

“Instead of separation, a sense of space”

James Pritchett

Northeast of the French city of Bourges there lies a place that John Cage loved — “*Les marais d'Yevre*.” This flat, open area is where the Yevre river branches as it meets the Auron river — the two natural boundaries of Bourges. For centuries, it has been the home of gardens, first commercial ones, then private. What attracted Cage to this place was the way it sounded: “a remarkable acoustic situation,” he called it. I visited Bourges one spring, and, on Cage's suggestion, wandered through *les marais*. Following the banks of smaller tributaries, walking past the gardens full of flowers just coming into bloom, I reached the Yevre itself, the center of *les marais*. It was here that I was able to appreciate what Cage loved about the place. From this point, in the middle of the network of canals and flat garden plots, many different sounds can be heard simultaneously. Distant highways provide the sounds of automobiles and trucks; the water flowing in the river and its tributaries burbles a few meters away; across the river, a tin plate, tied to a fruit tree to frighten the birds, blows in the breeze; an insect buzzes beside your ear. What impressed Cage about this situation is that all these sounds, whether near or far, are so clearly and distinctly heard: each sound is separate from the others, its distance from you perfectly perceived.

My visit to *les marais d'Yevre* in Bourges gave me a new awareness of the importance of space in John Cage's music. He often spoke of how his music was “just sounds,” of how he wanted them to “be themselves.” In the past I had associated this with his interest in their purely acoustic properties: pitch, loudness, timbre, and duration. But Cage was also interested in the ability of sounds to exist in space, and hence to define that space. In *les marais* I encountered different sounds spread out over a wide area; sounds at various distances, distinct from one another and yet converging at the point where I, the listener, stood. Such a situation is part of Cage's musical style, and is a key to understanding the *Essay* installation.

As I stood on the banks of the Yevre I was reminded of a statement Cage made in a letter to Pierre Boulez in 1950: “I want to know everything about *l'espace sonore*.” In Cage's aesthetic, the most important characteristic of this “sound-space” was its *emptiness*: sounds could occur at any points in it, completely independent of one another. Drawing upon the imagery of Zen

Buddhism, he described the notes of his music as "unimpeded and interpenetrating" — in the empty musical space of Cage's compositions, all sounds are perfectly distinct and perfectly combined at the same time. When he took a blank page, marked random dots on it, and then turned these into musical notes, it was one way of using this image as a compositional tool.

My experience at *Les marais d'Yevre* presents a naturally-occurring example of Cage's "unimpeding and interpenetrating" sounds. In his music, he sought to create similar situations using instruments, voices, or loudspeakers. In his composition *Dance/4 Orchestras*, for example, the four groups of instruments are to be placed as far away from each other as is possible within the performance space, so that we in the audience are aware not only of the music that they play, but of the space that they occupy. When this work was performed in a Dutch church in 1988, Cage was disappointed with the results at first: the echoes caused the distinctions among the four groups to be blurred (typically, he later came to appreciate the beauty of the echoes and the concert was a success). "We're no longer satisfied with flooding the air with sound from a public-address system," Cage wrote. "We insist upon something more luminous and transparent so that sounds will arise at any point in the space, bringing about the surprises we encounter when we walk in the woods or down the city streets."

It is in this context of sounds separated in space that this installation of *Essay* is to be understood. The idea that sounds define the empty space around them lends itself well to treatment as a sound installation. You can think of this church as a space of unimpeded and interpenetrating sounds, with each listener at its center. You hear all the sounds at once — near and far, loud and soft. Each loudspeaker marks a specific point in the total space: you become aware of the distances, and hence of the nature of the space in which you and the sounds have come together.

But why didn't Cage choose some other sounds for his installation? Why did he use these tapes of computer-altered voices reading from Henry David Thoreau's essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience?" The one line in Thoreau's essay that was dearest to Cage is the following: "That government is

best which governs not at all." Cage, like Thoreau, believed anarchy to be the highest form of social organization. He dreamed of the disappearance of governments and nations so that all people could be free to live their lives as they saw fit.

Cage saw his music as being analogous to the kind of individual anarchy he desired politically. The image of perfectly distinct, perfectly interpenetrating sounds existing in an empty space suggested to him the similarly distinct individuals in the politically empty space of his ideal "no-government." By removing national boundaries and laws — and hence the armies and police forces necessary to sustain them — the world would be made into a space as empty as this church, in which people, like sounds, could exist anywhere. "This is not so much a democratic point of view," said Cage, "as it is equally aristocratic."

Each individual voice of *Essay* is thus at the center of this work; there is no "leader" and no "followers." At the same time, each of these voices comes from the same source: they are all versions of Cage's own voice. The installation is thus about separation and unity, a celebration of the possibilities of empty space. In 1965, Cage noted that by "going in different directions we get instead of separation a sense of space." By this, I think he meant that the spatial dispersion of sounds — or the political dispersion of people — should not be interpreted, in a negative way, as estrangement. Instead, such separation reveals the beautiful, magical qualities of the emptiness that surrounds and supports each sound and each person. This emptiness is that which allows each sound to speak in its own way, and still to commingle with the others; that allows all the different versions of Cage's voice in this church to be at once clearly different and clearly the same. Above all, with its revolutionary text by Thoreau, it is a call to each of us to leave that space around each other so that, in the words of Buddhist doctrine, we can each be "the most honored one of all."

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