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Dick Higgins

Eugène Ionesco

Joe Jones

James Joyce

Allan Kaprow

Franz Kline

Milan Knizak

Jackson MacLow

Bo Nilsson

Luigi Nono

Claes Oldenburg

Jackson Pollock

Jean-Paul Sartre

Kurt Schwitters

Daniel Spoerri

Karlheinz Stockhausen

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Richard Wagner

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La Monte Young

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the something else

NEWSLETTER

Volume 1, Number 3 April, 1966 40c

INTENDING

by Dick Higgins

Back in the days of pure media, when pictures were painted in paint on cloth, before the best artists became more interested in the intermedia between painting and sculpture, between music and theater, etc., there was no particular value attached to intention. A work, finished, was essentially an entity. The painting was hung, noticed, and ignored. The script ruled the life of a few actors for a couple of hours, then was placed aside and forgotten until its next moment of dominance. It lasted, as opposed to the reality of shoes. Shoes serve and wear out. From the moment they are put on the feet, they are always changing, until the time when their change makes them less serviceable, irreversibly so, and they are discarded.

So many of the artists became unhappy about this eternal, unyielding quality in their art, and they began to wish their work were more like shoes, more temporary, more human, more able to admit of the possibility of change. The fixed-finished work began to be supplemented by the idea of a work as a process, constantly becoming something else, tentative, allowing more than one interpretation. We see it in literature in the controlled ambiguities of Joyce, William Carlos Williams, Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, Kurt Schwitters. In music we see the tendency from Wagner, of whom a very small variety of definitive performances is possible, through Ives, of whom a rather enormous possibility of definitive performances can coexist, through Cage, where the emphasis is on variety and the expanded experience rather than on any sort of definitiveness, to Philip Corner (and, perhaps, beyond), in whose work the only definitive quality of the performance becomes the negative one of not only being fascinating itself, but of suggesting as many as possible other interpretations within the context of the piece.

The composition then consists less of providing performers with explicit materials to work with than of fixing boundaries and kinds of images within which the performers operate. The reasoning which makes this attractive to the composer or playwright we shall get to shortly. But first I would like to take up a few historical observations and contrasts about the

period in which this way of working originated.

The late 1950's was typified by Abstract Expressionism (called "tachisme" in Europe) in painting, and by the International Style (Stockhausen, Koenig, Boulez, Nono, Nilsson, etc.) in music, so called because of its

very close parallels, aesthetically and technically, to the post-Bauhaus International Style in architecture. The International Style and Abstract Expressionism both emphasized working with very specific materials in an abstract (i.e., uncrystallized-into-clearly-semantic-details) manner. The reasons for this we will not take up here. However, the clarity and the vividness of certain of the painters' viewpoints, those of Pollock, Kline and de Kooning, gave a certain prestige to painting over all the other arts, greater than it had previously had in recent times. As a result, some of the younger painters began to feel that their work should include other media, and began to extend toward them. This is specifically true of Rauschenberg and Kaprow, and their experiments resulted in environments and Happenings. On the other hand, people involved in the other arts began to feel that painting was much more

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advanced, much more filled with exciting implications. And so they tried to associate themselves with

painting. This brings us to the work of John Cage.

Cage was always involved in both formal and acoustic experimentation. In fact, the implications of such an

early piece as *Construction in Metal* (1937) have never been followed up.

However, in the early 1950's, his work began to parallel that of the best Abstract Expressionists. At the time, he seemed anxious to avoid the responsibility of trying to mean something semantic in his work, but now it begins to look more like trying to develop a structural principle that was an alternative to the typical willed imposition of the International Stylists, which began to be seen as both arbitrary and requiring the subservience of the performer's own knowledge to the composer's will, and therefore implicitly fascistic and undesirable. Whether or not it was Cage's view, it is certainly my own, that serial music is a neo-feudal tendency, and quite without relevance to the rather different problems of our own times.

However, a sense of this problem was certainly implicit in Cage's attempt

to find more realistic structural means of composing music; and he developed the idea of working by chance operation, or what is known in Europe as 'aleatropic methodology.'

Chance meant fixing a set of possibilities and allowing a system of relationships between dice, coins, etc., to determine the details of material. It was on the one hand a practical structural method of giving materials to performers, and on the other a distinct reaction against the International Style's habit of applying arbitrary subforms to even the most minute of details.

But of course it meant much more than this. It meant accepting certain risks. By accepting the validity of this randomized material, one no longer was willing to accept the necessity of a clearly-defined willful imposition over the details. This was implicit in the whole procedure. A major part of the responsibility for the piece now lay in the system of relating the chance operation to the materials that were to be used. In other words, the composer could talk all he wanted about abdicating certain of these responsibilities. In fact, this was not what he did (nor am I certain it was what he would want to do, since in order to randomize a piece completely, wouldn't one have to give up responsibility for the system? And wouldn't this mean giving up thinking itself? And who wants to do that? Any serious artist? Surely not Cage.). What he did was to place the material at one remove from the composer, by allowing it to be determined by a system he determined. And the real innovation lies in the emphasis on the creation of a system.

I am not going to take up, here, Cage's concept of indeterminacy, since it strikes me as an essentially defensive argument that leaving the system open to the performers' contributions is valid, which I not only agree with but assume. Neither do I intend at this time to describe (or attack) the kind of art work which was sometimes done on the basis of this attitude, which gave materials to a performer, which he would then interpret according to his own system. This work depended for its interest on the performer becoming a composer and developing his own system of interpretation. It is therefore another story, really, and a very interesting one. Perhaps it is a point of further development. I suspect it is not, that it is a reason why La Monte Young turned to what I have called "Balkan Jazz" after doing such developments of Cageian indeterminacy as simply presenting would-be performers with the proposition, "Little whirlpools in the middle of the ocean," and letting

them take it from there. To depend on someone else's ingenuity, as this piece does, leaves any artist little scope to be relevant in. Since Young has more imagination than this scope allowed, it is inevitable that he should have turned to something else.

Another way to approach the idea of an art work as the projection of a system is to forego the idea of giving materials to the performer (or to the spectator). Jackson Mac Low, myself, and Philip Corner (all independently) began to do this kind of piece about 1960. This is the origin of the idea of composing (or writing, or-unfinished business-working in the visual arts) by emphasizing intentions and systems rather than the particularizations that most materials produce.

Now, obviously, it is impossible to see anything except in us physical manifestations. On the other hand, what one sees is irrelevant unless one is able to see it in the context of one's experience or to interpret it in some way. So what does this new emphasis have to offer?

The question disappears the moment the illusory contradiction is resolved: by giving blank forms, the most relevant materials for a given time and mentality can be filled in, thus avoiding the appalling irrelevance of perishable materials that are no longer current (e.g., O'Neil's emphasis on the need for a more honest sexuality, Sartre's interpretation of the alienation problem, Ionesco's interpretation of the same problem).

What the idea of working with blank forms really offers is the opportunity of working with unperishable materials and (implicity) a field of renewable ones.

Something Else Newsletter, Volume 1, Number 3: April 1966

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The composer, writer, artist defines the scope of the work. What falls within it is the piece.

This brings us to the point of this kind of emphasis on the artist's intention: he is no longer completely ruled by the specifics of his particular corner of history. The entire material of a piece can be worked completely in terms of local problems of the moment. A production which realizes a particular piece during the New York subway strike can be followed, shortly afterwards, by a production that replaces to general labor problems in Sweden or to the interrelations between the two Germanies, the two Viet Nams, the two Chinas or Koreas. And it remains the same piece. The field is open to realization in terms of

the most perishable materials, the political, social, or economic tendencies that are most current at the moment of production. This releases the artist from the kind of datedness that makes it almost impossible to appreciate an older political play, such as *Waiting for Lefty* without a very conscious (and annoying) effort to compensate.

Again, it eliminates the problems that result from the limitations of one's own artistic experience. For example, writing a piece by intention allows a composer to use the complete skills of a particular instrumentalist without his having known what specialties this performer has. Some trombonists, for example, are able to produce the effect of certain slides which any "well-trained" composer knows are impossible, and therefore doesn't call for. Only in this way can certain technical potentials be allowed to exist.

Finally, and probably most important, in composing music and choreography by intention, the composer is able to concentrate the broad outlines and forms of his piece into an integrated whole. Frequently (I have Stockhausen and Balanchine in mind) a composition will make perfectly good sense in its details, but the whole won't have any clarity or sense what ever. By specifying clearly procedures and processes which have sense imbedded into them, this problem can be avoided. By this, of course, I do not mean simply to say, "Be sensible," since that doesn't really mean anything specific. I mean that the composer, choreographer, playwright, Happenings-man, what have you, merely says, specifically, what he has

in mind, not in its material, but in the basis for the material. This has very great appeal for artists, and is,

in a way, a greater departure from the boringness of a "classical art" that has become irrelevant in the sense of becoming discontinuous from our daily lives, than simply finding ingeniously new sorts of cut-and-dried materials which do not, in themselves, imply new processes.

Just a moment ago we mentioned the key word in evaluating any work in this general field of possibilities:

"specific." The specificity of the artist's intentions has to be passed along if the work is to suggest anything to think about, which is normally a requisite for comprehensibility and impact, whether visual or sensuous or emotional. If the artist is sufficiently specific about what he intends, work which is written by describing intentions is capable of implying a very high moral stature in the

community which it creates among performers and audience, and the emotional impact can be very great indeed. For example, in Philip Corner's musical composition, published in *The Four Suits*, "4th Finale," one would have to be very insensitive indeed not to appreciate the emotional community which this game of art creates. The success of the piece is clearly to be attributed to its specificity. Everyone knows just what he is to do, and in the course of performing he experiences why as well. Specificity can therefore be used as a factor to look for in evaluating the new music, Happenings, and other works which present formal innovations of this kind. Once noted, the piece, if it has anything in it, will open up. If not, better luck next time. But what kind of value is specificity? For one thing, it's a relative one.

There are certainly degrees of specificity, and being as specific as possible is not necessarily a guarantee of the quality of a piece. One would have to be demented to attach much artistic value to the suggestion, "Bark loud like a dog," Yet it could be a very interesting situation if one hundred people would all do just that together. In other words, the first instance, presented in isolation, is specific enough, but by simply being presented as an imperative, one is more conscious of the sort of person who might ask that this be done. A hundred people doing the same thing together could create a mood of absolute terror. The second possibility, with the hundred people, might therefore be said to have greater specificity in that it leaves less open: who is to do the barking is specified, and the image becomes clarified. In so doing, it becomes more possible to comprehend the artist's intentions meaningfully. In the first case, one is told what to do and one asks, Why? In the second, one gets the picture and joins the fun. Obviously this is a very simple instance, but the point holds true even in the more complex pieces of Corner and Mac Low. The specificity which is of value, then, is whatever most efficiently defines the artist's intentions in as many ways as possible.

Last of three articles

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Robert Filliou arrives in New York shortly. He can be reached through teh Press. Wolf Vostell is living at the Chelsea Hotel and doing giant scores for his book in the cellar of the building in which the Gallery is located. Camille Gordon was killed on Route 1 when her car smashed into a chicken truck. When the feathers settle we will do her novel, The Golden Armadillo. Any recent arrivals from Czechoslovakia: we would be very interested in knowing what happened at the Prague Festival of Happenings that Chalupecky and Knizak organized in March. We have a new distributor for Germany and Holland. It's Typos Verlag, 6000 Frankfurt am Main, Grünebergweg 118, West Germany. Now our books will be easier to obtain in those countries. We're also going to distribute Typos publications here, but we'll announce that in more detail on the next newscard. Europeans please note: Typos' accounts are: Postcheck Frankfurt am Main 17523, and Frankfurter Sparkasse von 1822 Konto-Nr. 50-251 542.

John Cage is already at work on Notations, a profusely illustrated 400-odd-page monster, with reproductions of manuscripts and notations by most of the important composers of music and performance pieces of the last three decades, which will create a context for the new experimental forms of notation. We should have the book ready early in the Fall. Also in the Fall: Alison Knowles' Big Book, a book so large that it contains collapsible rooms in which, if only there were plumbing and cooking facilities, one could live for quite a while.

The liveliest of the book newspapers around is Jerome Agel's Books. Ask around for it. Much more open and forward-looking than others of its sort, its 15-column article last September was the first major feature on Marshall McLuhan in the U.S. That's long before Fortune, Life, SatEvePost, Time and the other booky-papers hpped on the M-M

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bandwagon.

Do you have all our **Great Bear** pamphlets yet? There's Claes Oldenburg's *Injun & Other Histories*, \$1; Alison Knowles' *By Alison Knowles*, 40c; Dick Higgins' *A book About Love & War & Death, Canto One*, 60c; George Brecht's *Chance-Imagery*, 80c; and, about April 11th, Allan Kaprow's *Some Recent Happenings* (which includes the most recent definition of the word by this inventor of the concept), 60c. These are the least expensive major documents in the new art forms; without them it costs a fortune to be informed. New York residents please remember sales tax, and postage for each pamphlet is 10c. Something Else Press Inc., 160 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

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the something else NEWSLETTER

Volume 1, Number 3

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So many of the artists became unhappy about this eternal, unyielding quality in their art, and they began to wish their work were more like shoes, more temporary, more human, more able to admit of the possibility of change. The fixed-finished work began to be supplemented by the idea of a work as a process, constantly becoming something else, tentative, allowing more than one interpretation. We see it in literature in the controlled ambiguities of Joyce, William Carlos Williams, Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, Kurt Schwitters. In music we see the tendency from Wagner, of whom a very small variety of definitive performances is possible, through Ives, of whom a rather enormous possibility of definitive performances can coexist, through Cage, where the emphasis is on variety and the expanded experience rather than on any sort of definitiveness, to Philip Corner (and, perhaps, beyond?), in whose work the only definitive quality of the perform-

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*This piece is reported to be in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. In 1950, Cage gave some early works to the artist Robert Rauschenberg, who had in 1947, during the 1940s, been the editor of the *NYC*. The album was 105 in size or more, and consists of three CD's with a three letter code which indicates various editions, written by Cage, and photographs done by Robert Rauschenberg.

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John Cage is already at work on *Notations*, a profusely illustrated 400-odd-page monster, with reproductions of manuscripts and notations by most of the important composers of music and performance pieces of the last three decades, which will create a context for the new experimental forms of notation. We should have the book ready early in the Fall. Also in the Fall: Alison Knowles' *Big Book*, a book so large that it contains collapsible rooms in which, if only there were plumbing and cooking facilities, one could live for quite a while.

The liveliest of the book newspapers around is Jerome Agel's *Books*. Ask around for it. Much more open and forward-looking than others of its sort, its 15-column article last September was the first major feature on Marshall McLuhan in the U. S. That's long before *Fortune*, *Life*, the *SatEvePost*, *Time* and the other booky-papers hopped on the M-M bandwagon.

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