

# Every Day is a Good Day: The Visual Art of John Cage

25 September - 14 November 2010

Kettle's Yard  
Teachers' Support Notes

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**"Most people who believe that I'm interested in chance don't realise that I use chance as a discipline. They think I use it as a way of giving up making choices. But my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask."  
John Cage**

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## Press Release

### John Cage: Every Day is a Good Day

25 September – 14 November

John Cage (1912–1992) was one of the leading avant-garde composers of the twentieth century, most famous perhaps for his silent work of 1952, 4'33". Cage was closely connected with art and artists throughout his long career, although it was not until he was in his mid-sixties that he began to practice seriously as a visual artist himself. In the last 15 years of his life, Cage produced over 600 prints with the Crown Point Press in San Francisco, as well as 260 drawings and watercolours. In these works he applied the same chance-determined procedures that he used in his musical compositions.

This is the first major retrospective in the UK of the visual art of Cage. The exhibition will contain over 100 drawings, prints and watercolours, including the extraordinary *Ryoanji* series, described by the art critic David Sylvester as 'among the most beautiful prints and drawings made anywhere in the 1980s'. In these works he drew around the outlines of stones scattered (according to chance) across the paper or printing plate, in one case drawing around 3,375 individually placed stones. He also experimented with burning or soaking the paper, and applied complex, painstaking procedures at each stage of the printmaking process.

Inspired by Cage's use of chance-determined scores, the exhibition will differ markedly from a traditional touring exhibition. The procedure that Cage often employed, using a computer-generated random number programme similar to the Chinese oracle, the 'I Ching', has been used to determine the number of works on show, their position on the wall and how many changes may occur at each venue. At Kettle's Yard, the exhibition will change 3 times but all the works will be on display all the time. The familiar aesthetic and narrative concerns of the artist or curator will be markedly absent from the exhibition, allowing for chance encounters between works and the space they are in. Cage, who disliked linear displays, employed this method in several exhibitions, notably *Rolywholyover*, in Los Angeles in 1992, which he described as a 'composition for museum'. He said, "I use chance operations instead of operating according to my likes and dislikes," thus avoiding preconceived ideas in order to be open to possibilities that he might not naturally consider.

Alongside the exhibition will be a lively programme of events, including a 'musicircus' on November 10, a series of interdisciplinary talks on Saturdays in October dealing with some of the wide range of subjects that interested Cage, such as randomness and risk, Japanese tea gardens, board games (Duchamp taught Cage to play chess) and electronic music; there will also be half-term activities for families, a fungi hunt (Cage was a keen mycologist), and the UK premiere of *One13*, a work for cello to be played with a curved bow. Full details are listed on our website:

[www.kettlesyard.co.uk](http://www.kettlesyard.co.uk).

The book to accompany the exhibition will be the first publication to cover all aspects of Cage's visual art, with more than sixty plates and other illustrations, and four interviews by curator Jeremy Millar with authorities on Cage's visual artwork, all of whom knew him well. It will also include a substantial extract from the art critic Irving Sandler's 1966 interview with Cage, and a 'Cage Companion' of quotations and commentaries reflecting the range of his interests and concerns over sixty years, from 'Anarchy' to 'Zen'.

**John Cage: Every Day is a Good Day** has been conceived by Jeremy Millar and is organised by Hayward Touring and BALTIC with the close support and guidance of the John Cage Trust.

Following its presentation at Kettle's Yard the exhibition will tour to Huddersfield Art Gallery, the Hunterian Art Gallery, Glasgow and the De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea.

## Biography

- 1912 John Milton Cage Jr. was born in LA on September 5, 1912. His mother, Lucretia, was a journalist but also played piano and Cage's father was an inventor of underwater vessels. Cage was obviously influenced by his father's inventing and went on to be extraordinarily innovative with his compositional and performance practices. Throughout his life Cage invented, among other things, the prepared piano and a multitude of new forms of musical notation. Assisting his father with his inventions also helped Cage escape being drafted to the army in the early 1940s.
- 1920 Begins piano lessons  
Though Cage was learning piano and was writing a reasonable amount of music, much of his early artistic endeavours were in the visual arts. These included painting and the study of art and architecture.
- 1930/31 Travels in Europe. Studies architecture, modern painting, modern music, writes poetry. Composes earliest works.
- 1932-36 Studies composition under composer and pianist **Henry Cowell** and the great **Arnold Schoenberg** who persuaded Cage to devote his life to composition. He also famously described Cage as 'an inventor...of genius'.
- 1938-40 Cage works at the University of California, Los Angeles, **UCLA**, as pianist and composer for the dance course there. This was the beginning of a long lasting relationship with dance, leading to other similar positions at other institutions. Dance was extremely important in the development of Cage's aesthetic as it contributed to his interest in rhythm and structure as well as a passion for collaboration.
- This continued at the **Cornish School of Arts** in Seattle where Cage was introduced to **Merce Cunningham**, his life long partner and collaborator. Cage was also introduced to the teachings of **Zen Buddhism**, which were extremely active at the school. Another important collaborator Cage met at the **Cornish School** was **Mark Tobey**; a painter and educator known for his use of chance in painting and drawing.
- It was also here that Cage was to invent the 'prepared piano', an instrument where the regular sounds of the piano are altered through the addition of objects such bolts and rubbers between the strings.
- 1940-49 Spends time in New York, initially staying with painter Max Ernst and art collector Peggy Guggenheim. It was through these significant individuals that Cage was to meet many of the most important artists of the time such as Piet Mondrian, André Breton, Jackson Pollock and Marcel Duchamp.
- 1943 Gives first performance in New York. Significantly, this was at The Museum of Modern Art, a gallery rather than a concert hall.
- 1949 Meets the composer Morton Feldman who, with Cage's pupil Christian Wolff, were to become the **New York School** - a close group of composers who came to define a generation of the musical avant-garde.

- 1951 Wolff gave Cage a copy of the **I-Ching**. The I-Ching is an ancient Chinese oracle which can be used for the selection and ordering of chance events. The I-Ching operated by throwing a set of three coins, six times. The way and order in which they fall leads to a statement and from this an 'answer' can be extracted.
- This text became a way in which Cage could dispense with free-will and decision making and also to parallel nature in the accidental and the unknown. The I-Ching was to be used in virtually every piece Cage made for the rest of his life and came to define his use of chance and indeterminacy.
- 1951 Cage makes a significant visit to the anechoic chamber of Harvard University. The chamber was designed to present the visitor with absolute silence. Cage was surprised, however, to find he could hear the beating of his heart and the hum of his central nervous system. This event was undoubtedly extremely influential in the development of Cage's most famous and controversial piece – **4'33"** written the following year. **4'33"** is a piece in which nothing is played for 4 minutes and 33 seconds. During this time the audience is invited to listen to the ambient sounds of their particular surroundings.
- 1951 First 'happening' at the **Black Mountain College**, where Cage was to meet and work with important visual artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg. Black Mountain College was a liberal, progressive college in North Carolina known for its intense creative programmes based on John Dewey's theory of education.
- 1958-69 From the late 50s and throughout the 60s Cage was to experiment with a range of different approaches to the musical score, favouring increasingly new graphic forms of notation. By using techniques such as layers of transparent sheets, coloured graphic shapes and textual instructions Cage completely reinvented the processes by which music was to be composed and performed through the score.
- 1969 Completes first major visual project in response to the death of Marcel Duchamp. The project was a series of plexiglass sculptures.
- 1978 Invited by Kathan Brown of Crown Point Press to complete a series of prints. Though Cage was at first resistant he accepted the invitation and began to do a series of etchings. He continued this, along with drawings and watercolours throughout the rest of his life. It is primarily this body of work that is represented in *Every Day is a Good Day*.
- 1983 Cage begins experimenting with watercolours at Mountain Lake Workshops in Virginia.
- 1992 Cage dies of a stroke while cooking for himself and Cunningham.

## What's in the Show?



Cage engraving at the Crown point Studio, 1982  
© Crown Point Press

John Cage (1912 - 1992) is one of the most important artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A self-proclaimed polymath Cage was engaged in a broad range of activities including music, visual arts practices, writing, teaching and even mycology (the study of mushrooms) - he once claimed that this was because it was next to music in the dictionary! In presenting a lesser known aspect of Cage's oeuvre, *Every Day is a Good Day* encourages a wider look at the artist's output. This broadens our understanding of his work, his personality and most importantly his legacy as one of the most important cultural figures of the 20th Century.

This exhibition differs quite significantly from other displays you might have seen here before. Inspired by Cage's chance-determined musical compositions, this exhibition has been created as a performance with a 'score' that can be interpreted differently at each venue. The 'score' for the exhibition at Kettle's Yard will involve 3 'movements' or re-hangs over the course of the show and, in addition, one work will be removed every 3rd day.

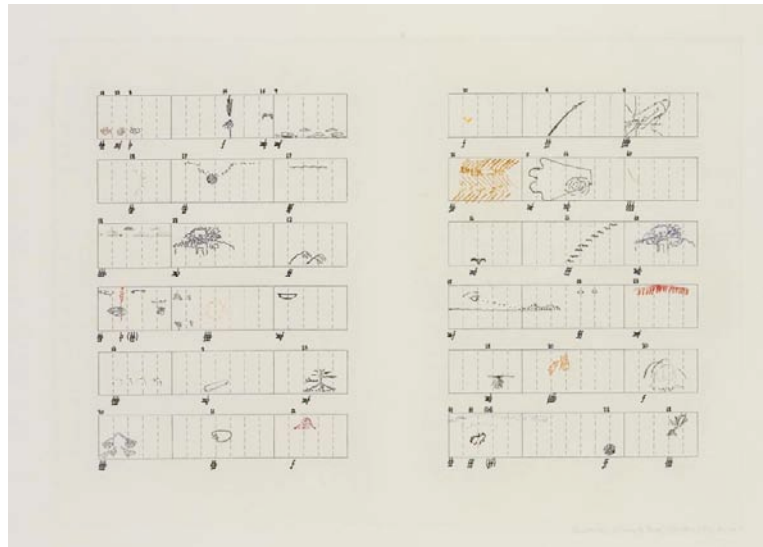
Cage said 'I use chance operations instead of operating according to my likes and dislikes.' He wanted to be open to new possibilities, beyond what he might naturally think of. Having been given a copy of the I-Ching in 1951, he then invented a computer-generated random number program, as a means to remove himself from the process at particular points. He set clearly defined parameters, carefully formulating questions, which the chance operations then 'answered'.

A similar computer programme has been used in the hanging of this exhibition. The programme dictates how many works are to be hung, where they are placed on the walls and how many times the display is changed.

The exhibition contains 135 works on paper including prints, drawings and watercolours. In the spirit of Cage, 30 of these works have been removed and replaced by 'silences' or empty spaces in the exhibition. There are a number of series represented in the show although, because of the way the show has been hung, the series do not appear in any particular order in the exhibition.

You will also find a selection of musical compositions to listen to and monitors screening some of Cage's performance pieces.

# Artworks



**Score Without Parts (40 Drawings by Thoreau):  
Twelve Haiku, 1978** Hard-ground etching, soft-ground  
etching, photoetching, drypoint, sugar aquatint, and  
engraving  
© The John Cage Trust

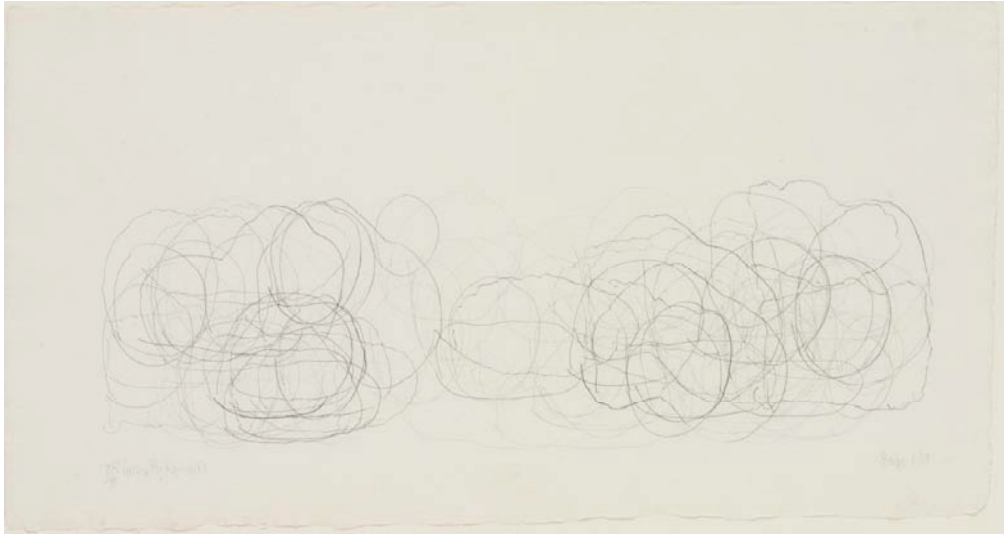
**Score Without Parts** marks the beginning of an extremely fruitful relationship Cage had with Crown Point Press in California. In 1977 Director Kathan Brown, invited the artist to come and make new work. Cage agreed and returned for one or two weeks of every year until he died in 1992. At Crown Point, Cage made 72 groups of prints including 667 individual works - many of which make-up this exhibition.

On his first day at the Press Cage brought along his 1974 musical work *Score (40 Drawings by Thoreau): and 23 Parts:12 Haiku*. This is an extremely important score for Cage as it highlights his renewed interest in visual artforms: -

“[the work] was the door that opened from music, for me, back into the field of graphic - paying attention to how things are to look at” (Rettalack, 1996, p.92)

To make this work, Cage placed drawings by writer, philosopher Henry David Thoreau onto 12 lines. Each of these lines were divided into segments which represented the structure of Japanese Haiku poetry (5+7+5). Cage turned this score into 23 parts of to be performed 23 performers on any instrument or voice. At the workshop, however, Cage removed the need for players leaving just 12 Haikus, turning the piece from a musical composition into a visual one; a score *without parts*. This work is a key transition for Cage and remains the only graphic work that deploys musical notation.

**Changes and Disappearances** is a series of very complex works which took years to complete. Cage had been experimenting with burning or soaking paper, and applied chance procedures at each stage of the printmaking process. In this series, for each print Cage altered the plates. Each line and plate edge were inked in a different, individually mixed colour. As the series progressed, the composition of the works built up – the last print in the series contains 298 colours.



**Where R=Ryoanji: R3, 1983**  
Drypoint, Courtesy of Henning Lohner  
© The John Cage Trust

In the series **Where R=Ryoanji** Cage drew around stones that were scattered (according to chance) across the paper or printing plate. In one case he drew around 3,375 individually placed stones. The art critic David Sylvester described these as, 'among the most beautiful prints and drawings made anywhere in the 1980s'.



**New River Watercolour Series II, No.1, 1988**  
Watercolour on paper  
© The John Cage Trust

Encouraged by fellow artist Ray Kass to try out his chance operations in other media, Cage produced a series of watercolours, "**The New River Series**" at his workshop at Mountain Lake. He experimented by painting with broad brushes and feathers and was especially excited about the transparency of the washes. Here he used his familiar chance operations to determine both the composition and the choice of materials.



**10 Stones**, 1989

Colour soap ground aquatint and spit bite aquatint on smoked paper  
© The John Cage Trust

### **Stones (1989)**

Following his experience with watercolours at the Mountain Lake workshops, Cage began to use paint brushes back at Crown Point Press. Brushing around stones onto the printing plates resulted in a curious hybrid between the prints and the watercolours. *Smoke Weather Stone Weather* was a series of prints from 1991 that seem to offer a culmination of these experiments. Cage delicately layers painted outlines of stones onto fragile smoked, handmade paper. He explained his reference to weather as follows: -

‘Weather remains the weather no matter what is going on ...so that the structural elements that do appear don’t change the way we see weather.

Through his prints and watercolours Cage used a range of procedures and techniques in order to capture the effortless beauty and complexity of nature.

# Key Themes

## Chance

Chance: **A. n.** **I. 1. a.** The falling out or happening of events; the way in which things fall out; fortune; case.

**b.** A happening or occurrence of things in a particular way; a casual or fortuitous circumstance;

**2.** (with *pl.*) A matter which falls out or happens; a fortuitous event or occurrence; often, an unfortunate event, mishap, mischance;

As a show that is hung through chance operations *Every Day is a Good Day* foregrounds the importance of chance and indeterminacy in Cage's work. Looking at Cage's use of chance can be an interesting way into thinking about ideas of randomness, chaos and control or the lack of it. Everything from curation, to dance, to music, to drawing and painting can be thought about and indeed practised using chance operations.

- Why not allow your group to use chance in the production of exciting new works - to learn how chance can be an aesthetic strategy, a liberating force.

One example of this could be to divide a piece of paper into a grid.

Choose six colours and number them 1-6.

Take 6 patterns/shapes/markings and number them 1-6.

For each square on the grid, roll two dice to determine what marking and colour should be used.

In this way you can build up an artwork.

What other questions could you ask the dice to determine?

- Cage used the idea of chance in nature to explain his use of the *I-Ching*. How can the use of chance imitate nature?
- Chance can be an extremely fun and dynamic way of thinking about John Cage and eastern philosophy, especially for younger people - the roll of a big dice, the tossing of a coin, throwing leaves in the air and watching how they land, and drawing round them - all practices understood by a younger audience.
- Chance processes in drawing have been central to many contemporary artists. You can see this in the recent Hayward Touring Show: *Drawing and Random Interference* and from books such as Whitechapel's *Chance*, part of the Documents of Contemporary Art series. An older audience may wish to explore why chance has become so important and whether it can have an impact on their own practices.
- The overall look of the exhibition is strikingly similar to the way Jim Ede positions his object in Kettle's Yard House. Cage's approach to composition involved a rigorous commitment to chance operations to overcome the

limitations of the rational mind and to open up new creative possibilities. By contrast, Ede relied on his own intuition to set up unconventional and yet harmonious conversations between objects, artworks and spaces at Kettle's Yard. By studying both House and Gallery, older students may enjoy looking at the interesting comparisons to be made between the two, to reflect on the proximity and differences between them and their respective relationships to art.

## Zen Philosophies

Zen philosophies teach us that if an activity is boring after 2 minutes, you should try it for 4. If still boring, try it for 8, then 16, 32. Eventually you will find that the activity is not boring at all, but very interesting. This was a philosophy Cage employed in the making of his work and related many of his hobbies, such as playing chess.

- How does such an idea reverberate with modern life today? - What tasks would be improved by spending more time over them?  
What can we learn about activities from their repetition or time frame?
- Try creating an activity to repeat.  
For example, write your name at the top of a large sheet of paper.  
Now write it 5 times. Now 50 times.  
Think about/ talk/ write about how you feel while doing these activities.  
How does your hand feel?  
What happens to the letters of you name?  
Are you thinking about the sounds while you write?

## Collaboration

Along with his contemporaries at places such as Black Mountain College and The New School Cage completely revolutionised the ways in which drama, dance, music and art interact and overlap. These events, called 'happenings' or 'musicircuses' due to the immediate performance element, were popular artforms in the 1960s. This mixing of artforms was pioneered by the Dada art movements of the 1910s. Based in Zurich, Dadaists would perform a poetry reading, concert and dance simultaneously. The effect was one of being overwhelmed and that everything was happening all at once, expressing the buzz of modern city life.

- Form small groups.  
Each person describe a hobby or activity you do in your spare time.  
Now spend some time drawing up a proposal for an event that would encompass all of these activities.  
Where would it be held?  
How much space would you need?  
How long would it last?  
How many people would have to be involved?  
What would you tell the audience to expect?

Perform these collaborations to others in the group.

# Notation

Undoubtedly a vital theme of this show is the idea of notation, or the relationship between visual marks or gestures and musical ones. Throughout his career Cage constantly reworked and reinvented the score -making it a unique sculptural/visual object as well as an interface between a player and the music. As a show of Cage's *visual* artworks, *Every Day is a Good Day* is interesting in that it presents drawings, prints and watercolours by an artist known primarily for his sounds (and silences). Although Cage was careful to differentiate his artworks from his musical compositions, they were undoubtedly interconnected and fed off each other.

- Take one of Cage's Scores. Can you play it? What do the marks sound like?
- Spend some time looking closely at a score whilst listening to the music. Do you think it represents what you hear?
- Choose your favourite song or piece of music and try and describe it visually. Do you need a score? Or can you describe it in an image or through colours.
- Participants could learn to read unusual graphic scores as well as come up with their own vocabularies of marks and gestures to be performed by themselves and others. The book *Notations* (1969) by Cage offers an interesting starting point for this as it charts many different approaches to notation from him and his contemporaries. Recently Theresa Sauer has made a new version of this book *Notations 21* (2009) which cites many artists working today grappling with similar ideas.

## Quotes

- ‘ I use change operations instead of operating according to my likes and dislikes. I use my work to change myself and I accept what the chance operations say. The I-Ching says that if you don’t accept the chance operations you have no right to use them. Which is very clear, so that’s what I do.’

(Cage, interview with Laurie Anderson. in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, Summer 1992)

- ‘The attitude I take is that everyday life is more interesting than forms of celebration, when we become aware of it. That *when* is when our intentions go down to zero. Then suddenly you notice that the world is magical’

(Cage, interview with Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, in *Tulane Drama Review*, vol 10, no. 2, Winter 1965)

- ‘If we think that things are being repeated, it is generally because we don’t pay attention to all of the details. But if we pay attention as though looking through a microscope to all the details, we see that there is no such thing as repetition.’

(Cage, interview with Birger Ollrogge, in *October*, vol 82, Autumn 1997)

## Weblinks

<http://www.xs4all.nl/~cagecomp/>

The Cage Compendium: a website by Cage scholar Paul van Emmerik, in collaboration with performer Herbert Henck and András Wilhelm. Includes exhaustive catalogues and bibliography, chronology of Cage’s life, etc.

<http://www.ubu.com/historical/cage/index.html>

John Cage at UbuWeb

<http://list.mail.virginia.edu/mailman/listinfo/silence>

Silence: Scholarly discussion of the music of John Cage

<http://www.crownpoint.com/artists/cage>

John Cage’s etchings at the Crown Point Press