of John's doing something so un-Zen-like as to go out of his way to avoid someone.

John and I had many conversations about taste. We were both aware of Duchamp's remark that taste was habit. In that spirit my mantra was, "The only thing interesting about taste is that it's always changing." If I showed John a new drawing I'd cover myself by saying, "What does your aesthetic prejudice of the moment say?"

I told John once of an occurrence far from the subject of aesthetic taste, but still related to the flexibility implicit in Duchamp's stance. On a run through Central Park, on an October morning, I had been hit by the powerful odor of what I would have sworn was human vomit. This odor has on occasion brought my own stomach—and I'm not unique here—to the brink of upheaval, and it did so that day. Once I was beyond the odor's range, the queasiness naturally left, but passing the area on the return trip I again had to fight off nausea. The next day, taking the same run, I noticed the same odor, just as intense, at the same spot. Surprised that it hadn't lost its potency after twenty-four hours, I looked around, and saw a number of tan or white flattened splotches scattered on the ground. This prompted an inquiry that brought the ginkgo tree and its habits into my personal lexicon: a friend explained how in the fall its spongy nuts fall to the ground and split, splattering their soft insides to give off their infamous odor.

Once this knowledge had taken root, I noticed that passing that area upset me less—and then less and less day after day. Yet the odor was not at all different to my nose; the smell was identical, but once I knew that it was a plant, its power of revulsion vanished. By extension, when John and I were discussing "ugly," I proposed that in aesthetic areas also our physical and psychological predisposition is of tantamount significance and our judgments proportionately malleable.

Early in our friendship John spoke of how thoroughly he enjoyed Mozart. My taste was in agreement and I mentioned that I enjoyed Haydn as well. He then told of a long rehearsal he had witnessed for a concert that was to include one of his own compositions. The orchestra had seemed to stay for hours on a Haydn work and he had become “exhausted” by the endless cadences. I joked that the cadences might have seemed endless only because it was a rehearsal—maybe the orchestra was having trouble and the conductor was making them repeat. The talk returned to Mozart and the uncanny rightness of most of his music. I said that he was my second-favorite composer. John asked me to name my favorite: “Bach.” John agreed, Bach was a great composer, but the devotional aspect of that music had become an obstacle for him. In the '30s, he remembered, he had heard the pianist Richard Buhlig rehearsing for hours with a student his two versions of Bach’s unfinished last work, *The Art of the Fugue*. That had made him feel that this was the only music he needed to hear. But as time passed, the complexity of Mozart won his affections over the order of Bach.

My defense of Haydn, in tandem with certain of my site-specific artworks, no doubt had something to do with this section of John’s lecture/radio play *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet*:

satiE

goes in seaRch

of sunlIght he comes across haydn

bill anastasi is looKing at haydn through a lorgnette

but Seems

to be tAking

a phoTograph

blll

Explains

that thE

loRgnette

connected to an old televsion set acts as a secondary camera

enabling him to taKe the picture

of a ghoSt

of A

ghosT

provlding

Everything

anD everyone
before dUring and after the photograph's taken
are in exaCtly
the rigHt positions
sAtie says
I have some Music
that is to be Played

Silently
I wrote it with An invisible ink and luckily
I gave the manuscripT to duchamp
one of these nlghts I'll ask him
for a xErox of it

John and Merce had been quite close to Willem de Kooning, and on at least one occasion, with de Kooning present, John had responded powerfully to one of his small works. On another occasion, though, when John and Merce were visiting the artist's studio, something happened that reveals how specific and independent John's aesthetic judgment was. Extremely impressed by something John had said, de Kooning, with a burst of feeling, said "John, if there is anything here you like you can have it." John got up and began to look at the array of paintings and drawings in the studio. De Kooning and the others kept talking, fifteen minutes and more passed, and John was still looking high and low. Finally de Kooning got up, went over to John, and said, "There's nothing here right now that you like, isn't that so?" John was silent.

John expressed amazement at Vico's prescient statement, more than two centuries before Hiroshima, about the potential of political power to lead to an Armageddon: "*Philosophy considers man as he should be... Legislation considers man as he is in order to turn him to good uses in human society. Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which run throughout the*

human race, it creates the military, riches and wisdom of commonwealths. Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, it makes civil happiness.” (The New Science, Cornell University Press, 1970, VI 131, VII 132)

If Cage believed that an idea was solid, he did not hesitate to work with it even if it originated elsewhere. When he was first asked to make prints he decided to start off with an idea that he saw as an homage to Duchamp. His favorite work of Duchamp’s was *Three Standard Stoppages*, 1913-14, for which what has been considered an instruction appears in the 1914 Box: “*If a straight horizontal thread one meter long falls from a height of one meter onto a horizontal plane distorting itself as it pleases and creates a new shape of the measure of length.*” John decided essentially to follow through on this idea for his initial print, changing only the distance that Duchamp specified: he climbed a ladder and dropped a piece of thread from the top.

When we first started our chess series John would sometimes ask me about my work. I told him of a work I’d made in Philadelphia in 1961, two years before moving to New York: a painting made by driving my car over a canvas. I was

only eight years late with this idea, I joked; I’d been ignorant of the work that he and Bob Rauschenberg had made together with the same idea in 1953. Instead of joining in the laugh, as I had expected, or ribbing me for being behind the times, he obviously wanted to cheer me up on the subject and simply asked a nuts-and-bolts question: what had I used on the tread of the tires? He said that he and Bob had tried all sorts of paints and inks and were never satisfied with the result. I told him that I had gotten permission to use the floor of a garage after hours, thinking that the accumulated oily dust and grit would be enough to leave an image. His instant reply was, “Oh, I like that much better!” It was probably John’s view of ideas as tools in the public domain that encouraged me to recycle this idea in the mid-’80s, when I was working on the *bababad* paintings. This is a series of large paintings, each eight and a half feet high and ranging up to eighteen feet wide. The title comes from the first seven (of one hundred) letters of the first of ten “thunderclap” words in Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, as it appears on the first page of the book. When I shared my “late” tire-painting story with John I was about to start one of the eighteen-footers, and I decided to begin by once again driving over the canvas. John heard about this when the painting was finished, and came to dinner at Riverside Drive specifically to see it.

If accused of self-contradiction, John showed no embarrassment. He owned neither a record player nor a tape player and, as mentioned, he questioned the whole idea of listening to recorded music; but on at least one occasion he recommended that I seek out a recording, if one existed, of a certain work that was almost never performed live. This was Satie's *Socrate*, which was based on Plato's *Apologia*. John said that he thought it was the most important work of the century, and also the most beautiful. I found two recordings and with familiarity came to the conclusion that it was among the most beautiful works of music using words. I used this episode to make an argument for the existence of recordings. John's response was simply to smile without a word.

Since John did not listen to recorded music and knew that I did, he gave me virtually every long-playing record, cassette tape, and compact disc that was given or sent to him. I have a long shelf full of them, often inscribed and signed. The jacket for the Mainstream recording of his *Cartridge Music*, 1960, performed by John and David Tudor, includes a reprint of an essay that he wrote in 1960 about the piece. On the front of the jacket, under his name, he wrote in black ink, *For William Anastasi artist, chess player and record hunter inter ales (?)* (the question mark indicating that he was uncertain about the

spelling, which indeed should probably have been *inter alia*, meaning "among other things"). Then after writing "record hunter" his black pen went dry and he continued in red ink with a comma, then *Blind explorer par excellence, runner*, and then signed *John Cage* in black and, superimposed, in red, *John Cage*. He also crossed out the "and" after *chess player* with an editor's delete symbol.

John and I had a number of conversations about the pros and cons of keeping a pet in the city. He knew my view that for a couple living together a pet can become an all-purpose outlet for emotions and physical affections at times when the partners are at odds for any reason. The pet can then become a kind of stand-in for the human partner who on better days would be the preferred recipient. Were the human couple alone on the premises, I thought, the incentive for getting to the bottom of their difficulties might be greater. John, on the other hand, told me he felt that in his relationship with Merce, their cat *Losa* actually brought them closer together. Long separations were normal in John and Merce's relationship, though, and were virtually nonexistent in my living arrangement with Dove. John allowed that this alone might be enough to explain the difference in our experience and respective positions.

If Losa happened to be in the vicinity, or on John's lap while I was mulling over a chess move, John would sometimes address him with baby-talk—perhaps even asking him questions, then answering them for him. His tone and language were wonderful, and the cat was in kitty heaven. But the entire performance was uncharacteristic in the extreme. Only Losa, it seemed, had the power to extract from John that kind of a monologue, that sort of emotion. But then, more than once, John would look at me abruptly and say in a decidedly down-to-earth voice, "Oh, they love anyone who feeds them."

According to Plato, when Socrates was unjustly sentenced to death, his friends in Athens wanted to spirit him away to protect him. He refused, saying that since he had benefited all his life from the good things that Athens had to offer, he would not avoid this fate coming from the same source. And why is everyone so afraid of death? he asked. If it proves right that after death we live to be punished or rewarded according to the life we have led, as some believe, he was sure he'd make out okay. And if death turned out to be merely a dreamless sleep, he said in effect, "What could be better than that?" John was very fond of this famous statement. He also liked the story about Diogenes, who, when asked how he wanted to be buried, replied, "Face Down. For soon down will be

up." And he loved the writings of Chuang Tzu, from the third century B.C. When my father died, in 1979, John pointed out this passage:

Chuang Tzu's wife died. When Hui Tzu went to convey his condolences, he found Chuang Tzu sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. "You lived with her, she brought up your children and grew old," said Hui Tzu. "It should be enough not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing—this is going too far, isn't it?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.

"Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped."

John knew that I considered Franz Kafka one of the extraordinary figures of the century. For him, however, Kafka's writing was "too psychological." (Perhaps that was what made him attribute Kafka's "*Psychology, never again*" to Rilke.) I told John I believed that Kafka was closer to Duchamp than any visual artist, in that his work came out of a part of his psyche that was utterly separated from the idea of an "audience." I also saw a kind of inverted parallel between Duchamp's secret making of the *Etant Donnes*, arranging for its posthumous debut, and Kafka's deathbed extraction from his closest friend the promise that all of his unpublished works would be destroyed.

I once repeated to John a short aphorism from Kafka: *You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait. Do not even wait, be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet.* John insisted I write it out for him on the spot.

We once found ourselves discussing an instance in which Duchamp had been accused of self-contradiction. Arturo Schwarz had gotten him to agree to officially remake certain of the early Readymades, in editions of nine, to be signed and numbered for potential buyers. Duchamp was reminded that years before, when some of the original Readymades were finding their way into the upper levels of the art market, he had said something to the effect of, "They don't get it at all, they just don't understand what I was trying to do!" His anointment of commercially available items, after all, had been a frontal attack upon the very idea of an art market. To this accusation of self-contradiction Duchamp was reported to have replied, "You're absolutely right! But finally I decided to rape and be raped by everyone."

From time to time John would say, "Life is too short for ugly." I was surprised by this remark, which seemed at odds with his also often repeated phrase, "I have never heard a sound I did not enjoy." We had a number of conversations about this. I started it by asking, "John, what *is* ugly?" Was he referring to abstractions like hunger or poverty? Or to aesthetics? He started to answer, but not in an

either/or kind of way. Then some interruption must have intervened, and I didn't get the gist of his answer then or thereafter. I've always regretted not pursuing this with him. It seemed to me that he was beginning to say that he was not referring to an abstraction but meant something aesthetic, but when we returned to the topic he didn't get around to citing a specific example of aesthetic "ugly." I do remember his assistant Laura Kuhn once telling me that sitting with him in a cafeteria where raucous rock music was playing, John finally asked her if she could get them to turn it down.

I repeated the statement attributed to Heraclitus, *The most beautiful thing in the world is a pile of random sweepings*. John seemed to love this image. I also brought up Duchamp's remark, made at the time of the Arensberg Salon get-togethers, that a church window that had fallen out of the wall and lay shattered on the ground was much more beautiful than it had been *in situ*. This remark, made years before the *Large Glass* was completed, is an uncanny precursor to Duchamp's remark to interviewers, after the famous breakage, that he much preferred the glass in its broken state. And in the context of "ugly" we discussed James Joyce's coprophilia and Satie's possible similar tendencies. In Joyce's case, letters he sent to Nora Barnacle, published by Ellmann in 1975, make his sexual likes clear. Asking her to write to him—she was in Dublin, he in Paris—he wrote,

Tell me the smallest things about yourself so long as they are obscene and secret and filthy. Write nothing else. Let every sentence be full of dirty immodest words and sounds. They are all lovely to hear and seen on paper even but the dirtiest are the most beautiful.

The two parts of your body which do dirty things are the loveliest to me. I prefer your arse, darling, to your bobbies because it does such a dirty thing. I love your cunt not so much because it is the part I block but because it does another dirty thing. (Selected Letters, 186.09)

I have taught you almost to swoon at the hearing of my voice singing or murmuring to your soul the passion and sorrow and mystery of life and at the same time have taught you to make filthy signs to me with your lips and tongue, to provoke me by obscene touches and noises, and even to do in my presence the most shameful and filthy act of the body. You remember the day you pulled up your clothes and let me lie under you looking up at you while you did it? Then you were ashamed even to meet my eyes. (Selected Letters, 181.15)

In Satie's case, after his death, when friends went into his living quarters, from which they had been excluded while he lived, they found the baseboards

covered with dried feces. John and I talked of Joyce's and Satie's outward elegance and neatness—they were almost foppish in dress and demeanor, Joyce with his rings and cane, Satie with his monocle and his meticulous attire, the more surprising given his poverty—yet paradoxically both clearly had an abnormally affectionate relationship with feces. I said, not entirely facetiously, that it might explain much about them as artists: there is such a disparity between the extraordinary “beauty” they were capable of creating in their art and the earthiness of some of their life habits. About Joyce I suggested that if you love, or, even better, find erotic what most of our “civilized” fellows find disgusting, then finding beauty virtually wherever you look can be almost a foregone conclusion. John agreed that this could go far to explain the incredibly wide range of references in *Ulysses* and the ever-widening one in *Finnegans Wake*. The world and every minute thing in it were grist for Joyce's mill. And this naturally tied into the love of chance. Joyce had said, *Chance furnishes me what I need. I am like a man who stumbles along, my foot strikes something, I bend over and it is exactly what I need.* I also had stumbled on something that Lucian has his character Menippus say: *The life of man came before me under the likeness of a great pageant, arranged and marshaled by Chance, who distributed infinitely varied costumes to the performers.*

John did not like very emotional art. He included in this the Greek tragedies and Shakespeare, and he leveled many all-purpose zingers at opera in general, yet in the case of *Don Giovanni*, one of the most emotional operas in the repertoire, he told of attending a performance that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. No doubt his reaction had to do with his love of Mozart; there is emotional art and then there is *Mozart's* emotional art. John's love of both Joyce and Mozart made me share a remark with him in William Tindall's book *James Joyce: A Reader's Guide: At once compassionate, serious and gay, Joyce seems Mozart's rival.*

I recall another example of John's relaxed attitude toward self-contradiction. He had made the famous remark “If I am right, Beethoven was wrong,” and other criticisms of Beethoven's oeuvre, once telling me that he thought the *Hammerklavier Sonata* was “reprehensible.” Yet we once attended a concert together that included Beethoven's Septet in E flat. It is widely agreed that this is a work of far lesser quality than, say, the late quartets, but the performance was excellent. As we left the hall I asked John what he had thought of the Beethoven: “Oh, without a doubt he was a very great genius!” he replied.

In the late '70s John said he would like a sculpture of mine that he had seen in my studio, *Sink* of 1963. It is a steel plate with a "recipe" that reads, *Set a piece of hot-rolled steel, ½ x ½ x 18 inches, level on a floor. Pour on it a portion of water short of overflow. When dry, repeat.* The title refers to the verb more than to the noun, emphasizing the active nature of rust eating away at the steel. John insisted on buying this piece, although such works of mine had very little market at the time. Somehow he had come up with the price \$1,800, though he knew that I would gladly have given him the piece as a gift. When I protested that this was absurdly high, he replied, "Oh, no, it's a very great bargain!" John supported other artists with checkered careers in a like manner.

The piece was delivered and John would pour about a half cup of water on it every morning—part of a ritual that included watering the more than 100 potted plants and trees that made the loft look like an indoor botanical garden. When visitors would ask about the piece, John would reply that in making a work that needed tending he thought I had done a good thing.

Not long after John's death Alanna Heiss called to tell me that she was connected with the approaching Venice Biennale. It was to be dedicated to John, and she asked if I would write an article to be translated for publication in the catalogue. The result was "Jarrry, Joyce, Duchamp and Cage," 1993. The following is an edited paragraph from that article:

In the early '80s, at a festival of new music in Venice, I attended numerous concerts with John, sometimes several in a single day. I made the observation that when another composer's music was being performed I could at times readily pick up echoes of Berg, Stravinsky, Webern, Bartok, Schoenberg—even, once, Duke Ellington. But then something of John's would be played and I was on my own. No traces of ideas from earlier composers peered out. The music was constantly full of new sound experiences and structures—due naturally enough to his use of chance rather than of existing modes of composition. He agreed, but with a smile that reminded me that his way of listening was different from mine—his entire approach was ahistorical.

In the mid-'80s the Frankfurt Opera commissioned two pieces from John, *Europas I* and *II*. His idea was to personally create every aspect of these works, as Chaplin did in the movies, except that he would not be one of the performers. This was an enormously ambitious undertaking, and at first John was clearly excited about the commission; he talked about it more and more enthusiastically than about any other work that I recall. But as it turned out, fair is foul and foul is fair. As time went by his attitude changed. The main cause, I felt, had to do with what he considered backpeddling on the part of the people who had proffered the commission. He talked about this with as much energy as he had at the start, but in the opposite direction. Dove and I were with him in Frankfurt for part of his stay there; his disillusionment showed. And a superstitious person could have been excused for blaming bad karma when, before the scheduled world premiere, *the opera house burned down!* But John could still laugh when, in the face of all this, I repeated the famous Greek saying, "Another victory like that and we're done for." It was in connection with this parade of misfortunes that John one day said something utterly unexpected and uncharacteristic: "I'm afraid that I'm going to make a fool of myself!" And during the same period, he uttered the even less characteristic, "Maybe I'll be lucky one day and the postman will kill me."

Early in my friendship with Cage I began to engage in the relaxation practice commonly called "meditation," sitting upright with eyes closed and repeating a mantra. When I mentioned this to John he told me of D. T. Susuki's teaching on the subject, which can be fairly summed up, Don't do it! This Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher, with whom John had studied twenty-odd years earlier, taught that the goal should be to meditate all the time. Sitting for half an hour once or twice a day would work against this estimable goal. I thought that this was probably right, but also that meditating all the time was most likely beyond my capabilities at that point; and since the practice I had tried seemed to work well for me, I continued it, and have to this day, almost thirty years later. Whenever the subject came up, though—and it came up a lot—John said without hesitation that he meditated all the time. And in fact, except on very few occasions, this seemed borne out by observation. You could not help but notice, for instance, that John never rushed yet was never late. For example, both he and Merce loved Buster Keaton, and when there was a Keaton festival downtown we'd be invited to dinner and then we'd go to the films. Typically John would do the cooking while he and I played chess, before Merce or Dove arrived. While I would ponder a move, John would quietly rise, walk into the kitchen area, and check something out or make an addition or an adjustment. But though there was never a sense that he was rushing back, I seldom had to wait after I had decided on the move for him to return. It seemed as though he

had some inner sense about how long I would need for my cogitation. And at dinner, if the movie time was approaching, I'd be checking my watch, or Dove might be checking her watch, and on occasion even Merce might ask what time it was—but John seemed never to check his watch, never even to be interested in what time it was, yet it was always *he* who said “I guess it's time to go.”

And we'd always be there on time.

There was another area where John seemed to have some sort of inner sense. Over the fifteen years that we were close to him, Dove and I noticed that if the telephone rang and it was John, it was always at a time that was comfortable for both of us. Meanwhile we had other friends who always seemed to call at the wrong moment. We laughed about this back then, and still marvel at it. We sometimes found ourselves predicting, in advance of picking up the ringing phone, just who the caller might be depending entirely on what we were doing. We probably got it wrong once or twice with the serial interrupters, but we batted a thousand with John.

When the chess games began, I had been in the habit, for about ten years, of running almost every day. John would ask about this. He had been a cross-country runner in high school, but no longer exercised. Merce, on the other hand, was devoted to exercise, yoga, and an array of workouts specifically useful for dancers. He and I would proselytize to the best of our ability. John was not at all against the *idea* of exercise; he agreed with it, in fact, but the form of exercise he might favor eluded us. He was almost seventy at the time. I was jumping rope every other day, as a form of cross-training, but I hesitated to suggest this because I was concerned that John might think it undignified. I was sure I was benefiting from it, though, so one day I summoned my courage and asked John if he had ever tried it. If my memory is correct, he said that he had jumped rope in the distant past, so it would not be a completely new experience.

The next day I brought a regular boxer's jumping rope to our chess session and suggested he give it a try. After the game I showed him the two basic techniques in my repertoire. He took the rope, tried it, and found that whatever he knew about this exercise had not left him—also, he liked it. He was soon jumping rope regularly. When he traveled to lecture, or with Merce and the

dance company, he would pack the rope in his suitcase. He found the exercise beneficial for his allover energy and physical feeling. He continued with this regime until one day, walking on an icy pavement in Illinois, he fell and broke his left arm. His arm went into a cast. When it was removed, I brought up jumping a few times, but he did not return to it.

In 1991, the text of a taped conversation between John and Richard Kostelanetz was published in the catalogue for an exhibition of works from John's collection, "William Anastasi, Dove Bradshaw, John Cage, Tom Marioni, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Tobey," at the Sandra Gering Gallery in New York. Part of the text was republished in the second edition of *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Routledge, 2003, pp 219–20):

Richard Kostelanetz: Anastasi?

John Cage: We play chess every day. We're going to play today, and he'll either drive down or he'll take the subway. If he comes down the subway, he'll bring headphones without music, and papers and a board to draw on, and pencils and so forth; and he'll make a drawing with his eyes closed, and his arms responding to the movement of the subway car.

RK: How big are they?

JC: They're convenient for drawing on his lap.

RK: Has he done other work reflective of non-intention?

JC: Oh yes. Some of it is close to Tobey in that his face is close to the wall, or the surface on which he's drawing, so that he can't really see what he's doing.

RK: Doesn't this relate to what Jackson Pollock did? Doesn't the physical aspect of what he's doing echo painting in general?

JC: Pollock is a curious case, because he doesn't have an interest in what he sees in the way that Tobey has an interest in what he sees. I think of Pollock as being involved in gesture.

RK: And Anastasi is not making gesture as much as extending or representing the subway's gestures.

JC: Yes.

RK: His arm responding to extrinsic forces, which Pollock would never allow.

JC: No. And Pollock controlled the color in a way that Tobey would never dream of controlling color, simply putting it in a pitcher and pouring it out, you see, so that the white never changes, whereas with Tobey every brushstroke would be with different white.

RK: Is that controlling color, or not controlling color?

JC: It's giving great complexity to the surface, the kind of complexity we see when we look at anything we see that it's not all flat.

RK: *Or uniform.*

JC: Whereas with Pollock it's uniform. And with Tobey and with Anastasi it's not uniform.

One day John asked as we were about to begin chess, "Did you come down with the car today?" I had come down by subway. He said, "Do you have your paper and pencils for a subway drawing?" I did—in fact I had made one on the way down. He said, "Are you going to make one on the way home?" Yes, I always did. Finally he asked, "Could I come with you?" He wanted to see one of the drawings in the making. So, after our two games were ended, we walked to 18th Street and Seventh Avenue and boarded the #1 IRT train northbound.

My posture is upright while drawing, with my back away from the backrest. I balance a pad on my knees. At that time I'd close my eyes. Holding a pencil like a dart, sometimes in one hand only, sometimes one in each hand, I keep the point gently touching the surface of the pad. My intention is to try to suspend intention, keeping my arms and grip as relaxed as possible while still holding on

to the pencil. The drawing is made by my attempts to keep some sort of balance by adjusting the pencil's pressure as the train sways and lurches. As with all the "blind" work, my thinking stays as far as possible from "art," "art history," "art career," "art criticism," myself.

Since my eyes are closed, and since I wear sound-deadening headphones to dampen the din of the train, I have little idea of what's happening around me. On this occasion, as we were stepping off the train at the 137th Street station, John made an uncharacteristic remark: "The idiots—they were making fun of you!" He was a great believer in the value of drawing. Once, when he was well into his seventies, I recall him giving a radio interview. He was asked if he had any advice about longevity. As part of his response he said he believed that everyone should draw, that whatever other advantages might come out of it, this was a healthful practice and it couldn't help but contribute to longevity, other things being equal.

Once during a winter weekend in a house Dove and I have in the mountains of Pennsylvania, a tremendous blizzard hit. It is a small cottage and the sounds of the howling wind twisting furiously around it, and of the hail and snow hitting the

windows, seemed unbelievably beautiful. I turned on a tape recorder and captured a half-hour of its unabated attack. Later, back in the comparatively peaceful city, I listened to the recording on headphones, and the sound seemed even more amazing in this incongruous setting. I mentioned this to John and he asked if he could hear the tape. I brought it down to him the next day. He described it as an extraordinary experience: you've heard blizzards, he said, but hearing one out of context deals a terrific jolt. He asked for a copy of the tape for David Tudor, who had taken over from John the musical directorship of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. John said, "If David likes it as much as I do, we'll use it as the accompaniment for a new dance of Merce's." I gave him a copy, but he did not raise the subject again. I assumed that either David had other ideas or that John, with his overfull schedule, had forgotten to play it for him. A couple of weeks later Dove suggested I bring up the subject with John, but I didn't. In my friendship with him I tried to act the way I thought he would. I didn't always succeed, but in this case I think I did.

The only other time we discussed the possibility of Merce using a "sound" idea of mine, the conclusion was similar. I had designed a piece titled *Ago*. The "recipe" called for making five recordings simultaneously, from five related locations, a half hour before curtain time of a dance program. Microphone no. 1 would be placed outside, on the theater's roof. No. 2 would be in the center

of the theater's highest balcony. No. 3 would be in the lobby, where the ticket-collecting would be going on. No. 4 would be in the pit, aimed at the audience finding their seats. And no. 5 would be backstage, in an area leading to the dressing rooms. The five recordings would be played simultaneously, each from a separate location, determined by chance, in the balcony and orchestra section of the theater. I showed the recipe to John; he said he liked it very much. As with the blizzard tape he asked if he could have a copy of the "score" and said he would show it to David.

In a terrifying incident late in John's life, he was attacked by a mugger who gained entrance to his fifth-floor loft by ringing the ground-floor buzzer and claiming to be a UPS delivery man. When John, possibly suspecting something, offered to go down to pick up the package, the man insisted that for some reason he had to be let into the building and up to the studio. I was extraordinarily affected by John's telling of this story, in part because he vividly acted out the mugging in words and actions; I had never seen him do anything similar. He put his hands around his cat's neck and actually shook it a little, shouting, "Tell me where you keep the [expletive] money! Where's the money!" Though he did this as if to amuse, the emotion behind it was clearly not funny. John's prior displays

of humor were subtle and soft-spoken, yet here he was replaying a brutal attack, imitating the attacker's voice, exactly repeating his language.

In the following days the subject of the attack kept returning, usually brought up by John. This too was uncharacteristic. I am certain that this mugging affected his optimistic and trusting outlook in a way that less sensitive individuals would find hard to understand. I decided to do something to prevent a recurrence: without talking to John, I asked the building superintendent whether there might be a way for packages for him to be left at the ground-floor reception desk of the J. Crew company in the building next door. By coincidence, my niece worked as a designer for the company at the time, and she was sure this was viable. The superintendent too agreed, and I told him to make the arrangements—only telling John after everything was in place. My reason for the initial subterfuge was my feeling that he would be resistant to the idea before the fact, but might accept it as a *fait accompli*. And this in fact was what happened: at first John frowned, even saying, "It's beginning to feel as though I'm not in total control of my life," but to my relief, and to Merce's and Dove's, he did not countermand the order. A while later a visiting friend of John's, hearing about the mugging, asked John if there wasn't a way for his packages to be left somewhere else. John, a little proudly, said, "Oh, Bill has already taken care of that!" Needless to say, any remaining feelings of guilt on my part evaporated.

John could be quite paradoxical. He once said he did not believe in recorded music; actually he went as far as to say, "That is not music." And he would tease me about owning thousands of LP's. (From time to time John would aim a friendly barb at me for owning so many possessions, particularly my lp's, but on the other hand he would also tell others about them rather expansively, a bit like a proud father.) On one occasion at a dinner with Merce, Dove, and me, we began to talk about recordings and my habit of listening to recorded music while doing a daily regime of exercises. John said, "But Bill, why would you want to hear the same performance of the same piece once you have heard it?" Without thinking much I said, "But John, *I'm* a different person every day." Before John could answer, either Dove or Merce started to say something that would have changed the subject, but John interrupted—an extreme rarity. "Wait a minute," he said, "I have had something like that!" I was astonished; I hadn't thought I'd said anything unusual. The conversation naturally stayed with this subject for some time. It became clear that John's thoughts on my remark were in a frame quite distant from the truism I had uttered, which seemed to have reminded him of something within himself that he had not connected with listening to music. At least when he was listening to music, it would seem, he felt that he *was* the same person he always was.

Despite John's gentle barbs at records and record collectors, if he and Merce were at our home for dinner he would occasionally ask me to play a part of a recording that was on his mind. Once we were planning to go to the opera to see Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* and Satie's *Parade*. He asked if I knew the Purcell, with which he was unfamiliar. I told him I knew it and found it beautiful, like virtually all of Purcell's works. We listened to an aria from a recording of *Dido* and it was clear that he enjoyed it thoroughly.

If John came across something that pleased him he would waste no time embracing it. In the mid-'80s Jasper Johns served a homemade ice cream dessert after dinner at his studio. Jasper is an excellent cook, and an excellent maker of desserts. He had recently acquired an ice cream maker. A recipe had been consulted and improved upon and John and Merce had been impressed. By this time John, Merce, and Dove and I were following the macrobiotic diet John had learned from Yoko Ono. John knew that you could substitute soy milk for cream in this kind of recipe, and he immediately had a machine like Jasper's delivered. For about a year most dinners at his loft ended with a marvelous macrobiotic ice cream finale. One day the machine quit. Learning that it would take a certain amount of time to be made new, he immediately ordered another machine just like it. When the refurbished original machine was delivered he gave us the three-week old machine, knowing how much we enjoyed the

dessert. It is still in use.

John resisted embracing the computer age until he could get assistance from an expert in the field. When this finally happened he gave us his IBM electric typewriter, knowing that I was still using the same portable I had bought in the early '50s, when I was attending night courses in Philadelphia. It is still used from time to time.

Once when John, Merce, and the company of dancers went to South America for an engagement, their accommodations were in the home of a supporter, where they slept for the first time on horsehair mattresses. Immediate converts, John and Merce ordered a pair of these mattresses to be made as soon as they returned, a wide one for Merce, a narrow one for John. Their enthusiasm convinced me and Dove and we ordered a horsehair mattress too. By happy coincidence, we were furnishing our summer cottage in Pennsylvania at the time, and John and Merce gave us their two old latex mattresses. We engaged a carpenter to construct a platform and each summer we still sleep on what has turned out to be an odd-sized superfirm bed with mismatched mattresses.

John's *Europera* series, created by him *in toto*—music, sets, costumes, lighting—is an excruciatingly humorous takeoff on the whole idea of opera. It is the project I most wish he had suggested collaborating with me on. Years after John's passing I learned that he had named me as a potential collaborator in an interview with by William Furlong:

WF: Do you work with any visual artists at the moment, painters and sculptors?

JC: I have a very good and close friend William Anastasi, whose work I enjoy, and we play chess a great deal together, but we haven't collaborated on any actual work, though we might.

When John suggested, the first time we met, that I have all the soundtracks of the "Sound Objects" playing simultaneously, following that advice would have turned the exhibition into a kind of collaboration. And the second time we met we arranged for his performance as narrator for my performance piece *You Are*; here we *were* collaborators of a sort, but it was in a piece of my design. The Furlong interview was a marvelous message to me from beyond. (It is in *Archives of Silence*, 1997, Q3, Re: Cage interview.)

John expressed enthusiasm over the years for the sound drawings I had shown him in 1965. A couple of days after his death, having trouble sleeping, I got out of bed and went into my studio. I decided to do a sound drawing. As I worked in the dark, it occurred to me that since the early '60s, technology had advanced to the point where a sound drawing exhibition would be viable. The drawing I had shown John the day we met was accompanied by a reel-to-reel tape that was played on a Tandberg 5 tape recorder, slightly larger and considerably heavier than a bread box. But now there were tape recorders barely larger than a pack of cigarettes. It struck me that one of these could be conveniently cradled behind the spring apparatus on top of a clipboard holding a drawing and the sound of its making. I visited Anne D'Harnoncourt, the director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and suggested that the Museum stage an exhibition titled *Sound Drawings*. John had liked to use the number fifteen in his work, because of the fifteen stones in the Ryoanji gardens in Japan. I proposed that I would ask fifteen of John's friends, artists and nonartists, to do a drawing each on 8 1/2-by-11-inch paper, taping the sounds they made while they were doing it. I would do a drawing as well, making for a total of sixteen works, with the sounds of the making of all the drawings audible simultaneously. Anne D'Harnoncourt agreed, and the date of August 28, 1993, was set for the opening. The fifteen people who were close to John that I was able to reach were Merce Cunningham, Jacqueline Matisse Monnier, Jasper Johns, Dove

Bradshaw, Tom Marioni, Dorothea Tanning, Mimi Johnson, Ray Kass, Alison Knowles, Laura Kuhn, Grete Sultan, Takehisa Kosugi, Kathan Brown, and Margarete Roeder. Each made a drawing that was exhibited along with the one I made.

It was our habit to invite John and Merce to our home for dinner on my birthday. We usually had Christmas dinners together and August 11 dinners together. Several days before my birthday Dove would call John and make the invitation. John would usually say, "I'll ask uncle Merce and if he's free we'll see you," then call back the next day and say it was fine. In the summer of 1992 there was a festival of John's music in the garden of The Museum of Modern Art, with concerts most nights of the week. Sometimes we would have dinner with John and Merce at their loft, then drive together to the concert. John and I were still playing chess most days, but his schedule was temporarily hectic. So, instead of playing automatically every day, we had gone back to the earlier habit of my calling around noon to learn whether chess was viable.

I noticed during these weeks that John was sometimes flushed, and seemed under increased pressure. A few days before my birthday, which fell on a day

with no concert, Dove said she was going to call John the way she always did. I replied, "No, not this year." Although I knew that, because of the tradition he would probably say yes, I didn't want to add anything to his schedule. I didn't want him to say yes; I didn't want him even to have to think about whether or not to say yes.

After the concert on August 8, a Saturday night, we drove John and Merce back to their home. Dove and I were surprised, almost amazed, when John made a point of kissing each of us goodbye. Since we saw him regularly he had long since ceased this habit. Dove and I talked of nothing else on the drive home, trying to fathom this out. Those goodbye embraces were the last time we would see him conscious.

I talked to him on the telephone on Sunday and again on Monday, but we did not play chess. I said he should take it easy, mirroring what I thought I picked up in his voice. John had his fatal stroke on August 11, 1992—my fifty-ninth birthday. I had not called that day to suggest chess. I thought that John might somehow be aware that this was my birthday, and if so, that his interpretation or misinterpretation of the change in our years-long tradition might be an added pressure. Dove could tell I was off-balance about this. Seeing that I seemed to be in terrible spirits, and thinking it might be depressing on my birthday to have

dinner alone at home as usual, she suggested that she would call a friend of ours in Philadelphia, Carl Kielblock, a former student of mine, and invite ourselves to dinner. Back in 1977, Carl had been the “writer narrator” for *You Are* on the evening before John had performed as the “composer narrator.” He is also an artist and we had engaged him to design the set and costumes for Merce’s *Inventions*, in 1989; the lighting for *Polarity*, in 1990; and the design for *Loosestrife*, in 1991. He was excited about our coming, even saying he’d bake a cake. So it was settled. But no sooner had Dove hung up the phone than I started trying to make up strange arguments against going. At one point I questioned whether our tires were safe; Dove reminded me that they were practically new. Since I could think of no reason to renege on our commitment, we finally took off, but I still kept trying to squirm out of it, saying we should call Carl and cancel. Dove repeated that there was no logical reason for doing so and I had to agree. Yet when we were in the rush hour line of cars inching forward to enter the Lincoln Tunnel, I veered to the left and out of line, barely a car length before we would be irrevocably committed. I had no idea what possessed me. I thought to myself, I’ll never hear the end of this from my partner—and I can’t blame her. I had not the slightest excuse except impulse. But instead she simply said, “These things happen.” Later she explained that there was something desperate in my demeanor that ruled out any other reaction.

It was in that time period that John had his stroke. Laura Kuhn, his assistant, had been with him all day, leaving around 5:30. Merce came home a bit after 6:00 and found John unconscious on the kitchen-area floor. Merce said later that when he discovered John he immediately called us. Of course there was no answer.

The phone was ringing when we got home. It was Laura, telling us to go immediately to St. Vincent’s Hospital—John had had a massive stroke. She and Merce were at the hospital. John was lying on his back. His eyes were closed but his breathing was powerful, with a full rise of chest and stomach. He seemed perfectly vital. Merce told us, though, that the doctors, in asking if they were to use extraordinary means to prolong John’s heartbeat and breathing, had assured him that because of the severity of the stroke, he would never be John again. John had often made it clear that he disagreed with the practice of helping someone in this state to continue breathing by modern medical techniques. Merce felt the same way.

John’s heart gave way less than twenty-four hours after his stroke. Laura told us that whenever the phone rang during her last day with him in the loft, John had said, “That will be Bill.” As she was leaving he said, “I wonder why Bill didn’t call.” The image of this has become a part of me.

John's ashes were scattered over a field in Stony Point, in upstate New York. It is near the place where John had had a room in the home of Paul Williams and his family. Dove and I had driven there with John years before to gather mushrooms, and he had taken us to a high place where he had scattered his mother's ashes. He added in a cheerful tone that it would probably be a good place for his own some day.

You Are

John Cage and William Anastasi

*Facsimile transcription of John Cage's live performance of
"You Are," a theater piece by William Anastasi*

The Clocktower, New York, 1977

1 Day 3 8:00

2 Its 8:00. i will attempt to describe what i hear in
3 this room where you and i wa are. i hear some people
4 walking and some others are talking. i just said hi
5 to anne major who has arrived a little bit late. just
6 before she sat down she made a very interesting sound
7 with the rubber sole of her shoe. and just now another
8 one moving her chair. the sound of the machine she is
9 using is extremely quiet in comparison with your type
10 writer.

11 8:01

12 an acoustic situation is extremely complicated. there are
13 so many things happening for instance the sound of this
14 clock. its almost as though it were boiling, throbbing,
15 and all the walking continues. do you have a cold?
16 do you need some kleenex? what?

17 8:02

18 now i hear the voice of my friend maryanne amasha. you
19 hear it. of all the sounds i
20 hear i am growing more and more fond of the one
21 of this clock. thats a nice one. the situation is in
22 is somewhat impossible, because in order to hear i must
23 be quiet. but in order to narrate which im obliged to
24 do, i have to speak and when i speak my attention is not
25 on what im hearing. so that my mind is divided between lis
tening and saying.

what is already noticing is that the sounds that are closest to me are the ones i hear that take my attention though the sounds of people talking -- that was interesting that sounded like a bottle opening. its not its a staple gun. beautiful.

8:05 and the button of that coat against the wall. its curious that im asked in this situation to know what it is that makes which sound. o whereas in a musical situation i didn't have such a sense of necessity. i would be able to listen to a sound in a piece of music without knowing what has caused it. perhaps as the time continues

my attention will move away from narration and become more musical so to speak.

8:06 perhaps as the time continues my attention will move away from narration and become more musical, so to speak. perhaps the need to narrate makes me makes the connection between cause and sound, so that i have something to say about by way of description.

8:08

if i merely said for instance that i heard high sounds and many sounds in the middle, every now and then some thing percussive, you see how vague the description is.

8:09

instead of a reporter perhaps in this subtle situation what is needed is a recorder.

2

dist
rapid
H
T

3

8:10

this has both a slight rattel and a pulsating whirring sound. now that there are so many people moving around and so many people talking its difficult to hear this clock unless i hold it up to my ear as i did and hear it, but before when there were less sounds i could hear the clock more easily even when it was a distance from my ear of a foot or so but when it was a foot away i didn't hear that slight rattle.

8:12

i can tell when the people are quiet now because its then that i can hear the clock without putting it up to my ear.

8:13

its actually very beautiful basically as far as i can hear the sound of talking and the sound of walking and now and then the sound which i have earlier described as having a percussive nature like the door slamming or like the stapling gun on the wall or if somebody dropped something, it didn't bounce.

this situation of course is very different from what i would hear if i were at home. and its largely due to the fact that there are so many people in the room.

8:15

do that again this is rattling now. try again.

1 maybe this can --

2 try it now.type something. okay. do it again.

3 doesn't seem to rattle much. okay. thats better.

4 try it now. no. go ahead. i think an old

5 fashioned typewriter would probably respond better.

6 im beginning to hear more sounds that sound like the same

7 time as the talking and the walking. this can is getting

8 more and more interesting.

9 this clock is like birds flying.

10 8:20

11 ive noticed there are moments when theres almost no walking

12 but the talking doesn't ever seem to stop. its amazing

13 how interested people are in talking.

14 youd think theyd be able to get along with a little bit

15 less.

16 when you cant understand what theyr saying then you

17 notice how that it sometimes gets louder sometimes more

18 subtler but the extraordinary thing about it is it almost

19 never stops. im going to listen carefully now and see

20 if i can notice its stopping.

21 8:23

22 im ging to listen for lets see we have this clock

23 im going to listen 30 seconds and see if i can hear a time

24 when there is no talking. how many -- i said 30 seconds.

1 8:23.50

2 0:24

3 i would say that during those 30 seconds there wasn't a

4 single instant when someone wasnt talking. but we have

5 no notion of what they were saying. i also have no real

6 sense of how to describe what it was that i heard except

7 that it was talking. Talking is made up of vowels

8 and consonants but when you hear it i this way it goes

9 into a kind of blur. an interesting blur. now and then

10 as the finnigans wake you hear a few words that are not

11 blurred. i mean to say that you understand.

12 8:26

13 but mostly none of it is as clear as the sound of this

14 clock. when he said "thats true" for instance that was not

15 blurred. just now i thought i heard someone

16 say wait, but im not certain that that was what they said.

17 there comes the staple again. the word beautiful. talk

18 about working.

19 8:27

20 8:28

21 8:29

22 if i were at home it seems to me that the sound situation

23 the number of events would be fewer and if i set out to

24 describe them i might be able to do it but here theres a

25 complexity that so far slip simplifies itself to me simply

1 simply to this clock. to say the sounds of the typing
2 and not so much your machine as your sighing now and then
3 or the moving of this, i mean to say the sounds that the
4 three of us are making here, if i touch this paper, for
5 instance.

6 8:31

7 and then i noticed besides the talking and the walking
8 but i keep calling the percussive sounds, the continuous
9 ones are the talking and the walking and the talking is
10 more continuous than the walking, and the fewest
11 are these striking percussive events.

12 i remember years ago looking out the window at grant
13 street and monroe and noticing the traffic in the east
14 river drive and imagining that one might write music
15 following the

16 8:32

17 following the a nature by describing the traffic. so that
18 it is to find a way of making a piece of music, it would
19 result from describing this situation that i am attempting
20 to describe but not succeeding in describing now.

21 if i were going to seriously make a piece of music out
22 of this situation i would have to come to some closer terms
23 with it than i have h yet found. perhaps before we get
24 to the end perhaps ill get an idea.

25 8:33 of what one would use or what i would use.

1 if i were going to make a piece of music out of this
2 situation which, as we say, you are.

3 8:33

4 im trying to imagine what that would be without recourse
5 to technology. its obvious that it could be done very
6 easily with a tape recorder.

7 8:34 but i like to imagine what it would be if i didn't
8 have any technology, because as duchonta said, if you
9 dont have any, if you dont have good tools it requires
10 greater skill.

11 8:34

12 but when i was trying to describe to you what i was hear
13 ing at the beginning you remember i kept thinking of
14 the clock, but that character of the clock which in terms
15 of music is an ostinato, its a constantly repeated
16 pulsating time type sound.

17 8:35

18 its not what i would use at all if i were making a piece
19 of music out of this situation. i do think i would use the
20 talking and the walking and it would -- wouldnt be
21 difficult to either construct or to train people
22 to walk, it might be more difficult to be get them to talk
23 because if they thought there were supposed to talk they w
24 ouldnt talk as well as they are talking now. when they
25 dont know that they are supposed to be doing it.

1 8:36

2 and there would be a great difference in the sound. it
3 would become self conscious. it would become
4 self conscious for as now what we are hearing is without
5 its without any attempt at self expression. it isn't
6 theatrical, for instance, let alone musical.

7 8:37

8 this is a solo for the typewriter.
9 even that's a complicated situation.

10 8:39

11 we have to come to the end of this solo.

12 8:40

13 there seems to be more of a laughing, more other uses of
14 the voice than just talking. laughing too.

15 8:42

16 the tearing of the paper is always very interesting.

17 8:43

18 its of course to make a piece of music like this one doesn't
19 really have to do anything except somehow have say this n
20 umber of people in a room of this size and to do something
21 so that they will stay here rather than go away. then they
22 are obviously going to make just exactly the kind of
23 sounds that we're hearing right now. im of course trying
24 to ignore the sound of your typewriter but this quiet
25 one over here, the court -- what is it -- stenograph
its so quiet that i try to hear it.

1 and the typewriter is so loud that i try not to hear it.

2 8:44

3 in speaking in this direction its coming out in this
4 direction. are you more out of transcribing than you
5 are in the arts? are you more a court reporter than an
6 artist? its very interesting i was just talking with
7 a yo-ng man here and its clear that when i was talking
8 with him i was not doing my job of narrating. in fact
9 if i were narrating i would now probably have to describe
10 what it was we talked about but it wasn't anything very
11 interesting. the sound wed have to say didnt make as much
12 sense as sound as this clock does or the general talking
13 walking which is even more sound when its more blurred.
14 so thats the key. it became in fact when we talked
15 together just now it became so distinct that it wasnt
16 interesting.

17 8:47

18 certainly not interesting to describe. did you take down
19 the conversation? just the answers?

20 *8:48

21 i wonder whether i would be able to listen differently
22 if it were in the morning. i began the day today in
23 florida. its i would say its as warm in this room as
24 it was in florida

25 8:49

one nice thing about the walking here is that its on the wooden floor and i remember when you first put your coat down and came to your chair you made that sound with your rubber soled shoe. nice one. he closed the suitcase, that falls in the category of percussive sound. though it had a slighty puffy wind instrument type wound

8:50

i haven't noticed a single moment without conversation. without the sound of someones voice. maybe if i had a microscope i don't mean a microscope i mean a way of hearin more slowly than i hear because i think one of the problems about listening is we have to listen so immediately to so many things that they escape our attention so that i not only have the impediment of having to talk while im listening but i have the impediment that there so much happening so quickly that i miss it all but if i could pay attention to it more slowly as though i had a microscope then i would begin to see spaces between the speaking, but with so to speak my ordinary ears i dont hear anything between the talking.

8:52

that would be very nice to have if we were having more technology to have something that would pull time stretch time out so that a little bit of it became a lot.

8:53

8:53

thats beginning to get somewhere.

there may even be such a machine for all i know. i discover more and more that im very backward technologically and that all things kinds of things are being invented without my being any the wiser. in fact i think im turning my back on technology a little bit. not when it comes to the technology i already know but when it comes to say the discovery of new technology.

i think the reason i turn my back on it is because so many people face it.

and since they do it i don't have to.

because that facing is being done so i can pay attention to something else. nevertheless it would be nice from a musical point of view to have some kind of a gadget by means of which we could take a little bit of time and examine it in detail.

8:55

that s of course not the sort of machine that i am.

because im only able to say the most unsatisfactory things about what im hearing. im able to say to repeat that theres a lot of talking and that it never stops, but if i had this machine that im speaking of i could take a little bit of time and there would of course be some talking in it but im sure there would be spaces if it were pulled

out enough, if it was large enough, there would
be some spaces where there wasn't any talking.

8:57

but as a man myself I'm not able to hear that absence
of talking. I just hear it constantly. and then I begin
to be silly and be pleased when somebody laughs, or
when I hear that stapling machine, simply because it
isn't talking. or that sound that this man made
with his camera box when he closed it and it had that
kind of puffy quality and I must say your machine is
a target for improvement. something should be done to ch
ange the sound. lets what this does to it.

its better. does that bother you. I don't its com
lets see what happens.

8:58

how soon do you want to look? see if it did it all
right. its okay. now play a little bit. I mean type.
I like it better this way. put this up here and
you'll be able to see it more easily.

9:00

you see theres less talking. I begin I think I hear

9:01 you have to change the paper?

theres definitely getting to be less talking.

I find this kind of sound uh as interesting and as

pleasing to hear not as I would say more pleasing

to hear than anything else. that idea I spoke of earlier

of making a piece of music out of this situation isn't

necessary because it is it is a piece of music if I

hear it as such. I had the feeling just now that I was

hearing as such but I'm not able to describe it to you

in -- I'm not able to describe it to you in ways that

would give you the musical feeling that I was having as

I was hearing. I think its because of that characteristic

that I mentioned earlier of its great complexity and I

enjoy the complexity but it goes by so fast that I was

not really able to say what it was I was hearing.

9:04

whats so beautiful about this kind of situation which

is the sound around us is that its not focussed its not

directed its not pushing. even when the striking percus

sive sounds come like opening this box and the stapling

machine, the sound of laughing, its no sooner laugh than

gone. so that your hearing goes on as freely after even

a very striking sound as freely after as before. and that

is the kind of situation that is so rare in so called m

usic. when I say so called music I mean music music.

because there everything is underlined and your taken
like a criminal in a truck right up to climax.

9:06

you didn't have to take the you didn't have to take it
from the stenograph? there is of course that distinct
difference between sounds that are close and ones that
are farther way. and closeness helps in particularly
the very quite sounds. I could by moving nearer your
machine change the effect it had on my attention.

9:08

lets see what that does.
its pretty good. i think though the paper isnt moving.

did it move. ill hold it. its better when

its over the whole thing. now i hear this throbbing
more.

9:09

9:10.10

there are coming to be periods of far less talking.
and also less walking. so that i hear your typing.
and the throbbing. and again the special ticking or
percussive sounds. the intermittent ones. i don't mean
that. i didn't mean intermittent. i meant the rare ones
the ones that come and are striking because there hasn't
been anything like them before.

9:11

now were hearing anumber of uses of the voice that
have to do with t what were doing. doves remark for in
stance about your virtuosity. and what is it your talking
about?

9:12

theres coming to be less separatin between what we're
doing and the people who before were just talking and
walking.

9:13.25

why was it that you were whispering?

9:14.10

you've been typing so quietly.

i think one of the things that needs listening to this
situation ^{the} so interesting is that you never know when the
next sound is going to take place and you don't know what
its character is going to be and by the time youve notice
d it some other sound is taking its place and the situation
gets to that complexity where you know longer can describe
it.

9:15 thats one of those special sounds, a kind of a squeak
ing of this table. we could --

its very nice. now we know that we could have it at any
moment just as we could cover the typewriter with the coat.
9:16 actually we don't need to do that because it
happened so to speak without my doing it in the first place

1 and just the fact of hearing it i noticed at the same
 2 time that if i wanted to hear it again i could do it.
 3 9:17
 4 ~~is this~~ is this whole situation the constant response to
 5 a question? and is this do we know what the question is that
 6 is being asked that makes what it is that we hear. or is
 7 this simply the situation of empty mindedness of not
 8 having any question to ask i think that thats what it is
 9 that if i had a question i would be in a situation
 10 of making a piece of music whereas here i am and i could
 11 be anyplace else and if there you werent there other
 12 you would be there. without asking any question at all
 13 all of these sounds would take place. but if it were
 14 if i were making a piece of music i would not be able to
 15 make it be this way unless i knew what questions to ask
 16 in order to get this kind of response. the response could
 17 come either from musicians who would perform in such
 18 a way so as to reproduce a situation like this or o it
 19 could be questions put to a machine that would then
 20 respond with a complex of talking walking sometimes
 21 percussive situation that would have the same kind of
 22 unpredictability that the situation we're actually in
 23 not only here but any other time and any other place,
 24 to a quieter or louder degree this kind of music is
 25 going on constantly.

1 9:21
 2 i didn't say lesser or greater because its always equally
 3 less -- theres just as little of it or as much of it
 4 as there is always. the only difference it seems to
 5 be actually is whether its quieter or louder. because
 6 take for instance the complexity that i was talking about
 7 when i mentioned about the machine with which we could
 8 stretch it out in such a way that we can see the spaces
 9 between. that kind of complexity i think is with
 10 us always. its just attention that might fail in the
 11 presence of the quietness. we might not notice in
 12 quietness as much complexity as we notice, well,
 13 in what you might call this mezzo forte.
 14 9:22
 15 and maybe those percussive sounds that are not nearly
 16 percussive but merely the least little bit louder
 17 sometimes greater louder. what all of these situation
 18 have in common is not the sounds, we could have this kind
 19 of situation for instance without any people.
 20 9:23
 21 just one person listening and then it wouldnt be the
 22 talking and the walking but it would be some other sounds
 23 that were, so to speak, predominant, but there would also
 24 be the thing that is in common, which is the unpredictability.
 25 except in this most general terms.

9:24

Thaureau says that we d should simplify but this is this experience of hearing so something that cant be simplified. and i think its surely the same way seeing, but perhaps hearing is even more complicated than seeing because it has all happens all the way around you.

you only see, so to speak, what is in front of you.

9:25 but you hear all the way around. this is of course what i like most about experience, where its seeing or hearing, is its unpredictability and i found it less interesting when i new perfectly well what i was hearing.

i mean to say when i was talking. even hearing what i am saying now is less interesting than my being quiet listening, and its doubly less interesting when im saying talking with someone and answering, say a question, or making some remark. so that i could go back to listening.

9:26

as to a source.

9:27

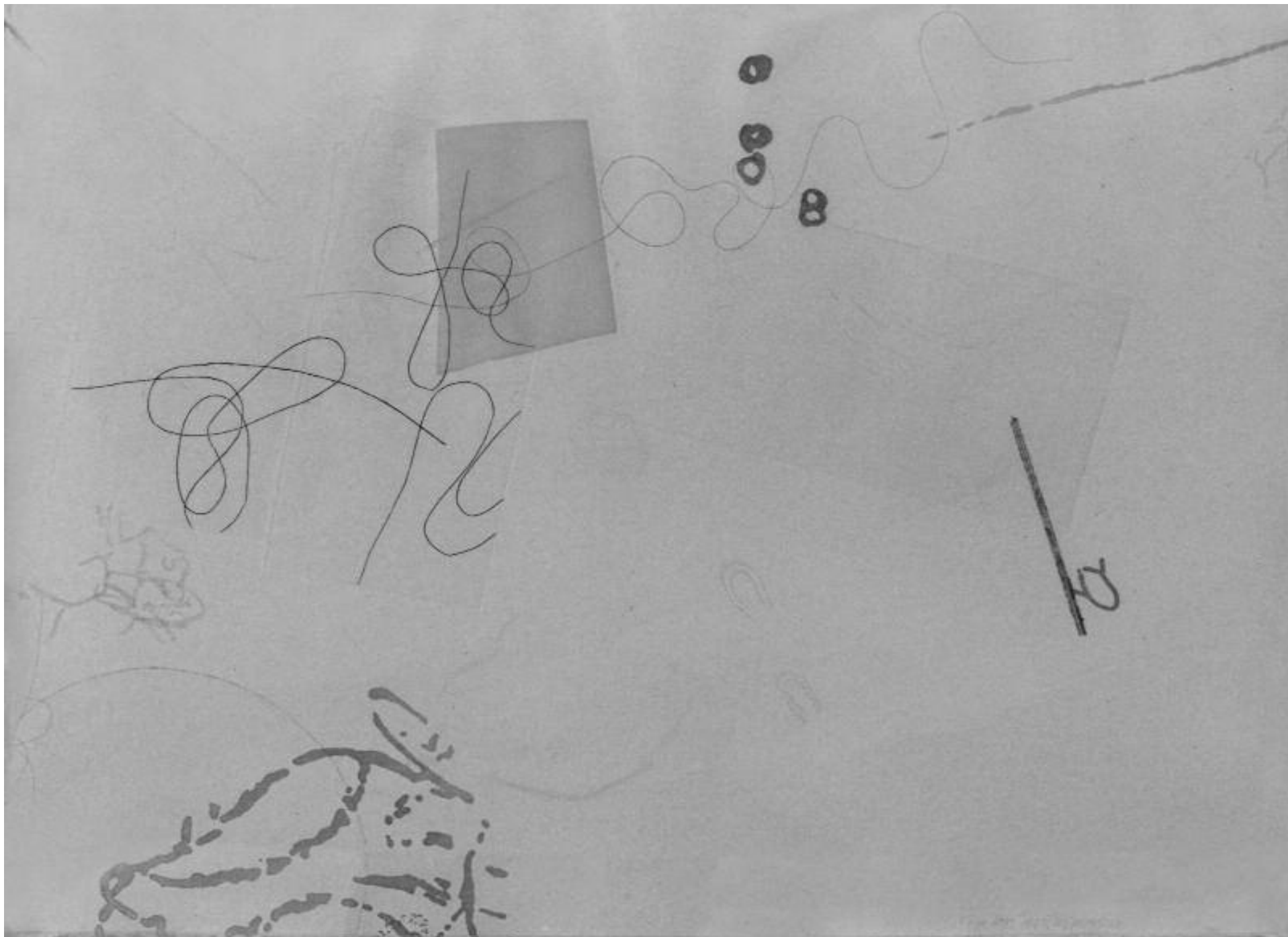
i notice that as i do that that there is a tendency for me to do what music lovers used to also do, which was to shut their eyes.

9:27

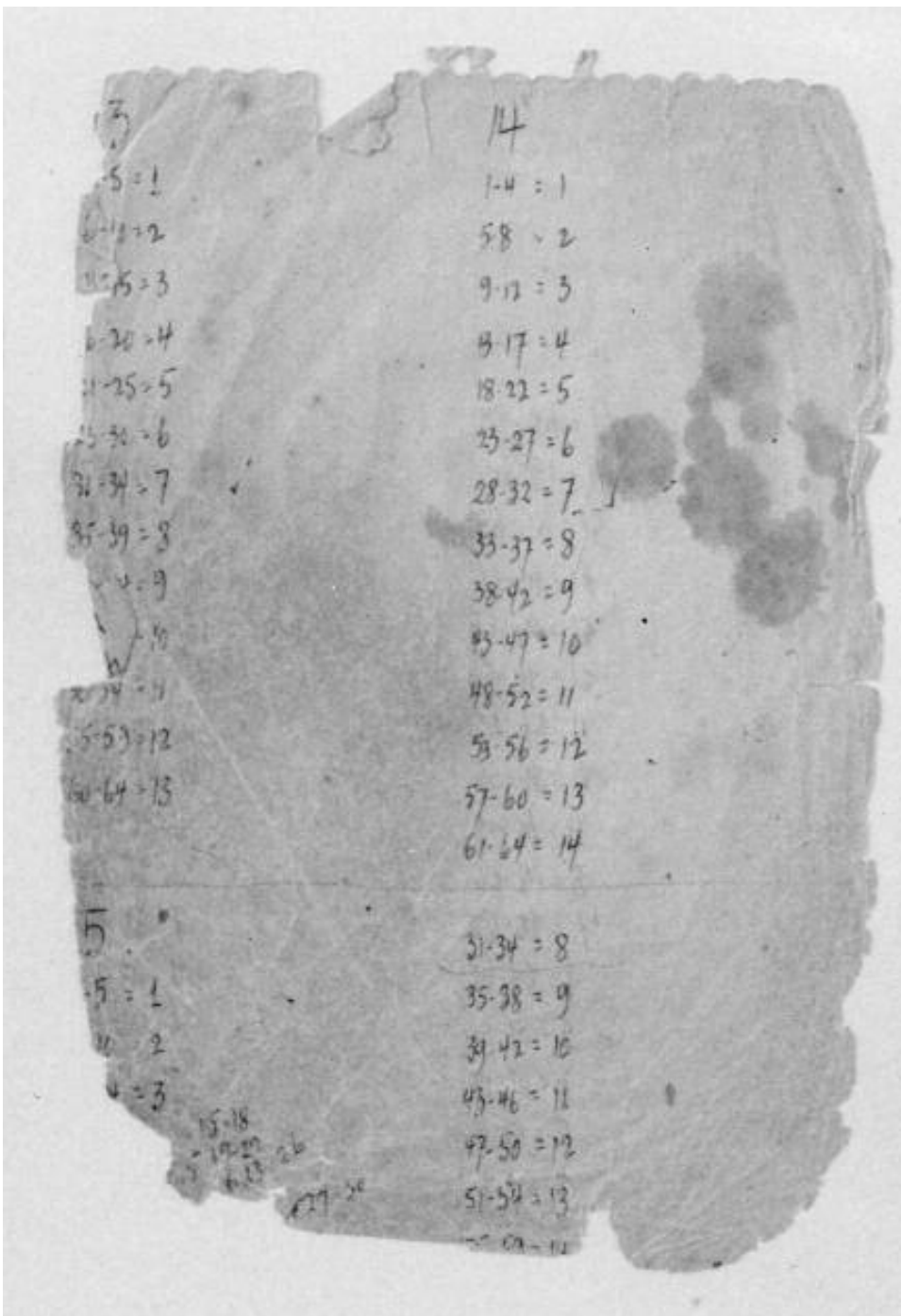
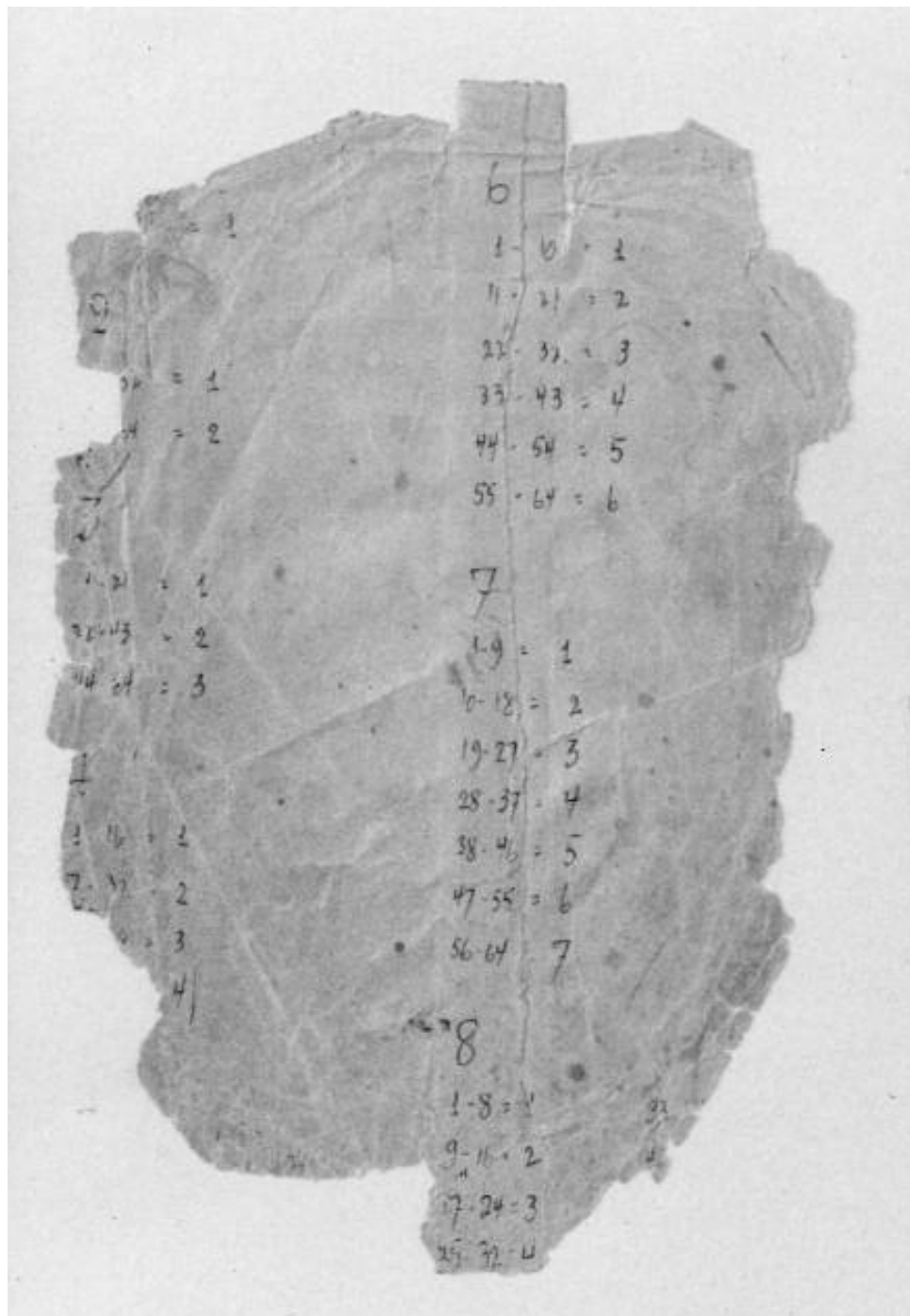
i wonder if shutting my eyes is similar to putting the waste paper basket on top of the typewriter. as i press the end of this clock against my ear it sounds entirely differently here than it does from the front.

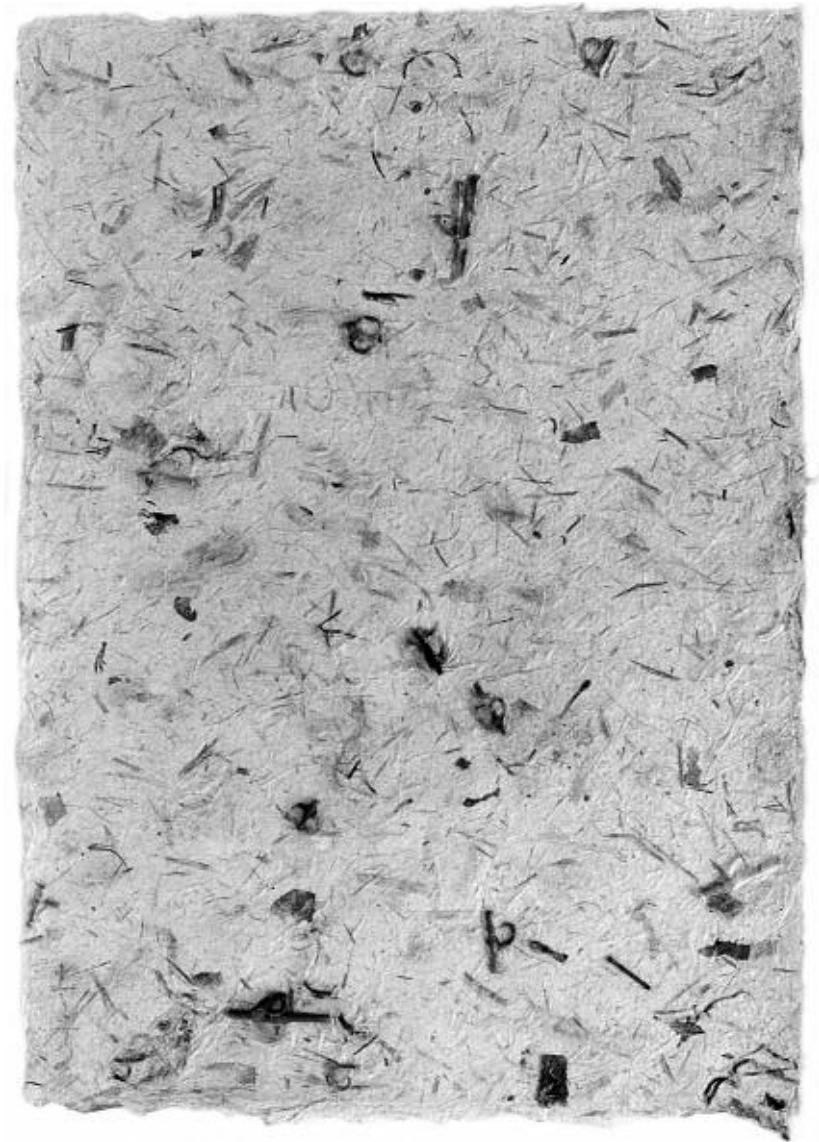
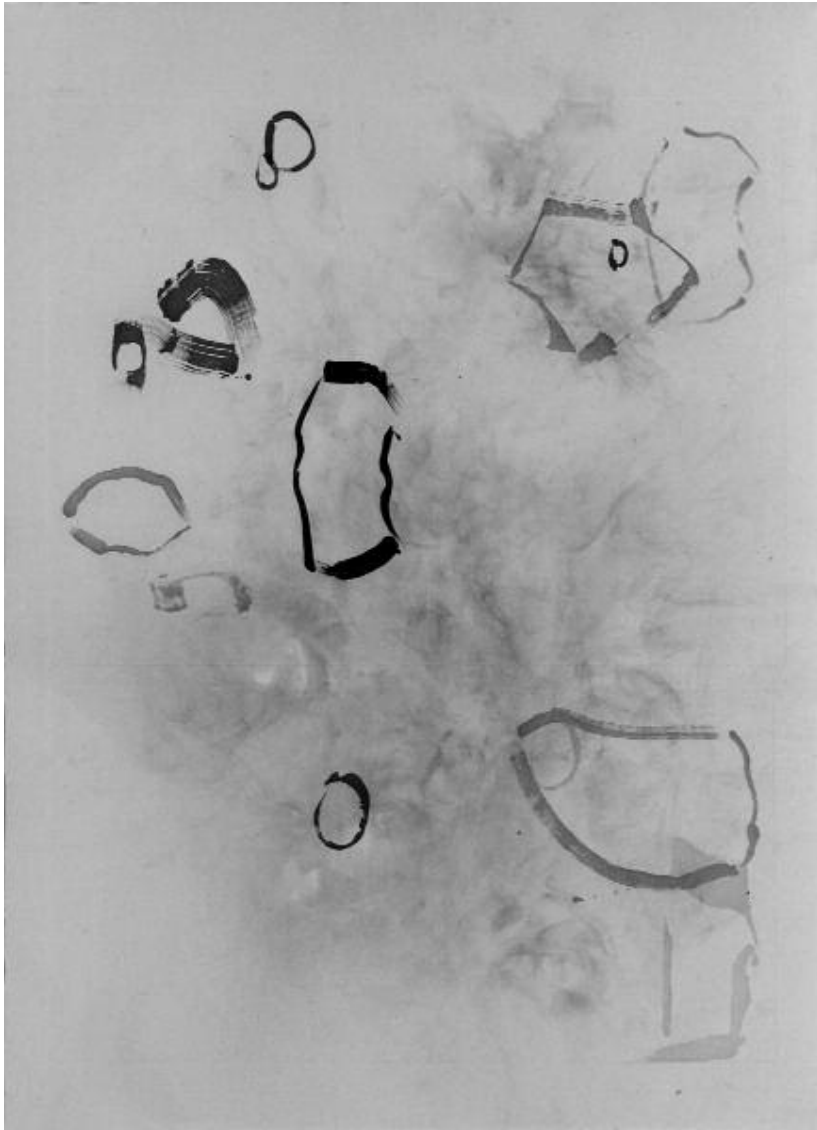
here i hear those two sounds i described as rattling and kind of whirring revolving sound now i theres still the two, but the whirring one's become more dominant than the rattling one is more delicate.

Selected Works, 1950-2007
John Cage and William Anastasi



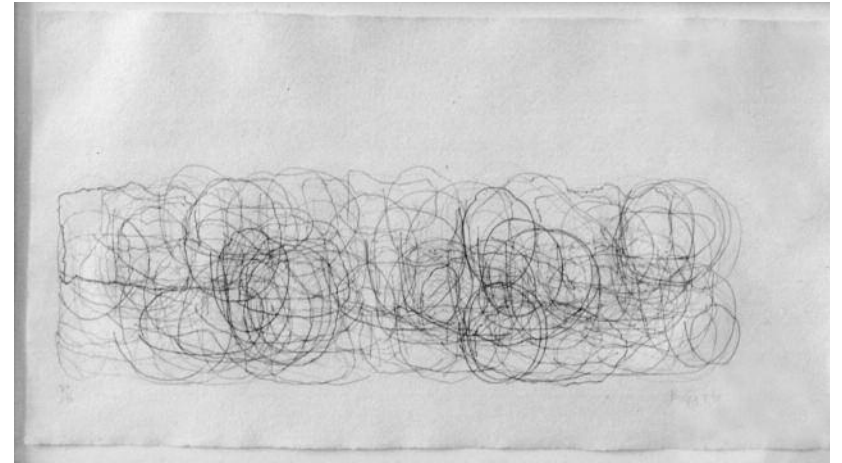
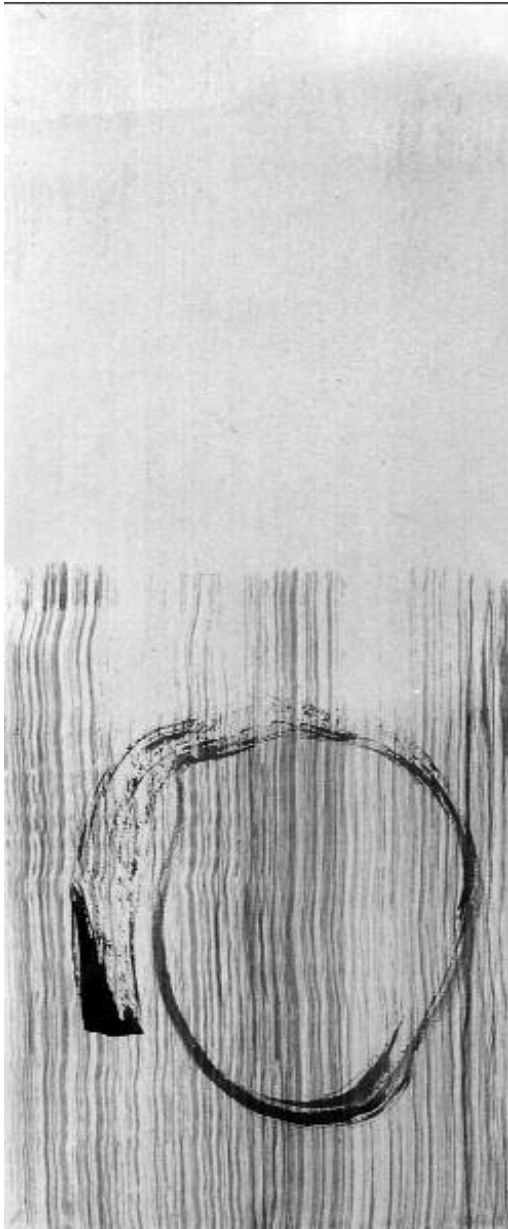
John Cage, *Changes and Disappearances* (drypoint, engraving and photo etching), 1979-82





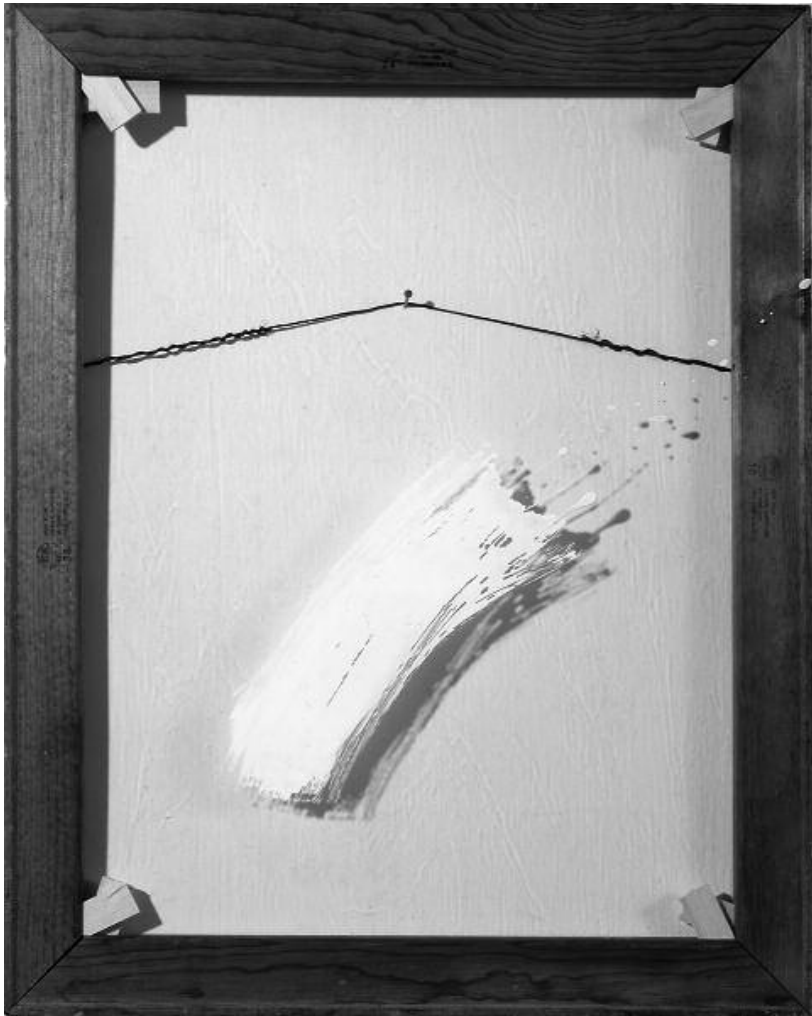
John Cage, *Wild Edible Drawing #1* (mulberry, banana, cattail, hijiki, honeysuckle, Hibiscus, flowers, gambir), 1990.

Left: John Cage, *The Missing Stone* (color spitbite and sugar lift aquatint etching on smoked paper), 1989.



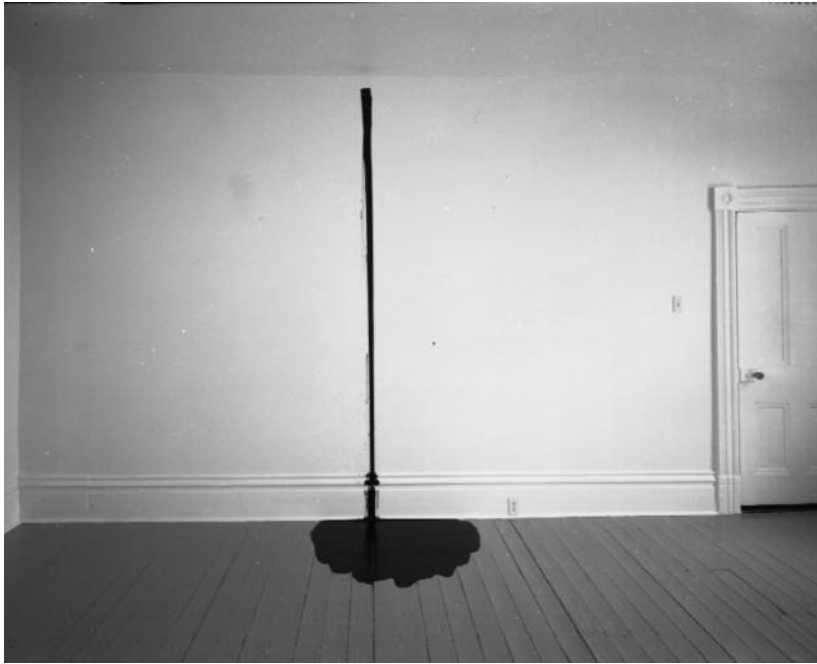
John Cage, *R 2/16, 8/84* (pencil on paper), 1984

Left: John Cage, *New River Watercolors* (Watercolor on paper), 1988



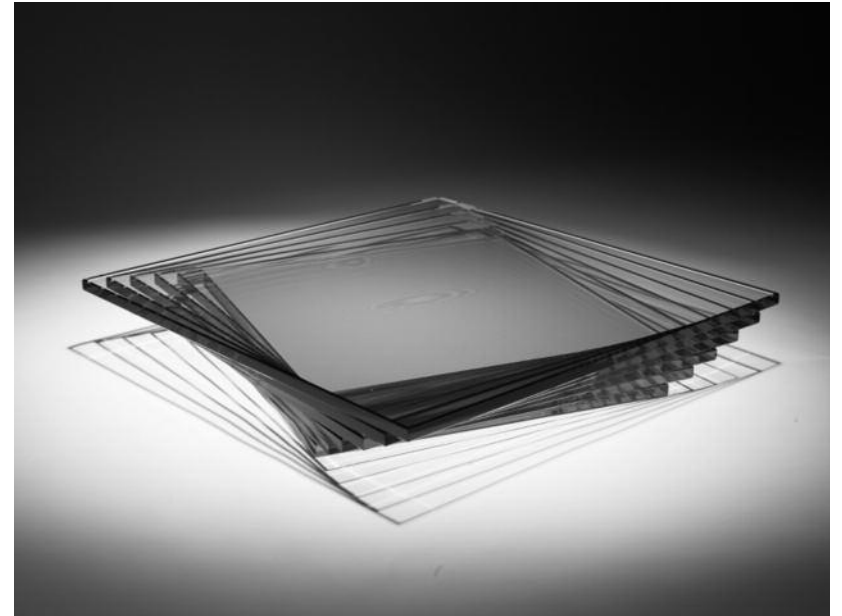
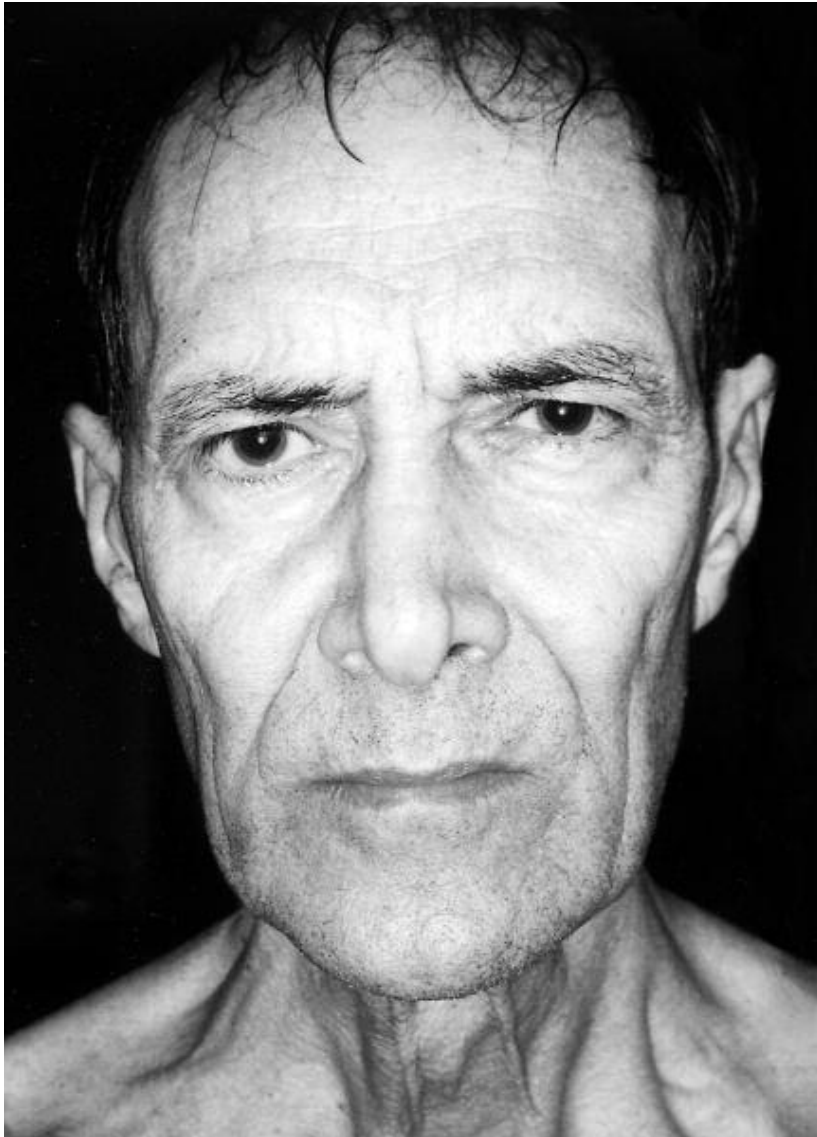
William Anastasi, *Microphone* (tape recorder, tape), 1963

Left: William Anastasi, *His Brush With Posterity* (acrylic on vinyl), 1962



William Anastasi, *Plaster Outlet*, 1966

Left: William Anastasi, *One Gallon High Gloss Enamel, Poured*, 1966



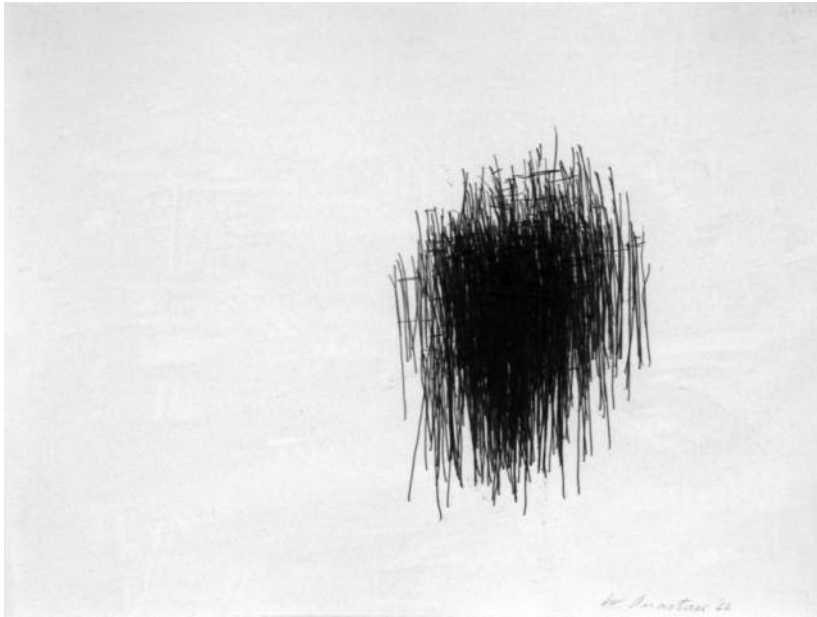
William Anastasi, *The Shelf Well* (tempered glass), 1967

Left: William Anastasi, *Self Portrait* (taken daily for one year), 2007



William Anastasi, *Sound Objects* (Installation view, Dwan Gallery), 1966

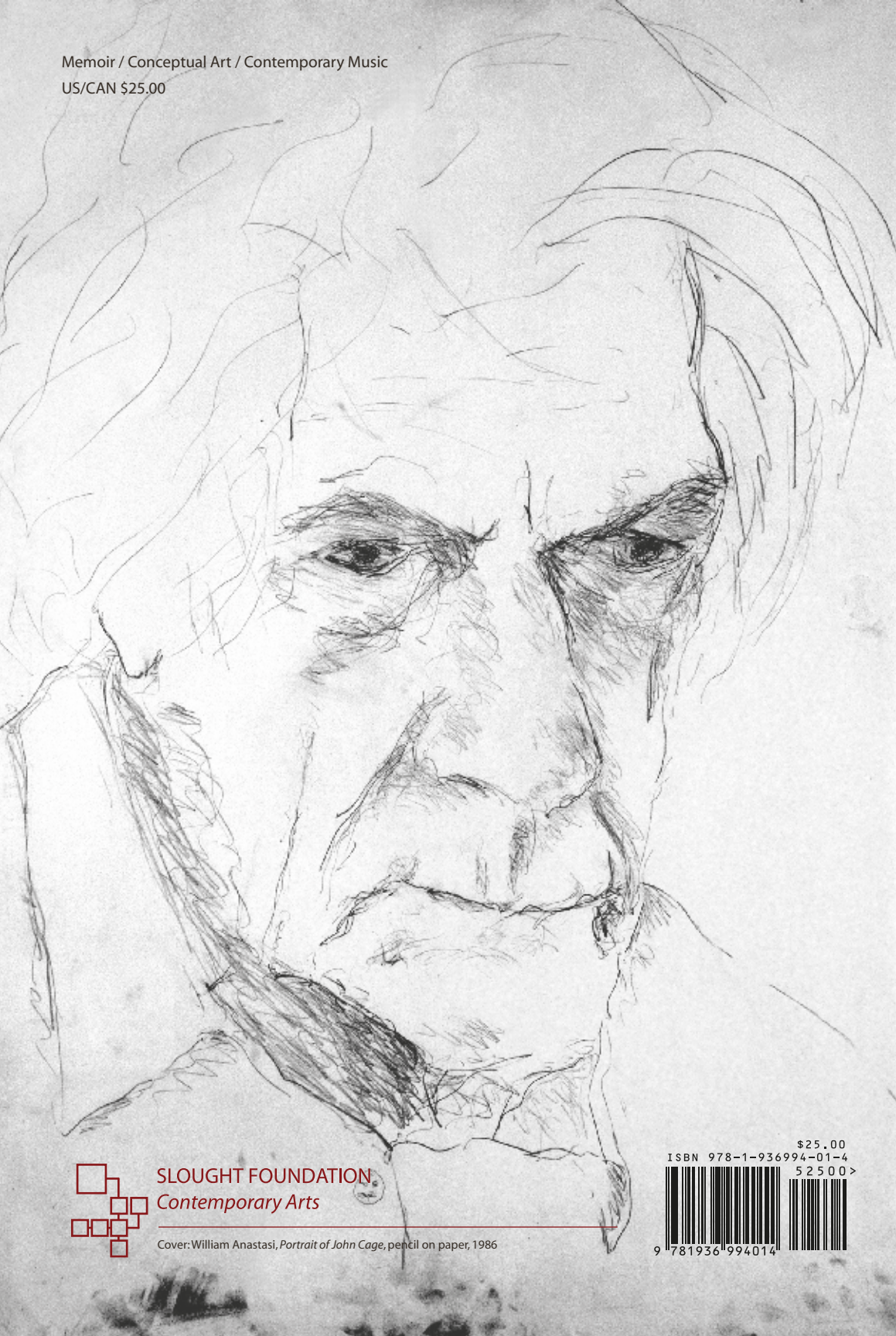
Left: William Anastasi, *Without Title* (pneumatic drill, speakers), 1964



William Anastasi, *Without Title* [Theater Drawing] (pencil on paper), 1966
 Right: William Anastasi, *Without Title* (inner tube, speaker), 1964



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