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Carl Fernbach-Flarsheim
Robert Filliou
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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
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Dick Higgins, "Intending"/Great Bear Pamphlets

TRANSSKRIPTION

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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[s. 2]

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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, lonesco's interpretation
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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
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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
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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,
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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 he 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 he 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
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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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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

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Marshall McLuhan in the U.S. That's long before Fortune, Life, SatEvePost, Time and the other booky-papers hpped on the M-M 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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NEWSLETTER

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* This piece is recorded in *The 25-Year Retrospective Concert of the Music of John Cage*, recorded in New York in May 1958. Please make check payable to George Avakian, and mail it to him at 281 Central Park West #15, New York 10024. The album costs $25 in mono or stereo, and consists of three LP's with a 24-page booklet which includes various manifestos, writings by Cage, and photographs, notes 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.

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