

'We have Eyes as well as Ears ...': Experimental Music and the Visual Arts

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Martin Creed conducting an 'orchestra' playing one note; Hayley Newman staging a choir that smokes cigarettes; and Anri Sala, so captivated by the detuned clash of two contrasting musical pieces on a radio, that he recreates it as a video performance in a gallery. Each of these pieces by contemporary artists not only reference sound as their basic material, but also question the social context, collective activity, and assumptions that surround the performance of those sounds. How do we differentiate these performance-based works from those of the 1960s and 1970s? And what is at stake when works become purely – or rather impurely – interdisciplinary? These are some of the questions that this chapter will raise and attempt at least some provisional answers. Needless to say, it will be necessary to view recent practices through the lens of both philosophical and historical debates in order to get some way to approaching those questions. Attempting a cross-disciplinary discussion is rife with its own problems, as in the 'and' of the title. It is one thing to put these two disciplines next to each other, but what does this 'and' signify: Cross-fertilization? Influence? Correspondence? Juxtaposition? Interpenetration? Obviously there are many different ways of reading this 'and': each will be relevant here, as will the issue of approaching a working definition of the 'experimental' common to both music and art.

A good deal of contemporary art embraces material other than the visual – sound being just one amongst many – so much so that there have been numerous cries against this turn toward the 'anti-visual' as it has been labelled.¹ Composers too have made use of collaborations with film, video, as well as performance art, sound or visual installations. Whether all this cross-disciplinary activity can still be called 'experimental' is a moot point. These 'experiments' have been with us now for half a century, and paradoxically, the 'experimental' is now a known tradition, and one

¹ I have chosen to use 'visual art' predominantly here – which is useful when discussing different mediums; 'contemporary art' which is also used here and there, while more pliable in its denotation of media, is also perhaps too temporally restrictive.

that has slowly percolated through – at times unconsciously – into the mainstream of contemporary art practice. But, as in any discussion of the experimental in the arts, all roads seem to lead back to John Cage, the great ‘permission giver’ to a whole generation of artists, who will inform this discussion at various points.

1

An argument against the possibilities of interdisciplinarity or even cross-fertilization within the arts, and a well-thumbed critical reference point, is the rather trenchant position of aesthetic formalism, most brilliantly preached by the American critic Clement Greenberg. As far as he was concerned, the hopeless and idealistic yearning of ‘media-scrambling’ – a ghost of neurasthenic and symbolist art of the nineteenth century – was to be countered by concentrating on the qualities of the medium at hand. There is such a thing as a dominant art form, Greenberg asserted, and within modernism that was, for him, painting. ‘The attempts to establish’, he suggested, ‘the differences between the various arts are not idle. There has been, is, and will be, such a thing as a confusion of the arts.’² And by honing the medium, by directly playing with its limitations, each art form could move away from this potential confusion, rationalizing and realizing its autonomy in the process, as well as bringing to bear a notion of aesthetic value derived from the direct perception of the work itself.³ This resulted in an extreme form of art for art’s sake, seemingly intransigent in laying down the gauntlet for what it conceived as ‘high art’: an almost pure experience of the medium, with no message, no interpretative content, and no depiction or illusion.⁴ Modernist painting, from this formalist vantage point, saw a developmental procession of ‘major’ artists from Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman in the 1950s, through to Morris Louis, Jules Olitski and Kenneth Noland in the 1960s. This was, in a nutshell, the Greenberg canon. Such was the power of the critic as the arbiter of ‘quality’ and ‘relevance’ that conceptualist Joseph Kosuth once said that the artist, under his regime, was reduced to firing clay pigeons for the critic to target and shoot down.

Needless to say, since the early 1950s other forces were at work while Greenberg was at his most powerful, including artists who didn’t quite fit the formalist canon, and artists who were affected by Greenberg’s *bête noire* – Marcel Duchamp. We

2 Clement Greenberg, ‘Toward a Newer Laocoon’, in Francis Frascina (ed.), *After Pollock* (London, 1985), pp. 35–46, at p. 35.

3 As a method, while empirical and intuitive, it is informed by Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*.

4 There is widespread misunderstanding about Greenberg’s denial of illusion and penchant for flatness in abstract painting. He suggests an optical space works best within the limitations of the medium, but it is still essentially a spatiality that is configured – as in Barnett Newman’s paintings, which are as much about ‘space’ as a demonstration of flatness.

can include here a whole range of artists relevant to that 'experimental tradition' mentioned earlier – Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and later, Minimalism, Allan Kaprow and 'Happenings', Fluxus, Conceptual Art and so on. And, of course, at the helm, Cage, the disciple of Duchamp, mentor of Rauschenberg and Johns amongst many others, and whose star had risen considerably in the 1960s. By 1982 – and reflecting back on the 1970s – in an interesting essay entitled 'Intermedia', Greenberg talks in war-like terms on the changes in art-making during that period:

The scene of visual art has been invaded more and more, lately, by other mediums than those of painting or sculpture. By 'scene' I mean galleries and museums and the art press. Now these welcome performance art, installation art, sound art, video, dance, mime; also words, written and spoken; and sundry ways of making poetical, political, informational, quasi-philosophical, quasi-psychological, quasi-sociological points.⁵

Alluding to the 'happenings' of the early 1960s, he notes, 'They "happened" in the context of visual art, and most of the people taking part had to do mainly with visual art, yet they exhibited hardly anything that was visual art as such.'⁶ Why is it, Greenberg asked, that the 'The printed page, the concert hall, the literary recital platform haven't been nearly so hospitable to the incursions of mediums not originally proper to themselves [?]'⁷ His answer is partly the fact that painting (central to his conception of modernism) had been at the forefront of experimentation since Manet, and provided a model for experimentation: 'None of the other arts had that early to dig into their own entrails. Certainly not sculpture, not music, not dance, not even literature.'⁸ This made painting, and then only later the visual arts in general, as leaders 'in the matter of modernist newness'.⁹ Greenberg's argument goes in a familiar turn, for those who know his later writings, with a lament concerning the decline of taste; but two additional facets are worth mentioning here: first, the issue of time-based work in galleries and museums, and second, the arrival of a new generation to whom innovation and newness become a second nature (for Greenberg this is mistaking 'effect' as an end in itself and appropriating a superficial conception of 'the new').

Concerning time, the model for Greenberg's conception of it within the visual arts is, again, that of painting: 'Drama, music, dance, literature, take place *over* time not just in it. Visual art is instantaneous, or almost so, in its proper experiencing, which is of its unity above and before anything else.'¹⁰ When video or sound installations

5 Clement Greenberg, 'Intermedia', in Robert C. Morgan (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings* (Minneapolis, 2003), pp. 93–8, at p. 93.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

8 *Ibid.*

9 *Ibid.*, p. 95.

10 *Ibid.*

exist in a gallery, they bypass the conventions of the theatre, TV, the cinema, the auditorium – contexts where they must convince *over* time, whereas, in a gallery context a situation becomes apparent where time becomes arbitrary; where the audience can enter and exit at free will, and where a conceived ‘wholeness’ of the event might not be perceived at all. What Greenberg criticizes here is a culture that has jettisoned not only the particularity of experience framed by the specificity of medium, but also the lineage of works of ‘quality’ that that frame enables. But it could also be seen as (which he would dismiss) a situation where an experimental attitude dominates, resulting in a questioning of the relationship of time to form, of process to object and of fragmentation to wholeness.

Greenberg also points something else out here, which he recoils from analysing further, that of a ‘new’ audience, who experience a different sense of time, a changed sense of being alert. This is an audience (if we can generalize at all) who have a different and more eclectic cultural background from Greenberg and his generation, who reference a vast array of popular culture. This in itself was transformed in the 1960s from the manufactured mass entertainment of previous decades to include a chorus of critically active voices. It was also at this time, in the 1960s and during these cultural shifts and upheavals, that Greenberg’s ideas of the purity of medium felt more and more embattled; certainly, in relation to what was actually happening in the galleries and museums. But, ever astute as he was even when discussing ‘the enemy’, it is possible to take three aspects from Greenberg’s essay in relation to the cross-over of experimental music and visual art. First, it was the institutions of visual art – rather than other disciplines – that became hospitable to all sorts of media, performances and situations. Second, a marked change took place in the experiential nature of the artwork, with particular reference to how time is figured, and how space is articulated – in and outside the gallery or museum. Third, the consideration of the ever-changing cultural expectations and make-up of this ‘new’ audience, together with their infiltration of, and influence upon, the administration of arts organizations, and art educational institutions.

2

John Cage’s huge retrospective exhibition of the mid-1990s is a perfect example of the kind of interdisciplinary event that might well have been Greenberg’s worst nightmare. Having been planned before his death in 1992, and toured in 1994-95, *Rholywholyover* (the title appropriated from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*) was described by curator Julie Lazar – who had worked closely with Cage on the project – as a ‘composition for a museum’. The effect was rather like stepping inside Cage’s chance methods, and if the exhibition was a self-portrait of sorts, one that brought together connections from the whole of Cage’s career, then it was a de-centred one at that. Cage had long been critical of ‘museum culture’ with its hierarchies and linear structures, and rather like the late *Europas* series of compositions, *Rolywholyover* was an attempt to work with antithetical material to his own interests, as in the

medium of opera in the former case, and to see what could be done with these dislikes. When Lazar initially requested 'A major, but non-linear, exhibition that reflected both his artistic accomplishments and his wide-ranging interests', Cage responded and

Recommended two things: that I make a preliminary selection of art objects, and then request permanent collection inventories from all modern museums in the country ... He wanted contents of the exhibition to be determined by performing chance operations on these lists, utilizing a computerized system based on the I Ching that he had employed in his compositions since the early 1950s. By departing from traditional organizational procedures in this way, Cage called into question the curator's role in defining artistic standards, and the museum's function in preserving them.¹¹

With this procedure, we have two lists; one chosen by Cage of works by artists and musicians, the other effectively chosen by museums and the I Ching. Structure in Cage – if we can call it that – is a sort of absent structure, determined by an inventory or lexicographical procedure of determining the limits of the material that the computerized I Ching printouts bring into play at any given point. This is a procedure that informed his later music and later visual work produced at Crown Point Press in San Francisco. Cage was unique in being an artist who produced music, texts, visual work, allowing each to be informed by his chance methodology. 'Most people who believe that I'm interested in chance', he once stated, 'don't realize that I use it as a discipline – they think I use it – I don't know – as a way of giving up making choices. But my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask.'¹² If, in the context of *Rolywholyover*, the listing of objects and museum requests are taken as a pre-compositional plan so to speak, Cage's basic material was, for him, both known and unknown in one sense.

Exhibits were drawn from various artists' works, Cage's own visual work and the museum artefacts. The list of artworks included both eminent and lesser known figures connected to Cage's own output. From a truly immense list, in particular, we can pick out key associates of the 1950s and 1960s – Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Sol LeWitt, Ad Reinhardt, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp, Allan Kaprow, George Maciunas, Joseph Beuys – from a vast range of others. Their works were, during the duration of the exhibition, either stored on visible storage units or made 'live' by the chance operations. Three technicians rearranged the works daily, being given hourly printouts determining the placing or re-placing of works on the wall, floor (depending on their nature) and so on. So a Barnett Newman, for example, might be placed according to the printout instructions, only to be moved, say, a few hours later, by maybe only a few inches, or to a separate wall altogether, or taken back into storage, and so on and

¹¹ Julie Lazar, 'Nothingtoseeness', in *John Cage Rolywholyover, A Circus*, (New York, 1994), unpaginated.

¹² Robin White, 'Interview with John Cage', *View*, 1/1 (1978): 5.

so forth. As there was no coherent unifying eye level for the hang, works could be separated or clustered together at different heights. This resulted in, as Jill Johnston reviewing the exhibition for *Art in America* in 1994 pointed out, a situation where, 'the walls of the show are covered with eccentrically placed pictures – as though the works had been thrown onto the surface and later straightened'.¹³

In the 'Museumcircle' room, Cage included the artefacts from the invited museums; he had eventually limited the participation to museums within the local vicinity or county at each touring venue. In Los Angeles alone this amounted to 130 museums, and the particular room in that hang, as Johnston recalled, consisted of 'a Salvador Dali drawing [who Cage, incidentally, had very little time for], a bustier once owned by Ingrid Bergman, an Orange County land-use map, four manhole



Example 9.1 'Rolywholyover: A Circus', curated by John Cage, 12 September–28 November 1993, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

covers, a John Constable landscape, an elephant-seal skull, a Jacob Epstein portrait of G.B. Shaw, a woven basketry mask'.¹⁴ No doubt Cage would have been delighted with these chance juxtapositions, of things 'speaking' to each other in new and different ways. It is also a reminder of the *operational* nature, literally, of the chance operation. Things appear to be transformed by chance, they can be seen afresh,

¹³ Jill Johnston, 'John Cage: Music for Museums', *Art in America* (January 1994): 72–2, at 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

in an alternative light, and in this way, chance operations can appear rather like a proto-deconstructive machine that reshuffles, re-orientates and allows endless new permutations. On seeing the exhibition at the now defunct Guggenheim SoHo in New York, the impact was one of a literal moveable feast, an exhibition that was moving in front of one's eyes, and an almost inexhaustible content of objects, art, documents, scores and other items. Cage had shown that his methodology had caught up, or even pre-empted, aspects of the curatorial practices of the late twentieth century. It is ironic that Cage's last major retrospective statement took place primarily in the field of visual art – as Johnston notes, 'Cage was given a chance to make his own imprint on such a [museum] space, something no comparable venue in music – his primary medium – ever allowed him.'¹⁵ This, in many ways, leads us back to Greenberg's first point. Cage's ideas, after all, were taken up very early on by visual artists, and as readily, if not more so, than by musicians. It becomes a complex and reciprocal relationship, as Cage readily acknowledged, whereby his generation of composers, as he once said, found it necessary to formulate a 'reply' to the pre-war achievements of modernist artists such as Kandinsky, Klee or Mondrian (and equally, each of these painters were strongly influenced by music in formulating their own positions). *Rolywholyover* reinstated, quite clearly, Cage's milieu as one dominated by artists and their circles – Duchamp, Peggy Guggenheim, the Abstract Expressionists, for example. These connections, in fact, prefigure Cage and his New York circle of composers – Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, David Tudor and Earle Brown. And Cage, we have to remember, was lacking any consistent means of livelihood during those earlier years – he was, as with the artists, disenfranchised from the academies, the universities and other normative means of earning a living. As a way of living and producing avant-garde art, the artists, no question, led the way. *Rolywholyover* as a visual installation, allowed a reflection on this historical moment.

It is peculiar in some ways to think of Cage as a fellow traveller with the Abstract Expressionists, but that is the case. He knew many of them well and worked with some of them – De Kooning and Franz Kline for example – at Black Mountain College, an experimental educational community in North Carolina in 1948. We can hardly equate Cage with the brusque machismo of some of these painters, but it provided a community, at least for a time. With their famous meeting places in New York, at a loft known as the 'the Club' on 8th Street – in its original location – and the Cedar Tavern, these artists set up an important creative dialogue and self-support system. De Kooning recalled its beginnings as primarily a social club – rather like the ones immigrant workers had set up in New York in the 1940s, and as an alternative to meeting in expensive cafes. Other significant members, besides participation by Newman, Rothko, Motherwell, Gottlieb *et al.*, included Willem's wife, Elaine de Kooning, Mercedes Matter – founder of the Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, and who was to later employ Morton Feldman as Dean – as well as the sculptor Philip Pavia. Art historian Irving Sandler described the Club as 'Reacting against a public which, when not downright hostile to their

15 Ibid., p. 74.

work, was indifferent or misunderstanding, [therefore] vanguard artists created their own audience, mostly of other artists – their own artworld.¹⁶ It was this atmosphere of self-sufficiency that no doubt impressed Cage, along with Stephan Wolpe, Morton Feldman and Edgard Varèse, and an atmosphere would have a marked effect on their own dialogues and ideas, or at least the stimulation to ask new questions. Again, it was a set of complex, reciprocal relationships, but the Club and its discussions (Cage lectured there on several occasions) was an important incubator for many aspects of what we now know as experimental music. It was also an important audience for Cage's, and his colleagues', experiments. Earle Brown, who joined Cage in New York in 1952 later recalled

We were conversant with all of them, they were the ones who came to our concerts; I mean, the musicians thought we were kooky, they thought we were nuts, they wouldn't even show up. I don't know if the painters liked our music either, but they showed up. We'd go every Saturday to their openings, you know, Guston or de Kooning or whoever. I felt it was a significant meeting of minds amongst the painters and composers – our group, that is, of composers.¹⁷

Neither group – the artists nor the composers grouped around Cage – saw themselves as a 'school' despite their lumping together of late as the 'New York Schools'. As Harold Rosenberg, an important participant in the Club and commentator on the work suggested, 'what they think in common is represented only by what they do separately'.¹⁸ The same certainly could be said of the four composers now known as the 'New York School' – Cage, Brown, Feldman, Wolff and not forgetting David Tudor, the virtuoso pianist who made it all happen, and who later was to become a composer in his own right. But where was this 'significant meeting of minds'? Apart from a social support group, there were collectively addressed questions of form, of activity in and for itself, that were being transformed by these artists. Harold Rosenberg – someone who was a key influence in bringing debates around existentialism to these artists at the Club – in a now famous passage spoke of a situation where

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.¹⁹

16 Irving Sandler, 'The Club', in David and Cecile Shapiro (eds), *Abstract Expressionism – A Critical Record* (New York, 1990), pp. 48–58, at p. 51.

17 David Ryan, 'Y a-t-il une "école new-yorkaise"? – Entretien avec Earle Brown', *Dissonanz*, 52 (May 1997): 14–19.

18 Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters' (1952), reprinted in David and Cecile Shapiro, *Abstract Expressionism*, pp. 75–85, at p. 76.

19 Ibid.

As familiar as it is, this particular phrasing denoted nothing short of a revolutionary reading of the new painting (a misreading, and a dangerous one at that, to Greenberg's mind). Rosenberg suggested this was not an aesthetic re-orientation – that is, not one, 'In order to make room for perfect relations of space and colour.'²⁰ But rather, it denoted a new inclusiveness to the act of painting, of the event, 'The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life.'²¹ These issues – although framed in a very different way from Cage, who disliked the connotations of 'action painting' – would find resonance in the composers' struggles with new forms. Cage, himself, from the late 1930s on, had been concerned with structure and inclusiveness, a tension that had come to a head by 1950. A year earlier in a lecture given, incidentally, at the Club, Cage would write of structure, 'it is like a glass of milk ... we need the ... glass and we need ... the milk ... or again ... it is like an empty glass ... into which ... at any moment ... anything ... can be poured.'²² Structure becomes a field of possibilities, and the moment is determined by the nature of the 'event' itself, exterior to Cage's mind and desires. Structure becomes a means of allowing certain things the possibility to happen or not – as in his empty durational structures given to participants in his various theatre pieces or 'circuses' – such as the seminal performance at Black Mountain College in 1952, with Cunningham, Rauschenberg *et al.*, or the *Theatre Piece* of 1960. But there is still a connection with all-overness or the symmetry of grid structures within painting in his abandonment of structure *per se* for *structured* process – both strategies giving the viewer more agile mobility in relation to the surface.

All-overness and the temporal aspect of painting – its seeming instantaneity – can also be translated into a model of time for composition, as Cage would demonstrate. This too concerned Morton Feldman, who like Cage – perhaps even more so – was affected by the discussions and the presence of both the painters and the paintings themselves. Clearly, both Feldman and Brown wanted to develop situations akin to the newfound physicality of the painters; Feldman suggested this in his oft-cited statement, 'The new painting made me desirous of a sound world more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed heretofore.'²³ And Brown formulated an equivalent statement in an early notebook entry of 1951-52, 'I want to get the time of composing closer to the time of performing.'²⁴ Both of these composers would demonstrate how aspects of painterly concerns could be translated into another medium, and convincingly so. Feldman was concerned with the creation of an 'aural surface' – one that is essentially static, even in the later massive compositions,

20 Ibid., p. 77.

21 Ibid., p. 78.

22 John Cage, 'Lecture on Nothing', *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middleton, Conn., 1961), pp. 109-27, at p. 110 [durational silences have been excluded from the quote].

23 Morton Feldman, 'Autobiography', in *Morton Feldman: Essays*, ed. Walter Zimmerman (Cologne, 1985), pp. 36-40, at p. 38.

24 Earle Brown, statement from a notebook 1951-52, Earle Brown Music Foundation, New York.

which retain this hovering and painterly quality; Brown's work, on the other hand, taking directly from Jackson Pollock's attempts to get 'inside the paintings', gives instructions to performers, for example, to bring 'an intensified sense of human and sonic presence and intuitive performance contact ... into an area of immediacy of action-reaction and flexibility' to a score's realization.²⁵ Passages of delicate graphism in certain works by Brown would be headed 'inarticulate' – an equivalent to residual, non-intentional marks that became part of the overall field of painting. Christian Wolff also developed a concept of 'zero time', an unmarked temporal space where the performer can take whatever time to realize a given task or event. And Brown's seminal graphic – or non-symbolically visual – score, probably the first totally 'indeterminate' piece in this respect, *December 1952*, which rejected a left-right reading of the page to initiate a situation where performers can enter and leave at any point (as in all-over painting). This is a piece that, in some ways, breaks the umbilical cord that attaches the score to the resulting sonic event, due to its 'ambiguity' in both corresponding interpretation and performance activity. Its continuous identity as a work lies, therefore, entirely in its visual manifestation, and not in any resulting audible realization.

The effect these experiments had on the conception and reception of music is, perhaps, taken for granted. It is a reminder of how much pre-war modern music was locked into a striated, counted time. By the late 1950s Wolff, commenting on new approaches to thinking time in experimental composition, could write,

*The music has a static character. It goes in no particular direction. There is no necessary concern with time as a measure of distance from a point in the past to a point in the future, with linear continuity alone. It is not a question of getting anywhere, of making progress, or having come from anywhere in particular.*²⁶

Wolff accepts that this is the source of, what he describes as, 'monotony and the irritation that accompanies it'. But he adds that this is, in fact, 'immobility in motion. And it alone, perhaps, is truly moving.'²⁷ In this way time becomes peculiarly spatial in these works. We get a sense of events occurring without the pre-given conventional narratives of how they should unfold *over* time. As with the painters who jettisoned composition in order to emphasize, in Rosenberg's terms, the canvas as an 'arena', it is a space where anything can happen. The white canvas becoming a void, or nothingness, against which the painter puts his or her mark, or existential trace, so to speak. Cage's conception of nothingness was perhaps the opposite of this anxiety that was rife in the artists' studios. Cage suggested a way, not of an aggressive act that stamps a trace upon the face of the world,

25 Earle Brown, from his performing instructions to *String Quartet* (1965), Earle Brown Music Foundation, New York.

26 Christian Wolff, 'New and Electronic Music', in *Cues, Writings and Conversations* (Cologne, 1999), pp. 24–37, at p. 36.

27 *Ibid.*

but of simply 'paying attention'. As artist Allan Kaprow pointed out, 'In Cage's cosmology (informed by Asiatic philosophy) the real world was perfect, if only we could hear, see it, understand it ... But if the world was perfect just as it is, neither terrible nor good, then it wasn't necessary to demand that it improve.'²⁸ Nor, we might add, make an existential commentary upon it. 'Things will happen and appear anyway', Cage seemed to be saying, as opposed to the weighted drama of *making* something happen.

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard discusses this 'making something happen', proposing that the act of musical composition is creating something 'audible' from the teeming mass of so-called inaudible sounds that form the backdrop to our perceptions. Music, he goes on, 'labours to give birth to what is audible in the inaudible breath. It strives to put it into phrases. Thus does it betray it, by giving it form' and that, 'Every sonorous phrase, even the simplest, announces that there will be another phrase, that it is not yet over, that the end of phrases is not yet to come to an end.'²⁹ And thus musical narratives mask a basic anxiety of 'nothing happening' which is where Lyotard's argument for a contemporary sublime comes into play – the situation whereby the inevitability of a safety net of knowing 'what happens next' is removed. Cage's 4'33" of 1952, the famous silent piece, as well as taking its inspiration from Robert Rauschenberg's white canvases of a year earlier, questions the very nature of gesture, of intervening as an author, composer or artist within what we take for granted – the 'invisible' or the 'inaudible' domains of listening or seeing. Both could be seen as 'empty' in relation to the expectation of something having to occur, and both curiously invert the natures of their respective mediums: Rauschenberg's white paintings allude to time – they make the viewer much more aware of the time of day, the specific lighting at that moment, the possibility, as Cage suggested, of the potential 'intrusion' of shadows within the viewing situation. Whereas Cage's 4'33" can be seen to accentuate the spatialization of sounds occurring within its time frames (this is my own experience of listening to realizations of the piece) and he certainly accentuates the visual aspect of performance, at least in its original context. Both these works have remained touchstones for avant-garde practices ever since, precisely because they have actively called into question the relation of the creation and reception of the art-event, but have also pointed to a fluidity, and called into question, the time and space considerations of their respective mediums.

The Abstract Expressionists, famously, as in the brooding iconic figure of Pollock, privileged an embodiment of male, rugged individuality.³⁰ Compatible with this inflation of the artist's ego was Rosenberg's suggestion that the artist becomes a

28 Allan Kaprow, 'Right Living', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (Berkeley, 2003), pp. 223–5, at p. 225.

29 Jean François Lyotard, 'Music, Music', in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges van den Abbeele (Minneapolis, 1997), pp. 217–33, at pp. 228–9.

30 That is, of course, the cliché: the participation and contribution of important women painters such as Elaine de Kooning, Grace Hartigan, Joan Mitchell and Lee Krasner amongst others, should also be pointed out here.

'cosmic I' – with a delimited, mythological sense of self – and that the 'Test of any of the new paintings is its seriousness – and the test of its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist's total effort to make over his experience.'³¹ Against this eulogy to the self and 'authenticity', shared by many of the painters, Cage's circle, including Rauschenberg at the time of the white paintings, sought a situation of *selflessness*. 'We should be free from the assertive, direct consequences of intention and effect', Christian Wolff suggested, 'because the intention would be merely one's own and circumscribed, while so many other forces are so obviously at work in the final effect'.³²

While many might have been exasperated with Cage and his 'Lecture on Nothing' at the club – with its Zen acceptance of nothingness – for numerous others he offered a potentially new terrain for artists to mine in the later 1950s, including ones as diverse in outlook as Jasper Johns and Allan Kaprow. Cage's growing influence during that time corresponded with a renewed interest, a rediscovery even, in the ironic, detached and disinterested aesthetic of Marcel Duchamp, so much so that Irving Sandler could talk of a Cage/Duchamp aesthetic.³³ With its disavowal of personalized expression, its inclusiveness of noise and the everyday, Cage's analysis was moving toward a holistic reading of the event – accentuating the fact that the production of sound was actually embodied sonically, physically, socially and visually. 'Where do we go from here?' he asked in 1957. 'Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them.'³⁴

3

If Cage's statements about theatre threw down the gauntlet to visual artists, then, in certain quarters, it was taken up with gusto. And while the connection between Abstract Expressionism and the Experimental composers throws into relief certain methodological correspondences – such as the field, the event of gesture, trace or mark, or signs of residual materiality (drips, blots, splashes, extraneous or exterior sounds and so on), essentially both look in different directions in terms of their respective world views. It was in the embrace of Cage's notion of theatre, within Fluxus and the 'Happening', that an experimental approach to art-making – akin to Cage's work at least – appears. Many of the protagonists were his students at the classes in experimental music he gave at the New School for Social Research in New

31 Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', p. 81. Rosenberg here is alluding to a connection with Walt Whitman's notion of a 'Cosmic I' – one that has little to do with the biological, everyday notion of selfhood.

32 Christian Wolff, '... let the listeners be just as free as the players', in *Cues, Writings and Conversations*, pp. 78–86, at p. 82.

33 See Irving Sandler, *The New York School* (New York, 1978).

34 John Cage, 'Experimental Music' in *Silence*, pp. 7–12, at p. 12.

York: Al Hansen, Allan Kaprow, Dick Higgins, Jackson MacLow and George Brecht to mention but a few. Importantly Kaprow was to synthesize various concerns of Abstract Expressionism and Cage in order to develop the 'Happening'. As a serious contribution to the debates around action, performance and installation, 'Happenings' have been undermined by numerous take-offs and caricatures of 'far out art'. Kaprow, by 1967, was despairing at the chic and hip Sixties appropriation, commercial exploitation even, of the term, 'Happening'. It is only relatively recently that as a concept it has been revisited and has taken on a strange relevance for many contemporary practitioners, in the raw energy and attempts to cut across the boundaries of what is acceptable as 'art'. An early form – in their original incarnation – of non-narrative performance or theatre, as events they usually had a loose plan, score or script, and would consist of various activities, sounds, objects from everyday life, makeshift environments, props, audience participation and materials of virtually any sort. The photographic documents of these events show them generally, but not exclusively, taking place in artists' lofts, and attempting to break down the separation of artist, performer, participant and audience. The idea of them taking place in the artists' natural habitat of the loft was an important one, it meant taking a stand against the growing dominance of galleries, dealers and general commercialization that accompanied the acclaim of the American painting. Although one of Kaprow's early important works, *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, took place in the Rueben Gallery, New York, in 1959, it was the grime and 'reality' of non-gallery spaces that attracted him. The chaotic, often chance-based activities were better suited to non-gallery or even non-art sites, which was Kaprow ultimately preferred. And, as with Cage, in most of these performances the unexpected, or unforeseen, was welcomed, as he states in 1961:

*Visitors to a Happening are now and then not sure what has taken place, when it has ended, even when things have gone 'wrong.' For when something goes 'wrong' something far more 'right,' more revelatory, has many times emerged. This sort of sudden near-miracle presently seems to be made through chance procedures.*³⁵

Kaprow's importance here is as a hinge between the diverse practices of Pollock and Cage. What he experienced in Pollock was an intensified ritual of action, one scarred with residues of the everyday, an almost uncontained space, which was to be translated into real space – an environmental space. In Kaprow's terms, Pollock had suggested an expansion to the artists' armoury, and an exploration of expanded materiality: 'not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odours, touch. Objects of every sort are materials of the new art.'³⁶ Cage, on the other hand, pointed to the dual exploration of chance and non-art which spurned a new means

³⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁶ Allan Kaprow, 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock (1958)', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, pp. 1–12, at pp. 7, 9.

of thinking across, or even fusing of art and music and, by implication, many other disciplines, as Kaprow explained:

It was apparent to everyone that these two moves in music could be systematically carried over to any of the other arts. But the more interesting prospect, as I saw it, was to follow the lead of these ideas well beyond the boundaries of the art genres themselves.³⁷

Kaprow was later to distinguish between sub-categories of happenings, 'Events' and 'Activities'. Events – most typically exemplified by the Fluxus group (which included George Maciunas, George Brecht, Al Hansen, Yoko Ono, Dick Higgins, Nam June Paik amongst a whole host of other temporary allegiances) were exemplified by 'disciplined attentiveness to small or normally unimportant phenomena'.³⁸ They tended to take place with a conventional performer/audience relationship, while Activities foregrounded the idea of participation in the given activity by abolishing, literally, the distinction between performer, participant and audience, in that everyone taking part in the Activity must *participate*.

It is here, in these two sub-categories of the happening, that the blurring of the boundaries of art and life, the examination of public and private spaces, and the possibility of operating as an *experimental* as opposed to an avant-garde artist are brought into focus. Cage had provided a clear exegesis on what constituted an experimental approach to music – it centred around process rather than the creation of objects, therefore impermanence was a characteristic, as was the embrace of the 'unforeseen' in terms of what will actually occur; it focused on sounds themselves (and their production) freed from musical narrative structures, and shunned an aesthetic separation of art from life. 'Imagine', wrote Kaprow, 'something never done before, by a method never used, whose outcome is unforeseen. Modern art is not like this; it is always Art'.³⁹ This was the basis of his call for 'life-like art' rather 'art-like art'. The experimental artist was not sure what the activities he was involved in actually were. It was without any official legitimating constraints or codes of practice and therefore it had the freedom to explore for its own sake. As an example, a piece might be looked at such as *On/Off*, made in the 1990s for a workshop in experimental art. Here, as in other Activities, Kaprow simply initiated an activity that involved the immediate available surroundings:

We decided to play with the light switch. The idea was that anyone in the room could get up from where they were sitting and turn off the lights. How long it would take was unplanned. Then, anyone could turn it on. Then off. Then on, and so forth. Long periods of time followed. Although there were no

37 Allan Kaprow, 'Right Living (1987)', p. 224.

38 Allan Kaprow, 'Pinpointing Happenings (1967)', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, pp. 84–9, at p. 86.

39 Allan Kaprow, 'Experimental Art (1966)', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, pp. 66–83, at p. 68.

guidelines about silence, no one spoke. You could hear people breathing. We peeked at one another, trying to anticipate who would make the next move. Sometimes we stared at someone, challenging them, to see who would wait the longest. People got up and played with the switch, flicking the light, or archly changing it back and forth, as if to convey some message. Equally there were 15 minutes more of doing nothing. The only advice given in advance was that anyone could leave the room when they had to. The experiment would end when no one remained. After about two and a half hours I had to give a talk elsewhere. There were nine in the room when I left. I went to the airport after the lecture and never heard when the room became empty.⁴⁰

Anyone who has participated in musical improvisational activity will recognize that the same tensions, expectations and behavioural tics that take place in those situations are clearly apparent here. And for Kaprow, its status *as art* must be placed in doubt for it to qualify as a truly experimental event. George Brecht, another student of Cage's at the New School, also developed a focus on activities and prosaic events – especially in his early Events which gave laconic instructions to the performer, such as *Three Window Events* which consists of directions to 'open a closed window' and 'close an open window', or *Timetable Music* where a train timetable is appropriated as a musical score. As with some of La Monte Young's early event scores during his association with Fluxus, they need not even be realized at all, but simply imagined – and in turn question the need for the public domain at all. In connection with this, Henry Flynt, an associate of Young, recalls,

After I became involved in new music, I remember walking through Harvard Yard and seeing a man positioned at the corner of a dormitory, seeming attentive but not visibly doing anything. The thought occurred to me that he might be participating in a new music performance whose existence was unannounced.⁴¹

Such was the peculiar situation of the late 1950s, early 1960s with the introduction of Fluxus Events, Happenings and Activities. Flynt describes the above as a possible 'new music event', although such activities or events, as we have seen, could be by so-called experimental artists or non-musicians. Brecht, for example, was a professional chemist, and many involved in Fluxus, like Al Hansen or Wolff Vostell, were visual arts trained, despite the mores of music continually being spoofed or critically and humorously examined in their work. And Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus, had a deep antipathy towards 'career professional artists'.

Flynt's history is also interesting as a case study bringing to light some of these paradoxes that might be associated with the extremities of the experimental. With

40 Allan Kaprow, 'Just Doing', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, pp. 247–52, at p. 248.

41 Henry Flynt, 'Cage and Fluxus', in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.) *Writings about John Cage* (Ann Arbor, 1993), pp. 279–82, at pp. 279–80.

a predisposition for the peripheral, and dipping into various activities at different times or simply attempting to be a thorn in the side of an avant-garde mainstream, Flynt remains an almost quintessential anti-art activist and something of an enigma. He demonstrated against 'culture' in general and against Stockhausen, twice, in 1964 – pre-empting a general disdain that grew amongst experimental composers for the German composer. His output questions consistency, the exploration of any particular medium or discipline, and the kind of relationship an artist (or musician) might forge with the world itself, avoiding any of the pre-given legitimizing structures that ultimately mark and shape practices within the fields of art and music.

Flynt was originally a mathematician, who shifted to philosophy while at Harvard where he was a contemporary of Christian Wolff and the filmmaker and fellow Young associate Tony Conrad. It was Conrad who introduced him to Young's early music which remained extremely important to Flynt. In the early 1960s he developed 'Concept Art' (not to be confused with LeWitt's or Kosuth's later formulation of conceptual art). Flynt had militantly embraced popular music over the 'new music' – Delta blues, Bo Diddley and so on. In the late 1980s, for a short period, he revisited 'Concept Art' and – reluctantly entering a professional context – had several shows at the Emily Harvey Gallery in New York, and also a room at the Venice Biennale of 1990 entitled 'Logically impossible Space'. After 1993, Flynt went back to the hypotheses and treatises, with his 'personhood Theory' – a kind of empirical philosophy of the self, the world and their interrelationship.

What are we to make of all this? There are two ways of viewing Flynt's practice – as simply a way of living, with a reflective critical and ethical dimension, together with various forays into creativity unburdened by career constraints. Or, serving a critique of elitist, avant-garde practices which, in themselves, have become normative and uphold the status quo. Both could be seen as an experimental attitude to thinking about how one positions oneself within a dominant culture, a politicized experimentalism. Flynt asks questions about the nature of the 'career professional' in art, music and even philosophy, each of whom he would see as partaking in a distortion by a specialist mentality that is ultimately at the service of spurious social functions. Nor had Cage gone far enough, as he suggests,

Cage's pronouncements in this period seemed to say that only listening and the environment were necessary for music, that composers and professional instrumentalists were passé. At the time, I took this to question the very legitimacy of art. Also Cage's juniors acknowledged and echoed these dicta. And yet Cage remained a professional composer, and his students became career professionals ... Seemingly extreme proclamations which are not acted upon (and in hindsight were not even meant) are troubling ... All the same, what are we to make of the presence of intimations of the end of art in the stance of career artists, intimations which turn out to be nothing of the sort?⁴²

42 Ibid., pp. 280–81.

This is, of course, an extreme form of experimentation, demanding the liquidation of art as we know it. Cage's later works in the late 1980s and 1990s contradict any reading of him as simply a proto-Dadaist. And for all his pronouncements Flynt maintains a 'what is to be done next' attitude, one that ultimately betrays its avant-garde origins, as well as the requirement of a *public* face – that of the pamphlet, the radio broadcast, demonstration or even the conventional gallery context. If it doesn't have this communicative element, then it simply reverts to a solipsistic form of living, a self-induced 'silence'. But such issues were, and still are, relevant to the whole question of what it is to be an *experimental* artist. And Kaprow, Brecht, Flynt and many others brought this questioning into relief, with the private/public debate, interpersonal rather than expressive interfaces, the nature of work and its resistance to an increasingly commercialized mode of exchange and thought, and the question of how to operate in the world itself as an artist: which became nothing short of an experimental construction of subjectivity and its interrelationships.

4

Such discourses examine the nature of events with all their connotations: formal, social, political even, and seemed to gravitate naturally to the arena of the visual arts. Almost none of these debates were adequately discussed in music schools or conservatoires, where they might have been only briefly tolerated, impatiently at that. Think of English experimentalist Cornelius Cardew's marginalization as a teacher at the Royal Academy School of Music. Partly, the reason for this lies in changes that had been taking place not only in the tradition of avant-garde innovation but also in its relation to instruction and the traditions of teaching in the visual arts, which had changed beyond recognition if we compare it to music. The traditions of the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College with their implementation of empirical research and experimentation rather a notion of *techne*, pointed to the accommodation of experimental and even marginal attitudes. Robert Filliou, another Fluxus artist, suggested that art 'offers an immediate "right of asylum" to all deviant practices which cannot find a place in their natural bed'.⁴³ Also, it should be said, the philosophical basis of art had become a more public battleground – especially since the advent of modernism. Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism as movements existed as blank slates for critical discourse to excavate meaning and context. There appeared to be no *givens* here, in terms of interpretation or meaning, hence conflicting accounts of those movements, and very different directions for future practice being deduced from them. With the growth of conceptual and idea-based art within art schools, it was only natural that sound and performance in general would attract more attention. Even Greenberg would acknowledge that the basis of art was one that didn't lie, necessarily, in the production of an object:

43 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris, 2002), p. 102.

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The notion of art, put to the strictest test of experience, proves not to be skilful making (as the ancients defined it), but an act of mental distancing – an act that can be performed even without the help of sense perception. Any and everything can be subjected to such distancing, and thereby converted into something that takes effect as art. There turns out, accordingly, to be such a thing as art at large, art that is realized or realizable everywhere, even if for the most part inadvertently, momentarily, and solipsistically: art that is private, ‘raw’, and unformalized (which doesn’t mean formless, of which there is no such thing.) And because this art can and does feed on anything within the realm of conceivability, it is virtually omnipresent among human beings.⁴⁴

Cage’s 4’33” could be considered as framing this ‘raw art’, as would Duchamp’s ready-mades, such as the manufactured urinal *Fountain* or *Bottle Rack*, each drawing on ‘anything within the realm of conceivability’ as art. Greenberg, it has to be said, saw this position as extremely limited in its possibilities, outside the cultured constraints of high art, and ‘sheltered from the pressure of expectation and demands’ that those constraints bring with them. But it does point to the expanded field of investigation that informed visual arts practice in the 1960s and 1970s.

This also explains the very possibility of participation in art school teaching, during that period, by experimental composers. Cage, Brown, Feldman and Wolff were each invited to English art schools, Gavin Bryars taught, at the beginning of his career, almost exclusively in art schools, as did Michael Parsons at Portsmouth and the Slade School of Fine Art. Cornelius Cardew and pianist John Tilbury also taught at various art institutions. My own art school experiences at Coventry in the mid-1970s were coloured by another generation of musicians, the improvisers: Steve Beresford, Lol Coxhill, Peter Cusack and sound artist Max Eastley, amongst others. Certainly, all of these encounters shaped a variety of outcomes. Counted amongst these might be Cardew’s experimental and anarchic collective, the Scratch Orchestra which owed much of its make-up to visual artists, and Bryars’s Portsmouth Sinfonia – which in itself questioned the nature of skill and error in performance – and was a direct amalgamation of students and staff from the art school.

In America many artists in New York passed through the Studio School during Feldman’s tenure as Dean there. Artist and critic Saul Ostrow, now Chair in Visual Arts at Cleveland Institute of the Arts, recalled,

I was a very arrogant student, and felt I knew more than, or at least as much as, my teachers. It was the sixties after all. Then I attended Feldman’s classes – this was at the School of Visual Arts. I remember the first day of class there was Feldman in a rumpled suit, wearing thick glasses and smoking cigarettes that burnt down between his fingers – he read from note cards which he had

⁴⁴ Clement Greenberg, ‘Counter Avant-garde’, in Morgan, *Clement Greenberg: Late Writings*, pp. 5–18, at p. 13.

*to hold very close to his face, his eyesight being very bad. Feldman, though, was the instructor who made me realize that I didn't understand a thing about the avant-garde, or the important role that experimental music was playing in terms of what was happening at the time. That was an important realization!*⁴⁵

Feldman provided an alternative view to the more extreme and politicized views of experimentalism. It was one that concentrated on the nature of material and how one positioned oneself within those materials in relation to process and technique. For Feldman, as with Lyotard, technique and convention tended to mask a fundamental anxiety that one needs to tap into in order to articulate a deeper experience of time and sound. A strong connection with the painters of Abstract Expressionism remained with Feldman, and we can note that his approach to sound was never abstract – as in Cage's or Wolff's notion of the performer 'choosing sounds' unspecified by the composers – Feldman always projected sound through the coloration of their *specified* instrumentation. David Reed, now an established painter in New York, and another student at The Studio School while Feldman was there, recalled Feldman's strong links to the original New York School of the early 1950s in his lectures and talks: 'In his talks he made many connections between the visual arts and music and told many stories about the painters – many of them pointed, but enigmatic.'⁴⁶ Students were in awe when Feldman would bring an artist from that generation in to speak, as he recalls:

Once he brought de Kooning into the school ... A student asked: 'What made the breakthrough of the Abstract Expressionists possible?' De Kooning turned to Feldman, 'When was it Morty?' And they go back and forth with dates – and finally settle, I think, on the first week of June 1948. De Kooning: 'That was the week that no one could paint. We were all out walking in the streets. No one knew what a painting was anymore. And it was that one week of not knowing that made everything possible.'⁴⁷

This process of forgetting was important to Feldman's practice as well as his view of the history of American modernism. It was a means of realigning oneself with material, but certainly didn't – as against Kaprow or Flynt – abolish or question the fundamental basis of art. While others were trying to move away from 'art', Feldman was trying to move his music closer to it. Music had become a form of entertainment as he saw it, while art still possessed that seriousness, that philosophical underpinning that Feldman required.

45 Email correspondence with the author, 2008.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

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If I have mapped two extremes, here, in the post-Cage activities of experimental art and music – with Kaprow and Flynt representing a philosophical and politicized reading of the thrust of experimental music in its translation into visual or performance-based activities, and Feldman viewing the relationship between the arts as a more subtle weaving of allusion and analogy informing ways of using methods and materials – then both these positions are still relevant and alive within current practice. In between there are, of course, many variants utilizing the visual and the sonic, either melding them together or each informing the other. Many practitioners of the 1960s and 1970s, directly affected by the first generation of experimental composers, are still active. Increased traffic has occurred between disciplines: Max Neuhaus migrated in the late 1960s from virtuoso percussionist to installation artist, while Phill Niblock, on the other hand, began his career as a filmmaker and began developing music by composing from taped sounds, in a manner similar to re-editing visual material. Often Niblock's drone pieces are simultaneously accompanied by his films of people engaged in manual work from footage shot across the world, each in their own way hypnotic.

Other artists have maintained multi-disciplinary approaches to their work, such as Charlemagne Palestine who from the early 1970s on has straddled installation, video, performance and music in his activities. Trained as a Cantor in New York, Palestine, whose works make use of either the voice or extended interference patterns on the piano, sees his work as an extension of the expressive depth of Rothko's or Newman's paintings. Atmosphere certainly prevails in his ritualistic approach, with low coloured lighting or ambience, and often with the appearance of fetishized stuffed toys embodying transitional objects in his performances. Sometimes these toys form installations and sculptures in their own right culminating in a cross-over with the work of artists Mike Kelley or Jeff Koons. Palestine's connection of sounds to a visceral sound-producing body resulted in performances where his own body would be subjected to physical strain in order to transform the sound. *Island Song* of 1976 might be a good example, where the small island of Saint Pierre Miquelon off the coast of Canada, apparently chosen at random from a globe, becomes the object of an audio mapping. Palestine, in this work, straps a video camera to his motorcycle and attempts to hold a single pitch for the duration of the cartographic excursion. Needless to say as the terrain became more difficult the sustained pitch distorts and involuntarily widens as the body is physically hurled about. Christian Marclay's video *Guitar Drag* (2000) inflicts similar damage to an inanimate guitar. Amplified, hooked up and tied by rope to a truck, it is dragged across terrain of San Antonio in Texas, during which it creates a variety of electronic screams, violent distortions and finally becomes a stringless battered resonating body. *Guitar Drag*, as Marclay himself suggested, is about references not only to cowboys and rodeos translated into a sonic 'road movie', but also violence, with a grisly starting point in a lynching. At the same time, the video also points to the destruction of instruments in iconic rebel rock concerts, and in Fluxus events (usually in that context, a piano or violin). This accumulation of different meanings, resonances

and historical references is typical of contemporary practices. While *Guitar Drag*, as in Palestine's videos, takes the duration of an activity as its delimitation of form and process, it does not shy away from tapping into our memories of received sounds and images.

Both these examples use sound as a means of marking duration and space. Sound performs this territorialization of space in our day-to-day environments – think of alarms, church bells, mechanical, animal or bird sounds and so on. In Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue's social analysis of everyday sonic experience, their starting point is the fact that, 'No sound event, musical or otherwise, can be isolated from the spatial and temporal conditions of its physical signal propagation.'⁴⁸ One striking aspect of Cage's *4'33"* was the accentuation of this perspectival aspect of sounds and their acoustical properties. Despite the rhetoric of sounds simply as sounds, Cage also leads to an analysis of production and place. And many recent works have followed suit in exploring this relationship to the spatiality of sounds and the perception of place. Max Neuhaus's early *Listen* (1966–76) was a 'lecture-demonstration' that consisted simply of the instruction to listen, while Neuhaus selected particular walks or sites particularly rich in their sonic material. These have included a power plant, with 'some spectacularly massive rumbling', or the underside of Brooklyn Bridge, 'with sounds of traffic moving across that bridge – the rich sound texture formed from hundreds of tires rolling along over the open grating of the road-bed – each with different speed and tread'.⁴⁹ Such focused listening and observation led to Neuhaus formulating architecture-specific sound environments and installations, placing sounds in particular architectural or exterior contexts. Sound becomes, here, a sculptural material that our physical presence enacts and bears witness to. Another variant is where artists might place specific sounds in various parts of a space acting as audible zones, but not necessarily site-specific. Bruce Nauman's *Raw Materials* (2004) installed in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern is a particularly dramatic example. Using 22 spoken texts – in the form of jokes, statements, propositions, emotional addresses or pleas – and organized in bands across the width of the Turbine Hall, the accumulative effect in the huge cavernous space of the Tate consisted of a disturbing cacophony of voices, which became particularized only as one moved around the space towards a given source. Often with manic repetition of phrases such as 'work, work, work, work...' or 'thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you...', the effect is one of a strange synthesis of the bleak comedic tragedy of Beckett combined with the relentlessness of early minimalism.

Similarly zonal in feel are Christina Kubisch's electromagnetic induction installations. Drawing on a wider array of sounds than Nauman, they bring together recordings of the sounds of nature, each resonant of particular landscapes or places, together with generated electronic sounds. Often, the only visual elements

48 Jean-François Augoyard and Henry Torgue (eds), *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* (Montreal 2005), p. 4.

49 Max Neuhaus, 'Listen', in Dan Lander and Micah Lexier (eds), *Sound by Artists* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 63–7, at pp. 63, 65.

in Kubisch's work are the actual means of sound production themselves – a series of cables that transmit the sound around which the public (wearing headphones that pick up the sound) walk – as well as the visual characteristics of the chosen spaces themselves, which are important: 'These sound zones', the artist has explained, 'are often created in the open air: in woodland glades for instance, or in buildings that were not constructed to act as concert halls, such as deserted factories, shipyards and cellars.'⁵⁰ In walking through Kubisch's sonic structures, the listener is able to mix 'impossible' relationships between zones – the sound of a jungle mingled with footsteps in a cobbled street and so on. Such installations also underline how these sounds suggest a corresponding visualization, and how one sense might trigger another.

Jack Goldstein's appropriation of sound-effect recordings in the 1970s explored the idea of utilizing sounds as *objets trouvés*, and acting as a sculptural reality. Sound as raw material – in itself – relates to *musique concrète* pioneer Pierre Schaeffer's formulation of the *acousmatic*; a notion that identifies the break between sound source and its sonic effect as one which, 'marks the perceptive reality of sound as such, as distinguished from the modes of its transmission and production'.⁵¹ But sound effects are also naturally evocative of their causes, and again can lead to visualization, an imaginary filmic narrative. Creating such a narrative out of sounds themselves was central to Tacita Dean's early work *Foley Artist* (1996) in which she explores the work of 'foley artists' who find ingenious ways of emulating and replicating sounds for a film's post-production phase. This process of 'rendering' makes the sounds appear more convincingly *real* than they would if sourced from the actual location, and in doing so, creates an over-determination. This lends 'a double property to sound: not only do we believe that sound can "objectively" and single-handedly indicate its source but also that it evokes impressions linked to this source',⁵² argues French composer Michel Chion. It is this double property – the pointing to a sound source, and the semiotic complexity of that connection – that has fascinated many contemporary artists. Dean's *Foley Artist* alludes to the almost palpable gloss that the *rendered* sound gives a filmic image. Only, in this instance, she is 'painting' her narrative with those sounds alone.

If each of these sound pieces put into effect a 'profound listening', one that is focused and developed, then this certainly due to the impact of Cage's *4'33"*, which has had almost legendary status amongst visual artists. Many examples could be given of an attempt to translate this piece into the visual. While working on *Rolywholyover* Cage asked curator Julie Lazar what she felt was the equivalent of silence in the visual arts. 'Nothingtoseeness' she replied. Numerous artists have risen to this challenge exploring such a blank emptiness, some perhaps independently of Cage, as in Yves Klein's *The Void* (1958) at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris, where

50 Christina Kubisch, 'About my Installations', in Lander and Lexier, *Sound by Artists*, pp. 69–72, at p. 72.

51 Pierre Schaeffer, 'Acousmatics', in Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (eds), *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York, 2004), pp. 76–81, at p. 77.

52 Michel Chion, *Audio Vision* (New York, 1994), p. 111.

the gallery was pristinely prepared but empty. In the late 1960s Robert Barry used electrical currents emitted by radios transmitters in a given space, and Michael Asher's *Air Sculptures* focused simply on air pressure, so one would *feel* a space. Others have positioned this 'nothingtoseeness' as a direct homage to Cage, as in Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2001). Nauman, who had used the empty studio as a foil for filmed and photographed activities in seminal works from the 1960s on, returned to this subject matter for this large-scale piece. Using infra-red cameras Nauman filmed the studio at night, completely empty, apart from its residua of half-finished or evacuated projects, and an infestation of field mice. Seven large video projections map the studio space from seven positions. Occasionally colours shift, or the viewer is aware of nocturnal movement, a moth or a mouse, but apart from this not much happens for a long duration. And yet, it has the effect of making the viewer more alert – and in looking for that thing that *will* happen, the tiniest of events become magnified in their significance. By surrounding the viewer with the projections, Nauman includes the likelihood that if this something does happen, then it could also be missed. Nauman's propensity for inactivity and duration could be traced back to the influence of both La Monte Young and Cage (although, for Clement Greenberg, this was expressed thus: 'the children of mid-century and after seem to have mutated into a tolerance, nay, appetite for boredom in the aesthetic realm that's unprecedented'⁵³).

But what has changed? And what distinguishes contemporary practices that combine or integrate sound, performance and time within the visual arts from their antecedents? Marked transformations have occurred in cultural attitudes, including, despite Greenberg's barbed comments, duration and how it is figured as an element within the spaces of the visual, together with the whole issue of participation, and, on many different levels, the problematic of both repetition and appropriation. Most of these issues have clear roots in the practices of earlier experimental arts.

Critics and philosophers such as Frederic Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard discussed in the 1980s and 1990s a breakdown of temporal narratives at a cultural level. The increased use and accessibility of relatively new materials such as digital sound, video and computer handling within the visual arts have intensified a drive toward spatio-temporal dislocation that is also reflected in everyday culture. And on that level the experimental and avant-garde have been swallowed up by a popular mainstream, some might say recuperated by the very capitalist system that they appeared to resist or critique. Daniel Bell, in the 1970s, saw the process as, potentially, a negative one: the excesses and exponential democratic hedonism of modernism percolating through to a voracious consumer society, already out of control. Jacques Attali, writing at the same moment, saw these processes as a nascent but possibly liberating entropy that would transform itself into another cultural stage. It is a transition from a society deadlocked into the copy, the reproduction, the accumulated stockpile of dead artefacts: from a cultural phase

53 Greenberg, 'Intermedia', p. 96.

of *repetition* to one that foregrounds participation freely and individually – a phase of *composition*.

If we have moved from repetition to composition in Attali's terms, then the stockpile of reproduced, historical objects becomes raw material for new approaches. 'It gives voice', he suggests, 'to the fact that rhythms and sounds are the supreme mode of relation between bodies, once the screens of the symbolic, usage and exchange are shattered ... An exchange between bodies – *through work, not through objects*.'⁵⁴ Attali sees music as prophetic of future social relations, and in using experimental music as a 'predictive reality' for this ideal of composing (a collective activity, that is, or composition as a 'bringing together' of diversity rather than an isolated activity), then he seems to have been accurate, to an extent. Certainly, more recent framings of practice, such as Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*, draw similar conclusions, although he stresses continuity rather than transition:

*The constitution of convivial relations has been an historical constant since the 1960s. The generation of the 1990s took up this set of issues, though it has been relieved of the matter of the definition of art, so pivotal in the 1960s and 1970s. The issue no longer resides in broadening the boundaries of art, but in experiencing art's capacities of resistance within the overall social arena.*⁵⁵

Social networks, conviviality and play – these might be seen as the hallmarks of experimental practices in the early stages of the new century. To this we might add humour and irony – perhaps one reason why Fluxus events have been revisited of late so often by contemporary artists. 'I get too claustrophobic when things get too analytical', Charlemagne Palestine once suggested, 'I need contradiction, irony, confusion, doubt. When I see a room full of these things I can relax.'⁵⁶ Salons and social gatherings have taken on a new import in the dissemination of creative work, new allegiances have been forged between composing, improvising and the inherited stockpile of images or sounds in the cultural memory bank. Christian Marclay's *Video Quartet* (2002) and Douglas Gordon's *Feature Film* (1999) both, in their very different ways, reflect a sense of re-composition of pre-existing audiovisual cinematic materials that is in alignment with Attali's sense of exploding the passive accumulation of the stockpile, and actively and creatively intervening within it.

If this is a kind of ecological position whereby artists are reusing materials, strategies, modes, objects and images, then is there not also the danger of a stagnation of the very notion of the experimental? If Martin Creed, to take one example, playfully addresses his doubts and attends to the question 'what do I do?' – an experimental approach if ever there was one – what do we make of the

54 Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, 1985), p. 143.

55 Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, pp. 30, 31.

56 'Looking for Mr Goodbear', Charlemagne Palestine interviewed by Mark Webber in *Resonance*, 7/1 (1998), pp. 26–30, at p. 29.

déjà vu that accompanies almost every piece that emerges in his response to that question? Is it a situation of creative exhaustion? Does everything now navigate to certain well-worn grooves? This is a pressing problem for composers, artists and those involved in intermedia. There is a thin line between replication and creative allusion, and being haunted by the objects of the past can gridlock cultural experimentation no matter how 'convivially' produced or addressed. There remains, however, to echo both Lyotard and Feldman, a potential indeterminacy within all fields of activity, including what we might see as 'old' media, that is essential to experimental practices. Surely this sense of an opening into the unknown is where the spirit of the experimental resides, harbouring within it 'an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its "reception" and "production"'.⁵⁷

57 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Critical Reflections', *Artforum*, 29/8 (1991), pp. 92–3.

