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On Lecture on Nothing

In John Cage's 1959 "Lecture on Nothing," the composer goes to great lengths to discuss his ideas about silence and "nothing" as it relates to music and life itself. He does so in a composed manner by writing his lecture out in a rhythmic structure, leaving gaps of "silence" in-between measures to further hone in on his point. Through wordplay and poetry Cage goes on to develop his idea of "nothingness," that being a state of being not dissimilar to the Buddhist notion of emptiness or "Śūnyatā." Being an individual who has been quite interested in the philosophies of Buddhism as well as a practitioner of Zen meditation for the majority of my adult life, it is my personal understanding that this state of emptiness implies not a cold, lifeless, cut-off state of mind but instead a humble selflessness, free from attachments and in tune with the true nature of reality. Once one is free of the pushes and pulls of craving and aversion you being to dwell, as the great Western spiritual teacher Ram Dass puts it, in the "space between two thoughts" (Here and Now – Ep. 171 – Reducing Oneself to Zero). This space between thoughts has been described as true bliss or Nirvana. As a short aside, it is interesting to note the parallels here to the idea of silence as being the space in between two sounds. A major theme in Ram Dass' teachings is this idea of becoming nobody and "reducing oneself to zero," that is entering into this state of freedom and bliss without being caught up in the role of the actor of the self (Here and Now – Ep. 171 – Reducing Oneself to Zero). I believe that Cage is speaking to similar ideas in his lecture. Once you begin to make art, music, poetry, etc. from this state of nothingness, your creation does not become something separate from life, it simply exists as life itself. Once one ceases from trying to create a "something" (a piece of art that is wrapped up in

the self, duality, and the idea that it can be possessed) and beings to create "nothing" (art that is life itself, free from clinging and attempts to make a grandiose spectacle), the artist is lead "to the world of nature, where...one sees that humanity and nature [are] not separate...that nothing was lost when everything was given away." ("Towards (a Definition of) Experimental Music" 8). "...Our delight lies in not possessing anything. Each moment presents what happens" ("Lecture On Nothing" 111). Again, this idea of not possessing anything, or in Buddhist terms, non-attachment, is said to contain the greatest delight. Art exists in the present moment as something to be experienced and that is the only time and place it is ever available.

During my time as an undergraduate student in Mississippi, I took a course on music psychology. On the first day of class, the professor asked us to consider the statement: "Art imitates life. Life imitates art." At the time, I easily accepted this statement as truth, seeing the obvious correlation between art and life and how they mirror each other. Reading the "Lecture on Nothing" reminded me of this statement and caused me to reconsider it. While Cage is certainly drawing correlations between the nature of life and art, I think he is taking it a step further by trying to present it in a non-dualistic way. In the statement from my music psychology professor, the word "imitates" seems to imply duality. The phrase seems to suggest that art and life are two things, existing as separate entities regardless of their reflections of one another. I think it is not enough to say that life and art imitate each other but that life is art and art is life. I think Alan Watts sums up this idea perfectly in *The Way of Zen* by stating "For when you climb it is the mountain as much as your own legs which lift you upward, and when you paint it is the brush, ink, and paper which determine the result as much as your own hand" (Watts 175). This is the "art of artlessness" as Watts again puts it (Watts 174). You are not forcing a "something" into

the world. Spirit and nature are one when an artist makes work from this state of interbeing. The artwork and life are not two separate things.

In "Lecture on Nothing," Cage makes some interesting points on the idea of structure: "That music is simple to make comes from one's willingness to accept the limitations of structure..." ("Lecture on Nothing" 111). He goes on to say that when one accepts the simplicity of structure, it can be filled with anything. At another point, he makes the analogy to an "empty glass into which at any moment anything may be poured" ("Lecture on Nothing" 110). I think this statement does an excellent job at cutting to the heart of the philosophy of Cage and Experimental music. The role of the composer becomes not to force his will on every aspect of the music. A balance must be achieved between desired outcome and unintended results. To embrace the experimental is to "turn in the direction of those [sounds] he does not intend." ("Towards (a Definition of) Experimental Music" 8). This, of course, is somewhat paradoxical in that once one tries to make unintentional sound, he is doing so intentionally. I think Cage is suggesting that an attempted solution to the paradox is to create an intentional structure that is left open (like an empty glass) for any possibility of sound to arise within. It is then that the role of the composer shifts to that of a listener, simply observing the coming and going of sound without judgement. To me, this is extremely liberating. No longer does the composer have to concern himself with whether the sounds he is making/hearing are "good" or "bad," as these descriptors only lie within the misperception of the mind. As Watts puts it: "It is to see through the universal illusion that what is pleasant or good may be wrested from what is painful or evil...to make an ideal of pursuing the good is like trying to get rid of the left by turning constantly to the right" (Watts 115-116). In music and art, when we try to constantly concern ourselves with what we consider "good" sounds, we limit ourselves in a way. When sitting down

to listen to something we have preconceived as "bad," it may turn out that the sounds are not so bad after all: they are just sounds. Since our concept of "good" cannot exist without its opposite, "bad," why not try to embrace both equally and without judgement? I remember the first time I ever heard the Japanese noise artist, Merzbow. I was turned off. How could anyone enjoy listening to these chaotic and harsh sounds? For some reason, part of me did not want to accept what I was hearing. Nonetheless, I was intrigued, so I gave it a second try. When I closed my eyes and just listened to the sounds, letting them enter my ears and embracing without trying to run away from them, it was the most pleasant, exciting, and visceral experience I had ever had with sound up to that point. For that moment, I suspended my preconception of what music "should or shouldn't" be, and just listened to the sound itself, not trying to dig for any meaning that might be lying within the noise, but simply enjoying it as a brand-new experience I had never had before.

Reading the "Lecture on Nothing" and Cage's writings on experimental music has made me greatly ponder the nature of my discography and the work I am currently creating. In the past, I have never deeply considered the implications of the term "experimental." I have always simply thought of it as a way to describe music that lies outside of convention, as opposed to its literal meaning of having to do with an experiment or the setting up of a sonic event in which the outcomes are unknown. It is interesting to look back on my output as a sound artist and consider how much of the material is truly "Experimental" versus how much is thoroughly composed and meticulously arranged sound works that reflect the desires of my artistic ego. Have I truly ever made "nothing" or have I only made "somethings?" Does it even matter as long as I am pleased with the result, proud of my work, and take delight in the listening experience?

While dwelling on Cage's idea of nothing, I was reminded of a project I recorded in the summer of 2019 that was released by an American record label as a five-CD box set. The record centered around room recordings of improvisations using various sound sources and replaying these improvisations back into the room and re-recording via various recording methods. The idea for the record was, I think, closely related to the idea of nothing. The improvisations were not thought out, I simply let them freely flow from me. I intended to allow the sound of the room to be fully present in the recordings, regardless of the sonic outcome (with two of the tracks consisting solely of the room sound itself). However, at the time I was living with a small orange cat who was quite a sociable character. Inevitably, a plethora of chirps and meows could be heard all over the resulting recordings. Since this was to be a CD release and since my ego simply could not bear to have these unintentional, unwanted, sounds in the recording, I undertook the painstaking task of editing out all of the cat sounds. This took hours and hours of meticulously cropping, editing, and crossfading to ensure that no noticeable edits could be detected and that not a single squeak from my cat could be audible. Now, if I had stayed true to my initial self-imposed rules and structure for the pieces I would have allowed the cat to stay in the recording. After all, he was as much part of the room sound as all of the other sounds present. However, I would not have been happy with the final result. I probably would have shied away from having the CD set made, not feeling that the material was not authentically what it tried to be.

This brings me to where I stand with Cage's philosophy of nothing. In my personal work, I think it is important for me to maintain a balance of striving for nothing and something. If it were not for my ego, I would probably have ended up discarding the work described above. My intention began from a place of nothingness, but it was my ego's push to create a something that

ended up being the driving force for completing the work in the end. However, I do understand the importance of striving to create nothing. As a practitioner of Zen, I realize the liberation present from striving, as Ram Dass says, to "become nobody." I think this is a wonderful starting point when approaching to make a work of art. It is important to clear one's mind, to not try to force anything, and to create simply for the delight of the experience. I think after exploring Cage's ideas, this is the state of mind I will more consciously strive for when creating. I will think twice and really listen before making the decision to edit out a sound I deem as "bad" from a field or studio recording. However, I do think at times it is necessary to allow some healthy space for egoic intervention when needed, as long as we do not confuse ourselves with the ego and fully give over to its desires (i.e. creating something to attempt to show-off, etc.) After all, the ego is a survival mechanism and humans have developed it for a reason. For me, nothingness describes a state of being, a way of working, and an open attitude towards sound. Even if I am in the midst of meticulously editing and arranging sound within my DAW to create a composed work, it is important for me to maintain a sort of flow state, letting the sound guide most of my decisions as opposed to my ego. When the ego needs to step in, let it do so briefly, but do not get caught in it. Finding balance is important. Like the balance between the Yang and Yin of Zen.

Bibliography

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