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# John Cage and the Architecture of Silence\*

BRANDEN W. JOSEPH

In 1961, Gyorgy Kepes invited John Cage to contribute an article to the book *Module, Proportion, Symmetry, Rhythm*, part of the series he was editing under the collective title *Vision and Value*. When the anthology appeared, Kepes pitched Cage's article "Rhythm Etc." as "a personal statement on the creative power and use of the module, rhythm, and proportion,"<sup>1</sup> although Kepes knew full well that Cage—sounding the only discordant voice in the collection—had expressly opposed the aesthetic value of any of the aforementioned principles.

When preparing "Rhythm Etc.," Cage correctly surmised that what united the themes of Kepes's book was an interest in Le Corbusier's proportional measuring device, the Modulor, and it was against this that Cage directed his critique. Cage was, not surprisingly, annoyed at what he called the "farfetched analogy to music of previous times" that ran through Le Corbusier's book on the Modulor.<sup>2</sup> More significantly, however, as an instrument of visual and architectonic harmony, the Modulor was diametrically opposed to Cage's own artistic project, a project premised on the rejection of harmony as a legitimate basis for musical composition. Cage saw harmony as an outdated and abstract ordering principle which served to regulate the otherwise continuous field of sound,<sup>3</sup> and he sought in his

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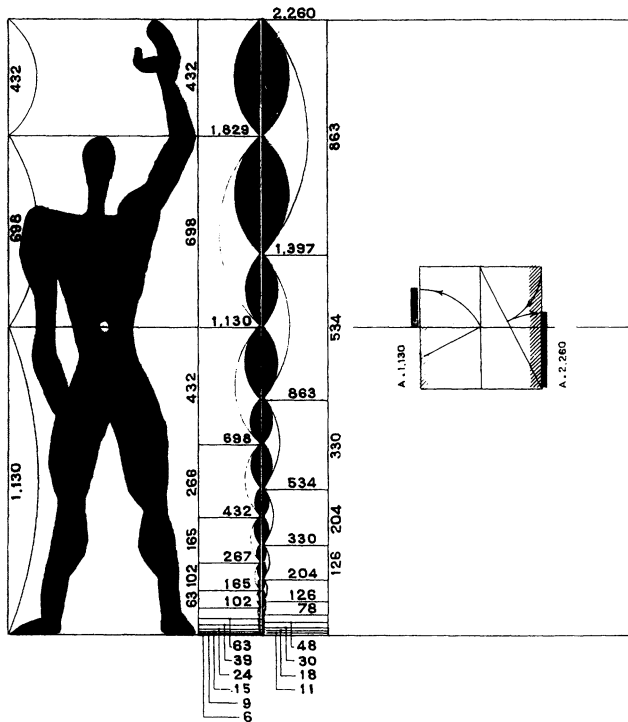
1. *Module, Proportion, Symmetry, Rhythm*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), book jacket. Cage tells the story of being commissioned by Kepes in the introduction to "Rhythm Etc." in John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967) (hereafter cited as *YM*), p. 120.

2. "Rhythm Etc." *YM*, p. 124.

3. "Harmony, so-called, is a forced abstract vertical relation which blots out the spontaneous transmitting nature of each of the sounds forced into it. It is artificial and unrealistic" ("45' for a Speaker," in John Cage, *Silence* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961] [hereafter cited as *S*], p. 152).



*Paul Williams. Gatehill Cooperative Community,  
upper square. Western facade of Williams-Cage  
House at lower left. Circa 1956.  
(Photo: Walter Rosenblum.)*



*Le Corbusier. The Modulor. Circa 1946.*

own work to substitute for harmony different structures, such as the “rhythmic structures” he created based solely on lengths of time.<sup>4</sup>

If Cage hoped definitively to end the reign of musical harmony, Le Corbusier proposed to extend it, by using the Modulor as a means of propagating harmonic proportion throughout the realms of the visual and architectonic. As Le Corbusier envisioned it, the Modulor would play a role at every building site as a proportional scale that would “serve as a rule for the whole project, a norm offering an endless series of different combinations and proportions,” which, “different and varied as they are, will be united in harmony.”<sup>5</sup>

Cage responded to Le Corbusier’s project with unequivocal condemnation and exposed what he saw as the authoritarian implications of the Modulor. As Cage stated, “once the measurements are made (not in rubber but in some inflexible material), the proper relationships determined . . . , a police force is in order.”<sup>6</sup> As proof, Cage cited a passage from Le Corbusier’s own text: “Concord between men and machines, sensitivity and mathematics, a harvest of prodigious harmonies reaped from numbers: the grid of proportions. The art . . . will be

4. Cage has discussed his interest in “rhythmic structures” throughout his own writings; see especially “Defense of Satie,” in *John Cage: An Anthology*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Da Capo, 1970) (hereafter cited as *JC*), pp. 77–84, and “Lecture on Nothing,” *S*, pp. 109–26. For a discussion of the subject, see James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), as well as Paul Griffiths, *Cage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), chap. 2, “Rhythmic Systems,” pp. 7–20.

5. Le Corbusier, *Modulor I and II*, trans. Peter de Francia and Anna Bostok (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948/1955), p. 37.

6. “Rhythm Etc.” *YM*, pp. 125–26.

acquired by the effort of men of good will, but it will be contested and attacked. . . . *It must be proclaimed by law.*"<sup>7</sup>

To this decree, Cage replied succinctly, "Art this is called. Its shape is that of tyranny."<sup>8</sup> However, against the impending threat of Le Corbusier's "reign of harmony,"<sup>9</sup> Cage did not immediately counterpoise the example of his own music, instead making reference to the alternative of a vitreous architecture. "Unless we find some way to get out we're lost," he warned, and then, "the more glass I say, the better."<sup>10</sup>

Although never mentioned by name, an important intermediary who facilitated the debate between Cage and Le Corbusier was the architect Paul Williams. Williams studied for some years at the Harvard School of Architecture and MIT, but was, more importantly, a student and resident architect at Black Mountain College where, in 1949, he and John Cage met.<sup>11</sup> It was from Williams that Cage borrowed the copy of *Modulor* that he studied to prepare "Rhythm Etc."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it was one of Williams's buildings that Cage had in mind when alluding to an anti-authoritarian architecture of glass. This building, in fact, was none other than John Cage's home.

Since the summer of 1954, Cage had lived at the Gatehill Cooperative Community in Stony Point, New York, an experiment in communal living organized to function, in part, as a successor to that aspect of Black Mountain College.<sup>13</sup> Located in Gatehill's upper square, Cage's apartment occupied the western quarter of a duplex that he shared with Paul Williams and the rest of the architect's family. Like the other buildings surrounding the upper square, the Williams-Cage House evinces a high modernist formal sensibility closely akin to that of Marcel Breuer's contemporary domestic architecture. Supported by a weighty central core and barely perceptible wooden columns, the rectangular mass of the house rests, on one side, against the upper slope of a densely forested hillside, while the opposite end of the structure stretches out at some distance above the ground. The main structure's sense of lightness, which is accentuated by its exceedingly thin lines and windows that run from floor to ceiling, makes the building appear almost to perch atop the site. Contrasting with the building's sylvan environment, the frame

7. Le Corbusier, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 126. Ellipses and italics are Cage's.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*, p. 54.

10. "Rhythm Etc." *YM*, p. 126.

11. Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), p. 177. Information on the life of Paul Williams has been confirmed through conversations with Vera B. Williams during the preparation of this article.

12. Cage states in the introduction to "Rhythm Etc.": "Living next door to an amateur architect who was deeply impressed by Le Corbusier, it dawned on me that the words might have come from Le Corbusier's book, *The Modulor*. I ran next door, picked up the book, opened it" (*YM*, p. 120). That Cage was undoubtedly referring to Paul Williams was confirmed by Vera Williams in conversation, March 27, 1996.

13. Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College*, p. 156; and Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Penguin, 1968), pp. 121–22.

*Paul Williams. Williams-Cage House.  
South facade. Circa 1956.  
(Photo: Walter Rosenblum.)*



is clad in panels of prefabricated, industrial materials, ranging in texture from corrugated aluminum to fiberglass and asbestos.

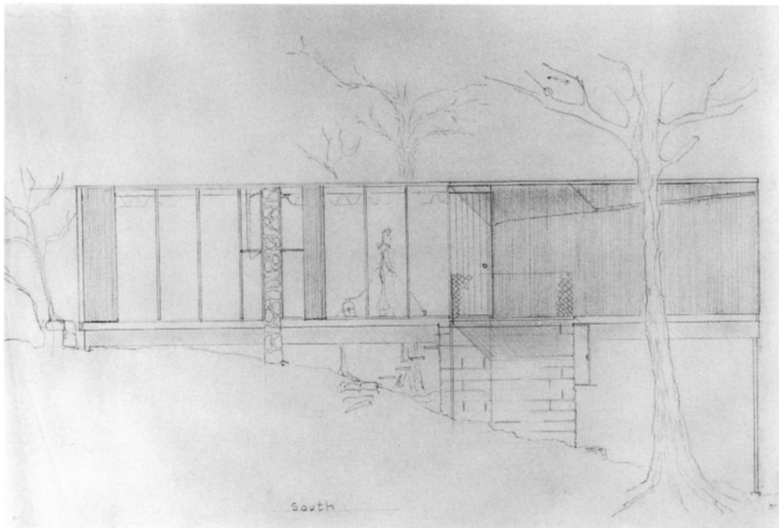
Separated from the remainder of the building by a free stone wall that John Cage and Vera Williams built by hand, Cage's living quarters, with the exception of a small bath and kitchenette, consisted originally of a single room, the western and southern walls of which were made up almost entirely of vertically sectioned glass windows. While the southern view looks out onto the other buildings at Gatehill, the western wall faces directly onto the steeply climbing hillside. This wall is the most striking aspect of the building, for Williams designed it to slide open, coming to rest in a large wooden frame that stands next to the building as an extension of the facade. It was to this feature that Cage referred when he wrote in "Rhythm Etc.": "Not only the windows, this year, even though they're small, will open: one whole wall slides away when I have the strength or assistance to push it. And what do I enter?" Cage asked, once more taking a swipe at Le Corbusier, "Not proportion. The clutter of the unkempt forest."<sup>14</sup>

While such a specific reference to the Williams-Cage House is unique to Cage's polemic against Le Corbusier, it nonetheless forms part of a larger discursive figuration of glass and glass architecture that surfaces repeatedly throughout Cage's statements and writings. Far from being simply a convenient metaphor, what I would like to argue is that this architectural trope is of particular importance for understanding the specificity of the neo-avant-garde artistic project that Cage pursued throughout the 1950s.

The earliest reference to glass architecture that can be found in Cage's

14. "Rhythm Etc." *YM*, p. 126.

*Paul Williams. Drawing for Williams-Cage House. Circa 1954.  
Courtesy of the Williams family.*



writings occurs in the “Juilliard Lecture” of 1952. There, Cage stated with regard to contemporary music, “It acts in such a way that one can ‘hear through’ a piece of music just as one can see through some modern buildings or see through a wire sculpture by Richard Lippold or the glass of Marcel Duchamp.”<sup>15</sup> It is not insignificant that this first reference appeared in 1952, for that year marks the composition of Cage’s most famous work, *4’33”*: the manifesto presentation of his definition of silence as the presence of ambient and unintentional noise rather than the complete absence of sound. Indeed, the passage quoted from the “Juilliard Lecture” might well refer to *4’33”*, for, as originally composed, the work consisted solely of an empty time-structure of three silent movements through which any sounds emanating from the environment could flow.

Over the years, Cage would more explicitly relate his understanding of silence to the material properties of glass. In a lecture entitled “Experimental Music,” given in Chicago in 1957, Cage stated:

For in this new music nothing takes place but sounds: those that are notated and those that are not. Those that are not notated appear in the written music as silences, opening the doors of the music to the sounds that happen to be in the environment. This openness exists in the fields of modern sculpture and architecture. The glass houses of Mies van der Rohe reflect their environment, presenting to the eye images of clouds, trees, or grass, according to the situation. And while looking at the constructions in wire of the sculptor Richard Lippold, it

15. “Juilliard Lecture,” in *ibid.*, p. 102.

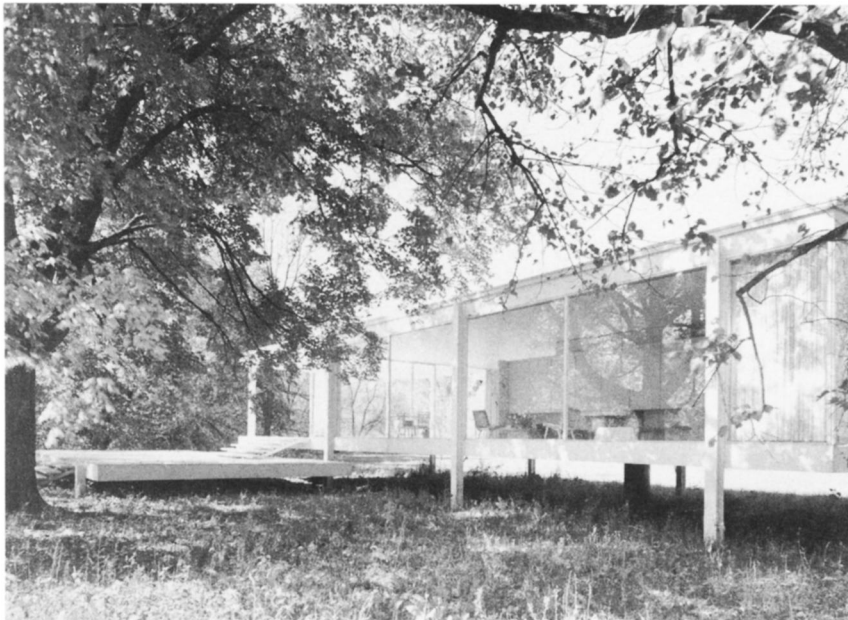


*Page from Moholy-Nagy's The New Vision showing Lux Feininger's photograph of Walter Gropius's Dessau Bauhaus. 1947.*

Abb. 103 walter gropius 1926  
das bauhaus in Dessau

foto: lux feininger

innen und außen durchdringen einander in der spiegelung der fenster. das weinensichhalten der beiden ist nicht mehr möglich die stange der wand, wenn alles „außen“ früher zerbrach, hat sich aufgelöst und löst die umgebung in das gebäude stellen.



*Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Farnsworth House. 1945–51.*



is inevitable that one will see other things, and people too, if they happen to be there at the same time, through the network of wires. There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make silence, we cannot.<sup>16</sup>

In the way that it subtly interrelates the conceptions of vision and hearing; space and time; music, sculpture, and architecture, this passage proves much richer and more complex than that in the “Juilliard Lecture.” Moreover, in this passage Cage makes a distinction between two modes of openness operating among the constellation of individuals grouped around the notion of transparency. Whereas one looks, as before, through the wire mesh of Lippold’s sculptures, in Mies van der Rohe’s architecture the observation of the environment is to be understood as a result of the reflections cast across the glass surfaces of the building. In this reformulation of transparency in terms of reflection, Cage returned to what was undoubtedly one of the primary sources of his interpretation—the discussion of architectural space presented by László Moholy-Nagy in the book *The New Vision*, the importance of which Cage stressed on more than one occasion.<sup>17</sup>

As defined in *The New Vision*, truly spatial relations—as opposed to volumetric ones—were only achieved by modern architecture through the mutual interpenetration of the interior and exterior of the building.<sup>18</sup> While Moholy-Nagy did reference the physical openness and flow of space in certain modernist buildings, he repeatedly presented his concept of architectural space as a consequence of the play of external reflections. This idea he articulated most clearly in the caption placed below Lux Feininger’s photograph of the glass curtain wall of Gropius’s Dessau Bauhaus. “Fenestrations,” Moholy wrote, “produced the inward and outward reflections of the windows. It is no longer possible to keep apart the inside and outside. The mass of the wall, at which all the ‘outside’ previously stopped, is now dissolved and lets the surroundings flow into the building.”<sup>19</sup> In

16. “Experimental Music,” S, pp. 7–8.

17. Cage stated that Moholy-Nagy’s book was extremely influential to his thinking from the 1930s on and that reading it was what attracted him to teach at Moholy-Nagy’s Chicago Institute of Design in 1941. See *John Cage Talking to Hans G. Helms on Music and Politics* (Munich: S-Press Tapes, 1975). Cage also mentions *The New Vision* in *Musicage: Cage Muses on Words, Art, Music*, ed. Joan Retallack (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1996), p. 87. It is of interest to note that Cage had spent the summer of 1938 teaching at Mills College in the company of both Kepes and Moholy-Nagy (Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors*, p. 89).

18. In order to include the work of his friend, the sculptor Richard Lippold, Cage had to fudge Moholy-Nagy’s definition of space somewhat, for Moholy-Nagy strictly differentiated architectural and sculptural space. In his evaluation of Lippold’s constructivist sculptures, Cage would seem to have been following Moholy-Nagy’s consideration of the Eiffel Tower, which remained sculpture, although it occupied the “border line between architecture and sculpture” (Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision* [New York: George Wittenborn, 1947], p. 61).

19. *Ibid.*, p. 62. It should be noted that Moholy-Nagy directly mentions Mies van der Rohe, among others, in the sentence in which this figure is referenced.

Cage's writing, this formulation of the reflection on the outside of the building forms a complimentary pair with the effect of transparency from the inside as a means of visually opening up the building's structure to the environment. It was the relation of the inside to the outside (and not the reverse) that Cage took as the operative part of Moholy-Nagy's definition of architectural space.

Cage's reading would have been supported by Moholy-Nagy's text, which described the end limit of spatial relations as the complete dissolution of architecture into its environment. At the end of *The New Vision* Moholy-Nagy speculated that

A white house with great glass windows surrounded by trees becomes almost transparent when the sun shines. The white walls act as projection screens on which shadows multiply the trees, and the glass plates become mirrors in which the trees are repeated. A perfect transparency is the result; the house becomes part of nature.<sup>20</sup>

In "Rhythm Etc.," Cage would echo Moholy-Nagy's understanding of a glass building's ability to dematerialize. In apparent reference to Mies's Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, Cage stated, "If, as is the case when I look at that building near Chicago, I have the impression it's not there even though I see it taking up space, then module or no module, it's O.K."<sup>21</sup>

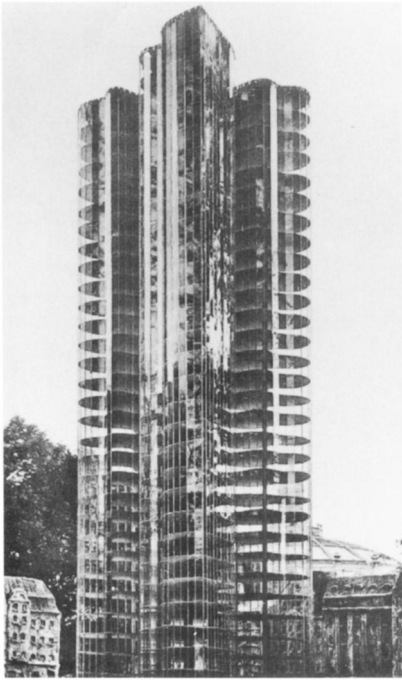
Cage's interpretation of Miesian architecture contrasts sharply with a reading such as that of K. Michael Hays, who has theorized Mies's work in relation to the aesthetic strategies of the historical avant-garde. According to Hays, beginning with the skyscraper projects of the 1920s, Mies eschewed any prioritization of an internal formal logic from which the building's meaning could be derived and figured its signification instead through a mimetic immersion into the urban context. Reflecting the chaos of metropolitan existence across their surfaces, the vitreous facades of Mies's buildings overtly register the disorder and anxieties of modern urban society. In comparing Mies's skyscraper projects to Kurt Schwitters's *Merz-Column*, Hays argues, "Both share an antagonism toward a priori and reasoned order. Both plunge into the chaos of the metropolis to seek another order within it through a systematic use of the unexpected, the aleatory, the inexplicable."<sup>22</sup> Yet, in order for one of Mies's buildings to function as a cognitive mechanism or what Hays, following Adorno, calls an "exact fantasy" of reality<sup>23</sup>—that is, in order for it to assume a critical, rather than merely superstructural function in relation to society—the Dadaist montage of fragmentary appearances that materialize across its glass surfaces must be understood as part of a dialectical

20. Ibid., pp. 63–64.

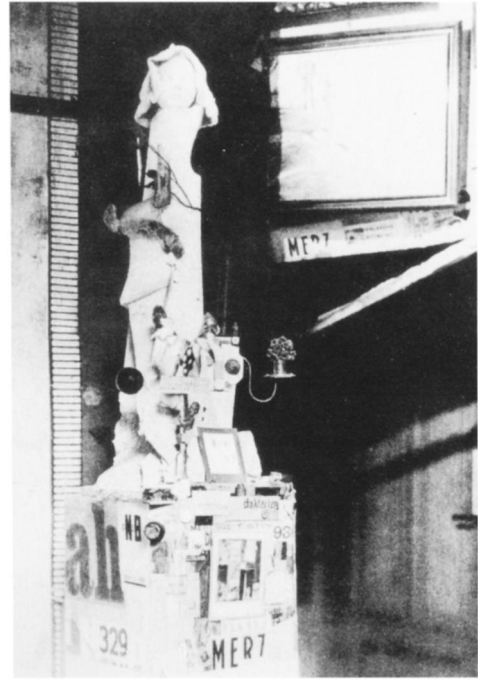
21. "Rhythm Etc." *YM*, p. 128.

22. K. Michael Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), p. 192. Hays has developed this reading of Mies through "Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form," *Perspecta* 21 (1984), pp. 14–29; *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject*; and "Odysseus and the Oarsmen, or, Mies's Abstraction Once Again," in *The Presence of Mies*, ed. Detlef Mertins (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994), pp. 235–48.

23. Hays, *Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject*, p. 192.



Mies van der Rohe. Skyscraper project. 1922.



Kurt Schwitters. Merz Column. Circa 1923.

relationship formed with the relative autonomy of the building from its cultural as well as physical environment. A necessary condition of the building's oppositional stance, it is this ability to tear a disjunctive cleft out of the continuous surface of reality that Hays, following Tafuri, has termed the "implacable silence" of Miesian architecture.<sup>24</sup>

Cage's understanding of Mies differs from that of Hays most starkly in that it rejects the notions of relative autonomy and critical distance that Hays posits as indispensable. For Cage, any silence in Miesian architecture would not negate the environment but would open the building up to an interpenetration with its surroundings along the lines of Cage's own definition of silence. Indeed, Cage figures the transparency of Mies's glass buildings as a metaphor for his own goal of eradicating harmonic music's alienation from the plane of everyday existence. Following the allusion made to the transparency of the Farnsworth House in "Rhythm Etc.," Cage added, "It must be that eventually we will have a music the relationship of which to what takes place before and after ('no' music) is exact, so

24. "Mies's achievement was to open up a clearing of implacable silence in the chaos of the nervous metropolis; this clearing is a radical critique, not only of the established spatial order of the city and the established logic of classical composition, but also of the inhabiting *nervenleben*. It is the extreme depth of silence in this clearing—silence as an architectural form all its own—that is the architectural meaning of this project" ("Critical Architecture," p. 22). Hays states that "the Barcelona Pavilion tears a cleft in the continuous surface of reality," in "Critical Architecture," p. 25. On Mies's silence, see also Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), p. 148; and the passages on Mies van der Rohe in Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (New York: Abrams, 1979), pp. 151–57; 335–42.

that one will have the experience that no experience was had, a dematerialization (not of facts) of intentions.”<sup>25</sup>

By abrogating any notion of critical distance, Cage opened himself up to a series of attacks by Theodor Adorno. In articles written at the beginning of the 1960s, Adorno criticized Cage’s interest in allowing sounds to be just sounds<sup>26</sup> and reiterated what he saw as the compositional necessity to subjectively form musical materials into functioning relations.<sup>27</sup> In the article “Vers une musique informelle” of 1961, Adorno wrote:

But the hypothesis that the note “exists” rather than “functions” is either ideological or else a misplaced positivism. Cage, for example, perhaps because of his involvement with Zen Buddhism, appears to ascribe metaphysical powers to the note once it has been liberated from all supposed superstructural baggage.<sup>28</sup>

In imputing to Cage an attitude that fluctuated between pure immediacy and the ascription of metaphysical powers, Adorno located him at exactly the same “crossroads of magic and positivism” that he criticized Walter Benjamin for occupying nearly a quarter of a century earlier.<sup>29</sup> And Adorno’s advice to Cage was much the same as that once offered to Benjamin: in a word, “more dialectics.”<sup>30</sup>

For Adorno, the failure to form one’s material dialectically—whether as critic or composer—was symptomatic of no less than a capitulation to the ego-annihilating forces of instrumental reason and culture industry.<sup>31</sup> “Composers tend to react to [the anthropology of the present age],” Adorno stated, “by renouncing any control of their music by their ego. They prefer to drift and to refrain from intervening, in the hope that, as in Cage’s *bon mot*, it will be not Webern speaking, but the music itself. Their aim is to transform psychological ego

25. “Rhythm Etc.” *YM*, p. 128.

26. This is a general idea in Cage’s thought; see, for example, “History of Experimental Music in the United States,” *S*, p. 70.

27. Theodor W. Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle” (1961), in *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 301–2, 307. See also Theodor W. Adorno, “Avant-Garde” in *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (1962), trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1976), pp. 180–81. On the necessity of critical distance, see Theodor W. Adorno, “Music and New Music” (1960), in *Quasi una fantasia*, pp. 256–57, 265. Cf. also Peter Bürger: “For the (relative) freedom of art vis-à-vis the praxis of life is . . . the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it along with its distance” (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], p. 50).

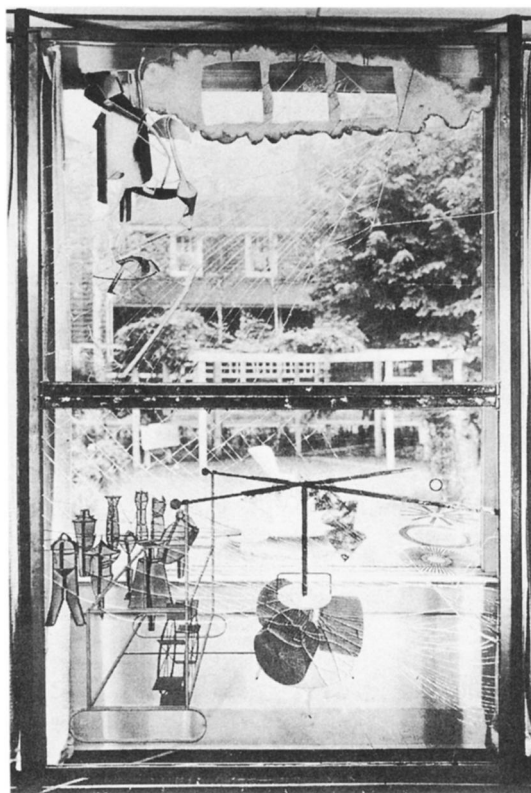
28. Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” p. 287.

29. Adorno to Benjamin, November 10, 1938, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977), p. 129. Robert Hullot-Kentor has commented on the connection between Adorno’s late writings on music and his debate with Benjamin in the 1930s in “Popular Music and Adorno’s ‘The Aging of the New Music,’” *Telos* 77 (Fall 1988), pp. 90–94.

30. Adorno to Benjamin, March 18, 1936, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 124.

31. On the relation of Adorno’s critique of Benjamin to his subsequent critique of the place of subjectivity under culture industry, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 171.

Marcel Duchamp. *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*. 1915–23.



weakness into aesthetic strength.”<sup>32</sup> As Adorno viewed it, a Cagean aesthetic ultimately amounted to little more than an ineffectual revival of Dadaism.<sup>33</sup> “[I]n contrast to its Dadaist grandparents,” Adorno cautioned, “it degenerates at once into culture, and it cannot remain unaffected by this.”<sup>34</sup>

In this last assessment, Adorno’s judgment of Cage is typical of those who would view the composer as a victim of the historical neutralization of avant-garde aesthetics. Typical, but unjust, for Cage clearly understood the failure and co-optation that was the general fate of the earlier avant-garde movements. As he explained in his preface to *Indeterminacy* of 1959, “There is a connection possible between the two, but neither Dada nor Zen are fixed tangibles. They change; and in quite different ways in different places and times, they invigorate actions. What was Dada in the twenties is now, with the exception of the work of Marcel Duchamp, just art.”<sup>35</sup> To this brief but insightful synopsis of the theory of the avant-garde, Cage added, still referring, in part, to the important exception of

32. Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” p. 283.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 314–16. In this, Adorno’s critique approaches that of Peter Bürger in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

34. Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” p. 316.

35. “Preface to *Indeterminacy*,” in *John Cage: Writer*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight Editions, 1993) (hereafter cited as *W*), p. 79. Cage will repeat, with only slight alterations, this and the following statement in the preface to *Silence* of 1961, *S*, p. xi.

Duchamp, "I often point out that Dada nowadays has a space, an emptiness, in it that Dada formerly lacked."<sup>36</sup> In another article published the same year, Cage made it clear that this notion of space was the same as that he attributed to modern architecture.<sup>37</sup> This fact is significant, for it indicates that behind Cage's aim of collapsing art into life was not a renewed faith in the transgressive facticity of the unassisted readymade but instead an investigation into the modalities of transparency that brought Duchamp closer to Mies van der Rohe. In other words, the Dadaist forebear of the Cagean project was not the *Bottle Rack* but *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*.

Because of its transparency, Duchamp's *Large Glass* served for Cage as the model of an art work with no determinate focal point or center of interest. "Looking at the *Large Glass*," Cage explained,

the thing that I like so much is that I can focus my attention wherever I wish. It helps me to blur the distinction between art and life and produces a kind of silence in the work itself. There is nothing in it that requires me to look in one place or another or, in fact, requires me to look at all. I can look through it to the world beyond.<sup>38</sup>

Beginning with the concept of silence exemplified by *4'33"*, Cage would seek ways of attaining a similar modality of unfocused perception in music. One manner in which Cage approached this goal may be seen in another composition of 1952, *Music for Carillon I*—also known as *Graph*.<sup>39</sup> The score for the piece consists of twenty-four, 3-by-10-inch sections of quadrille graph paper onto which Cage added an array of points, the locations of which were determined by chance operations. Read from left to right, each of the inch-wide horizontal segments is equivalent to one second of performance time, while the vertical axis corresponds in a relatively indeterminate manner to the disposition of high, middle, and low tones.

As opposed to a traditional harmonic structure, the graph which serves as the "structure" of *Music for Carillon I* does not divide or regulate the continuum of pitch-time in any way, but instead leaves its expanse completely intact.<sup>40</sup> There is, for example, no necessity of lining up the points of the score with the abscissas

36. "Preface to *Indeterminacy*," *W*, p. 79.

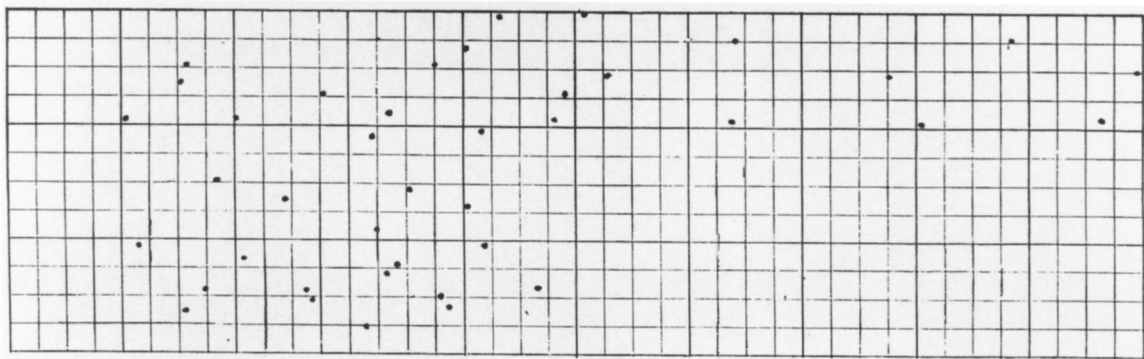
37. "Implicit here, it seems to me, are principles familiar from modern painting and architecture: collage and space. What makes this action like Dada are the underlying philosophical views and the collagelike actions. But what makes this action unlike Dada is the space in it" ("History of Experimental Music," *S*, pp. 69–70).

38. Quoted in Moira and William Roth, "John Cage on Marcel Duchamp," *Art in America* 61 (November–December, 1973), p. 78.

39. In the following discussion of Cage's scores, I have relied on the information and analysis provided in Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage*, especially pp. 92–95 and 134–37. It is interesting to note that although *Music for Carillon I* was written in October 1952, it was revised for publication and copyrighted in March 1961, the year Cage began writing "Rhythm Etc."

40. As Cage stated in "History of Experimental Music," "All this can be summed up by saying each aspect of sound (frequency, amplitude, timbre, duration) is to be seen as a continuum, not as a series of discrete steps favored by conventions (Occidental or Oriental)," (*S*, pp. 70–71).

*John Cage. Excerpt from Music for Carillon I (Graph)  
No. 1. 1952. © 1961. Used by permission of C. F. Peters  
Corporation on behalf of Henmar Press Inc.*



and ordinates of the grid in order for them to be readable. Rather, while it is only through the presence of the graph that these random markings can be translated into music, the structure of *Music for Carillon I* remains as though on a different level from the graphic representation of the sound plane. Although in actuality the points are laid onto the quadrille paper, one might see the graph—from the other side, as it were—as a window through which the separate space of the sonic continuum can be viewed.<sup>41</sup>

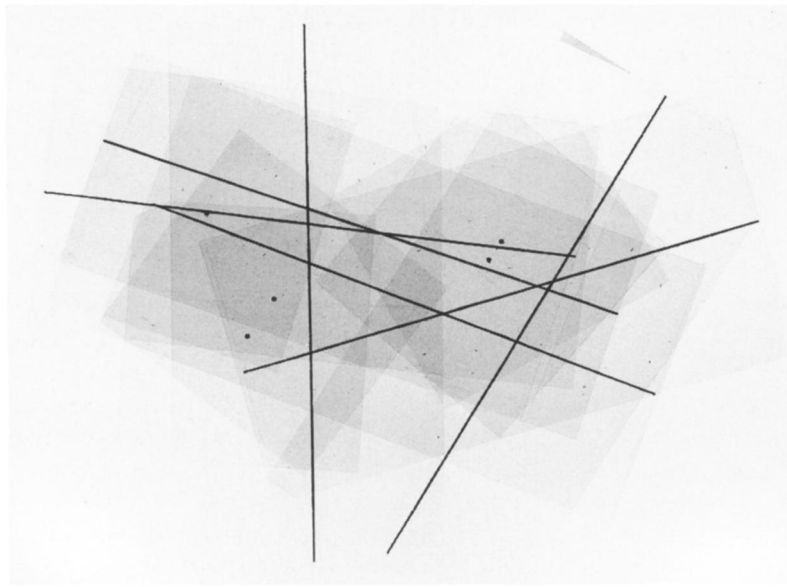
*Music for Carillon I* does not consist merely of musical material left in an untransformed state of residual facticity. By allowing chance to determine the location of the points, Cage deliberately “composed” the work in such a manner as to avoid any result that could be related to harmony or any other form of consciously created musical continuity. The “aggregates” or “constellations” into which Cage’s musical materials fall are thereby characterized by incidental rather than exclusive relationships. Lacking any determinate continuity on which to focus, the listener must then await “no matter what eventuality” and not simply those sounds integrally related to the music as composition.<sup>42</sup> This openness to “no matter what” allows the listener to unfocus her attention and “hear through” the piece, accepting as equally proper any sound and even the environmental or unintentional noises that occur during performance.

More specifically, the structure of *Music for Carillon I* functions to map out the space in which the points are situated, providing thereby the coordinates by which that space may be read and hence performed. That the graph acts as a map of pitch-time coordinates rather than as a traditional musical scale is made clear by the fact that the vertical axis is elastic in the sense that it may be recalibrated

41. Visual tropes, such as Cage’s analogy of structure to an empty glass, can be found in “Lecture on Nothing,” in addition to the statement “But life without structure is unseen. Pure life expresses itself within and through structure” (S, p. 113).

42. This form of listening is discussed throughout Cage’s writings. See, for example, “Composition as Process II. Indeterminacy,” S, pp. 35–40.

John Cage. *One configuration of Variations II*.  
1961. © 1961. Used by permission of C. F. Peters  
Corporation on behalf of Henmar Press Inc.



for instruments of differing octave ranges. Thus, the different sonic identities of the points in any given musical realization will depend upon the proportion of space between them rather than upon their location in relation to the lines of the graph. In the “Juilliard Lecture,” Cage explained this notion of space as constitutive of difference through the example of leaves on a tree. “[A]ny other leaf of the same tree,” he wrote, “if it were the same as another leaf, it would be a coincidence from which each leaf would be free because of its own unique position in space.”<sup>43</sup>

In all of Cage’s later point-drawing scores, different means of mapping space similarly allow for the musical realization of the constitutive difference between points. The unique acoustic result of each piece is determined solely by means of the particular structure through which the randomly located points are viewed. (As Cage wrote in “45’ for a Speaker,” “Spots are spots and skill’s needed to turn them to the point of practicality.”)<sup>44</sup> Through subsequent scores such as *Variations I* and *Variations II*, Cage further developed his ideas of transparent structure and spatial differentiation. In these scores, Cage’s “structures” literally take the form of transparencies, separate from but laid atop different spatial arrays of points. In *Variations II* of 1961, the structure has become six separate transparencies each of which is printed with a single line. Once the lines have been randomly arrayed on

43. “Juilliard Lecture,” *YM*, p. 99. As with many of Cage’s pieces from the early 1950s, the implications present in *Music for Carillon I* go beyond its concrete realization. By designating the instrument, Cage limited (in a manner he would soon realize was unnecessary) the possibilities of the piece to the sounds that could be played on a carillon. Nevertheless, in the above analysis I have purposely emphasized the implications inherent in the score.

44. *S*, p. 161.



top of the points, the acoustic identity of a sound is determined by measuring the distances from a point to each of the six different lines in order to yield values corresponding respectively to the parameters of frequency, amplitude, timbre, duration, time of occurrence, and number of sounds. Here, not only pitch and time, but all aspects of a sound's identity are determined by measurements made with reference to a transparent mapping. As each throw of the transparencies completely alters the configuration of the structure, the fixed intervals of harmonic structure have completely given way in favor of an infinite series of "intermittent aggregates" for which there is no underlying proportional rule.<sup>45</sup>

Although Cage's aesthetic is clearly predicated on more than a misplaced trust in the supposedly transgressive nature of readymade material, nothing so far refutes the most damning aspect of Adorno's judgment: that the failure of Cage's compositions to attain an autonomy, however relative, from social conditions betrays an incapacity to achieve the distance necessary for a critical practice. Likewise, lacking any negativity vis-à-vis the urban context, Cage's understanding of Miesian architecture would appear to strip it of any criticality. It would be mistaken, however, to argue that Cage's interpretation of Mies was motivated by an uncritical acceptance of modern urban existence. (Cage speaks, for example, of his "disgust" at walking through Times Square.)<sup>46</sup> If Cage had no interest in forming aesthetic devices to reveal the structures of an otherwise indecipherable chaos of modernity, it is because, for Cage, the aversion to the city and to the commercial culture engendered there was motivated, not by a surfeit of irrationality, but by a dearth of it. For from his standpoint in midcentury America, what Cage could understand better than his Dadaist predecessors on the Continent was that there was already a strict logic to the form of modern existence: one that had little to do with chaos, but instead had everything to do with repetition.<sup>47</sup> This realization brings him closer to the position that Horkheimer and Adorno had arrived at during their years in California. As they stated in the opening lines of the culture industry chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "The sociological theory that [the developments of modernity] have led to cultural chaos is disproved every day; for culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part."<sup>48</sup>

That repetition encompasses more than the identical return of the self-same was one of the lessons Cage credited Arnold Schoenberg with teaching him. "Everything," Cage recalls Schoenberg saying, "is repetition. A variation, that is, is

45. The classification of aggregates can be found in "45' for a Speaker," in *ibid.*, p. 163.

46. Cage's aversion to Times Square can be inferred from his statement "Nevertheless, I do go to town now and then and I do pass through Times Square, with which for many years I was unable to make my peace. With the help, however, of some American paintings, Bob Rauschenberg's particularly, I can pass through Times Square without disgust" ("Letter to Paul Henry Lang," *JC*, pp. 117–18).

47. For Cage's aversion to the repetition in modern society, see statements made in "Defense of Satie," *JC*, p. 79, and "Composition in Process," *S*, p. 21.

48. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 120.

repetition, some things changed and others not.”<sup>49</sup> In this, Cage could have agreed with Adorno, who noted: “In serial music this dialectic is taken to extremes. Absolutely nothing may be repeated and, as the derivative of One thing, absolutely everything is repetition.”<sup>50</sup> Where Cage could not have agreed was when Adorno concluded that “The task of [contemporary] music would be to rethink this dialectic and incorporate it into its own organizational structure.”<sup>51</sup> Cage did not view atonal serialism as presenting a viable alternate with which to structure a contemporary music: as he stated, for the project of constructing a wholly new music, “The twelve-tone row offers bricks but no plan.”<sup>52</sup> With this, Cage distanced himself from Schoenberg, and thus from Adorno as well; because, for Cage, the problematic of repetition and variation in serial music was ultimately no different from that of harmonic structure: serialism replaced counterpoint, but both presumed an underlying model to which they implicitly referred.<sup>53</sup>

Cage stated repeatedly that the evolution of harmony, including the questioning and disintegration it experienced under atonality, was integrally linked to the development of Western commercialism.<sup>54</sup> If, as Adorno emphasized, life in commodity culture becomes objectively more repetitive and conformist, society’s connection to harmony, as Cage viewed it, must nonetheless be understood through the manner in which that conformity is subjectively lived as individualism. With the development of capitalism came the replacement of actual differences by a system of “accidental differentiation” and “pseudo-individualization.”<sup>55</sup> While the individual’s desire for difference is catered to by means of the “personalization” of products, this personalization only distinguishes mass-produced

49. “Mosaic,” *YM*, p. 48. Cage expressly juxtaposes Schoenberg’s idea of repetition with his own idea of differentiation by reference to the differences between leaves on a tree in *Conversing with Cage*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Limelight, 1987), p. 222.

50. Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle,” p. 284, n. 7.

51. *Ibid.*

52. “Forerunners of Modern Music,” *S*, p. 64, n. 8. On Cage’s idea that serialism does not represent a new structure, see “Forerunners,” *S*, pp. 63–64, and n. 7. In “Mosaic,” Cage explicitly calls Schoenberg’s structures neoclassical, *YM*, p. 45.

53. “Forerunners,” *S*, p. 63, n. 7.

54. “The East in the West,” *W*, p. 25: “Because of its ability to enlarge sound and thus to impress an audience, [harmony] has become in our time the tool of Western commercialism”; and “Defense of Satie,” *JC*, p. 84: “It is interesting to note that harmonic structure in music arises as Western materialism arises, disintegrating at the time that materialism comes to be questioned, and that the solution of rhythmic structure, traditional to the Orient, is arrived at with us just at the time that we profoundly sense our need for that other tradition of the Orient: peace of mind, self-knowledge.” In “Forerunners,” Cage stated that atonality represented the denial of harmony as a structure, but only led to “an ambiguous state of tonal affairs” (*S*, p. 63).

55. For a discussion of “accidental differentiation” and “pseudo-individualization” as they apply both to commodities and to commodified music, see, respectively, Theodor W. Adorno, “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938), in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 35, and “On Popular Music,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 9 (1941), p. 25. In *La société de consommation* (Paris: Denoël, 1970), Jean Baudrillard analyzes much the same aspect of commercial culture in terms of the interplay of “model” and “series,” a discussion that resonates perhaps more closely with Cage’s position in “Rhythm Etc.”

objects from one another by means of minute distinctions, such as those of color and available accessories. By substituting for actual difference only so many declensions from an a priori model or type, the extent and range of difference is effectively circumscribed—even if that model is purely ideal and inductively produced by the unfolding of the series. Apparent opposition to the series is defined as merely a negative relation to the series as such, in just the same way, as Cage pointed out, that atonality is forced to evade the presence of tonal harmony.<sup>56</sup> Far from being opposed to it, serial differentiation is the necessary alibi of social conformity.<sup>57</sup>

Looking back from his standpoint in the twentieth century, Cage saw the advent of harmonic music and the dynamic of repetition and variation as reproducing (if not preceding) as culture the same logic of model and series that would come to pervade society with the commodity form.<sup>58</sup> But, while the system of serial differentiation ideologically accommodates people into the realm of commodity production, the traditional musical work, according to Cage, operates as ideological at still another level. Because the variations of the series are inevitably related through the intermediary of a harmonic structure to the role of an existential author, the individual subject is placed firmly at the center of the system. “The thing that’s so offensive about the series,” Cage explained, “is the notion that it is the principle from which all happenings flow (it would be perfectly acceptable for a series to enter into a field situation). But the prediction of series equals harmony equals mind of man (unchanged, used as obstacle, not as fluent component open at both ends)!”<sup>59</sup> By apparently replacing an individual at the center of the socio-economic system, the traditional musical work functions to relieve, if only temporarily, the anxieties experienced by the subject decentered by the developments of capitalism. “Masterpieces and geniuses go together,” Cage observed, “and when by running from one to the other we make life safer than it actually is we’re apt never to know the dangers of contemporary music.”<sup>60</sup>

With this, we have returned to Cage’s argument with Le Corbusier. For the Modulor—as proportional harmonizer of the world’s buildings and merchandise—was presented by Le Corbusier as no less than the ur-model of multinational capitalism. “[T]he ‘Modulor’ would,” he dreamt, “one day claim to be the means

56. “A Composer’s Confessions,” *W*, p. 31.

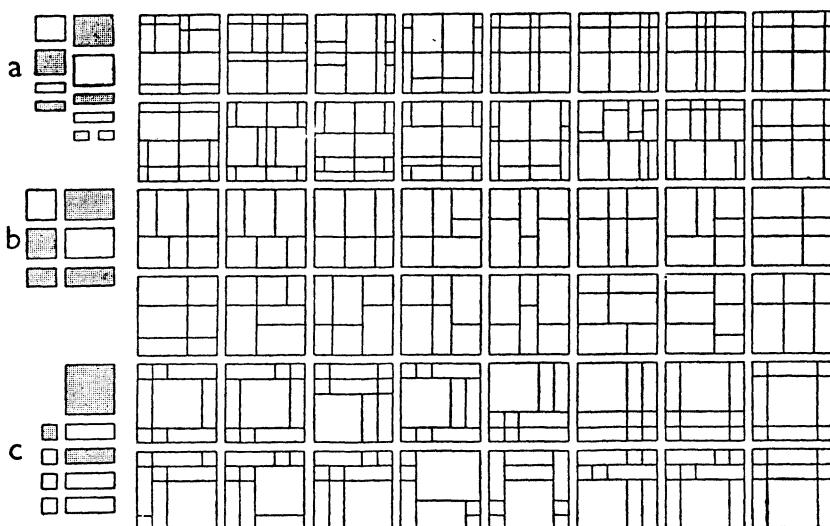
57. Adorno, “On Popular Music,” p. 24. See also Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (1968), trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), p. 141.

58. On the anticipatory function of music, see Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

59. “Seriously Comma,” *YM*, p. 28.

60. “Composition as Process: III. Communication,” *S*, p. 46. By contrast, contemporary music was understood by Cage to fill the role of “bumping into things, knocking others over and in general adding to the disorder that characterizes life (if it is opposed to art) rather than adding to the order and stabilized truth, beauty, and power that characterize a masterpiece (if it is opposed to life)” (*S*, p. 46). See also “Mosaic,” *YM*, p. 44: “We’re chucking this idea too (even though Schoenberg had it): that music enables one to live in a dream world removed from the situation one is actually in.”

*Le Corbusier. Table from The Modulor showing possible combinations of harmonious proportions. 1948.*



of unification for manufactured articles in all countries.”<sup>61</sup> Far from representing a procedural innovation, Le Corbusier’s Modulor acted to increase the efficiency of commodity production precisely by centralizing and intensifying capitalism’s dynamic of model and series. By adopting the Modulor as standard, or so Le Corbusier advanced, one would be able to derive from it a variety of proportional schemes that would fulfill every individual’s desire. “Ingenuity and good taste will make use of them at will,” Le Corbusier said, “finding arrangements to satisfy every temperament and every fancy, and to meet every purely rational need.”<sup>62</sup>

It was Le Corbusier’s complicity with the logic of capitalism that motivated Cage’s subtle but perceptive criticism: “Don’t tell me it’s a question of mass production,” he wrote in “Rhythm Etc.” “Is it not rather that they want to establish, if not the rules of the game, at least what it is that one uses to play with when he starts playing?”<sup>63</sup>

Thus, Le Corbusier’s analogy to music turns out not to have been so farfetched after all, for his project aimed to fulfill exactly the same role that traditional harmonic music had come to play: responding to the anxiety caused by the decentering of the individual by the system of mass production. It was for this reason that Le Corbusier continually railed against the arbitrariness of industrial

61. Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*, p. 56.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

63. “Rhythm Etc.” *YM*, p. 123.

standards, and it motivated his repeated claim that the Modulor was superior because it was “based upon the human scale.”<sup>64</sup>

By now we can understand how Cage could have viewed Le Corbusier’s system as tyrannical. For were a single person actually able to dictate the form and extent of the allowable variations of commodity production, he would indeed be a tyrant, personally delineating the range and scope of subjective as well as objective differentiation.<sup>65</sup> We may now also be able to understand why, in “Rhythm Etc.,” Cage would have posited his home at Gatehill as antithetical to Le Corbusier’s project. For it may be argued that Cage viewed the Gatehill community as an instantiation of an oppositional aesthetics.

The siting of the Williams-Cage House, at a tangent to a hillside in the midst of a huge expanse of woodland, is important, because a certain notion of nature, understood as an immeasurably complex realm of unregulated differentiation, ultimately served as the paradigm and justification of Cagean aesthetics.<sup>66</sup> Such a proximity to nature was integral to Cage’s understanding of Mies as well; for in Cage’s descriptions, Mies’s glass buildings reflect clouds, trees or grass, but never images of the city.<sup>67</sup> However, while Cage viewed through one wall of his apartment the undeveloped, forested hillside, through the other he saw the proto-urban configuration of the neighboring houses. There, around the pebbled clearing of the upper square, was manifest the logic of prefabrication and mass production that Paul Williams had incorporated into his thoroughly modern, post-Bauhaus-style buildings. Looking out from Cage’s apartment, these two views were not juxtaposed to form opposed pairs such as nature/culture, rural/urban, or freedom/regulation.<sup>68</sup> Instead, the natural expanse that surrounds the settlement relativizes the realm of serial difference marked out by the buildings, situating them within the wider field of what Cage saw as nature’s more radical sense of differentiation.

Yet even this formulation is not exact, for the settlement is not simply surrounded by nature; it is infiltrated and interpenetrated by it as well. No window in the upper square fails to reflect the surrounding trees and hillside, and from within the buildings each glance readily traverses the interior to arrive at views of the outlying natural realm. This dynamic occurs nowhere so much as in Cage’s

64. Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*, p. 113 and passim.

65. “The social inflexibility,” Cage noted, “follows from the initial conception of proportion” (“Rhythm Etc.” *YM*, p. 126). Cage’s reading of Le Corbusier’s text would have been encouraged by lines such as “. . . music rules all things, it dominates; or, more precisely, harmony does that. Harmony, reigning over all things, regulating all the things of our lives, is the spontaneous, indefatigable and tenacious quest of man animated by a single force: the sense of the divine, and pursuing one aim: to make a paradise on earth” (Le Corbusier, *The Modulor*, p. 74).

66. This reading of nature runs throughout Cage’s writings; see “[Letter to Paul Henry Lang],” *JC*, pp. 117–18 and “Experimental Music,” *S*, pp. 9–10, as well as Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage*, p. 147.

67. In this, Cage is again close to Moholy-Nagy, who postulated in the quotation from *The New Vision* cited above that “the white house with great glass windows” would dissolve into nature.

68. On Cage’s opinion that “there is no need to cautiously proceed in dualistic terms,” see “Composition as Process: III. Communication,” *S*, p. 47.

apartment, where the high proportion of glass causes the interior and exterior to interpenetrate almost completely. Furthermore, by designing the entire western wall to slide off the facade of the building into the adjacent frame, Williams literally opened the structure up to nature, and in the process transformed a glass wall à-la Mies van der Rohe into the *Large Glass* of Marcel Duchamp. Freed of any attachment to the interior of the building, the wall becomes a mechanism of pure exteriority, mimetically dissolving into the environment via the interrelated play of transparency and reflection.

A paradigm of critical distance such as that posed by Frankfurt School aesthetics ultimately presupposes a relatively autonomous subject who will realize the structure of capitalist society once it has been presented without obscuring transformations. In the Cagean paradigm, on the other hand, given the lack of any possible autonomous or semi-autonomous space of critical distancing, the subjective transformation takes place on the level of perception rather than cognition.<sup>69</sup> *Pace* Adorno, Cagean enlightenment had nothing to do with the ascription of metaphysical powers, but was defined instead as the achievement of a mode of perception in which attention was unfocused, and the attachment to transcendent models and the limited play of repetition and variation they engendered could be undermined. To this end, the goal of Cage's oppositional aesthetic was not to understand the regulatory structures at the base of the social formation, but rather to forget them.<sup>70</sup> Through the amnesic removal of the overarching model, a reorientation of perception toward the experience of differentiation would serve as a means of opposing the serialized logic of the commodity. As Cage explained in conversation with Daniel Charles,

In contemporary civilization where everything is standardized and where everything is repeated, the whole point is to forget in the space between an object and its duplication. If we didn't have this power of forgetfulness, if art today didn't help us to forget, we would be submerged, drowned under those avalanches of rigorously identical objects.<sup>71</sup>

69. On the shift from cognition to perception, see "Experimental Music: Doctrine," S, p. 15; and "Where are We Going? and What Are We Doing?" S, pp. 204–5.

70. This was articulated in a note by Duchamp which Cage would come to quote often: "to reach the Impossibility of sufficient *visual* memory to transfer from one like object to another the *memory* imprint" ("Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas," *YM*, p. 79). For the complete Duchamp passage, see *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson (New York: Da Capo, 1973), p. 31:

Identifying  
To lose the possibility of recognizing 2 similar objects—2 colors, 2 laces, 2 hats, 2 forms whatsoever, to reach the Impossibility of sufficient *visual* memory to transfer from one like object to another the *memory* imprint.

—Same possibility with sounds; with brain facts.

71. John Cage, *For the Birds* (Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981), p. 80. See also the statement Cage makes about the future of standardization in relation to architecture in "Questions," *Perspecta* 11 (1967), p. 71.



*Interior view of Cage apartment with Merce Cunningham.  
November 1956. Courtesy John Cage Trust.  
(Photo: Valenti Chasin.)*

Only after this form of enlightenment had been achieved could Cage return to the city and view it and its inhabitants without disgust. “We go into a crowd,” he explained,

with a sharp awareness of the idiosyncrasies of each person in it, even if they’re marching, and we along with them. We see, to put it coldly, differences between two things that are the same. This enables us to go anywhere alone or with others and any ordinarily too large number of others. We could take a vacation in a hotel room on Times Square.<sup>72</sup>

That Cage’s oppositional aesthetic is not predicated on a relative autonomy from the phenomena to be critiqued problematizes the Frankfurt School ideal of Oedipally mature individuals who somehow hold their own against the dictates of consumer culture.<sup>73</sup> For Cage, the cognitive capacities of consciousness and the controlling force of the ego act to inhibit the experience of differentiation; the mind plays the role of a model from which only a limited series of ideas about the world can be derived. In contrast, Cage’s differential perception, in which the last vestiges of a monadic humanism have been abolished, leads to the possibility of independent, or what Cage termed “experimental,” actions: i.e., actions not

72. “Where Are We Going? And What Are We Doing?” S, p. 238. It should be noted that Cage did eventually move out of Stony Point and back to Manhattan.

73. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” trans. Anson G. Rabinbach, in *The Culture Industry*, p. 92: “It [the culture industry] impedes the development of autonomous independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. These, however, would be the precondition for a democratic society which needs adults who have come of age in order to sustain itself and develop.”

circumscribed by the inherent teleology of serialized and conformist modes of behavior. An experimental action, Cage explained, “is simply an action the outcome of which is not foreseen.”<sup>74</sup>

It does not move in terms of approximations and errors as “informed” action by its nature must, for no mental images of what would happen were set up beforehand; it sees things directly as they are: impermanently involved in an infinite play of interpenetrations.<sup>75</sup>

It is through the experimental pursuit of the nonidentical that Cage’s project reveals itself as an anti-ideological one, meant to evade the situation Adorno described as “The totality of mass culture [which] culminates in the demand that no one can be any different from itself.”<sup>76</sup>

In a manner analogous to that in which in his scores he had employed space to undermine musical continuity, Cage described experimental actions as a function of spatial separation. In the article “Composition as Process: II. Indeterminacy” of 1958, Cage explained:

There is the possibility when people are crowded together that they will act like sheep rather than nobly. That is why separation in space is spoken of as facilitating independent action on the part of each performer. Sounds will then arise from actions, which will then arise from their own centers rather than as motor or psychological effects of other actions and sounds in the environment.<sup>77</sup>

If, in the above description, Cage’s musicians no longer resemble the regimented automatons of the culture industry, neither do they approximate the autonomous, centered subjects of classical thinking. Instead, just as the music they perform breaks free of the limitations of “European harmony,” Cage’s musicians attain liberation from society’s ideologically pre-modeled norms of consciousness and behavior, but only through the complete immersion into a radically multiplicitous perception of the world, a turning of the mind “in the direction of no matter what eventuality.”<sup>78</sup> Interestingly, at the end of “Composition as Process II,” Cage once again turned explicitly to the topic of architecture, noting that for the successful performance of such experimental music, “The conventional architecture is often not suitable.” Rather, Cage would go on to propose, “What is required perhaps is an architecture like Mies van der Rohe’s School of Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology.”<sup>79</sup>

74. “History of Experimental Music,” S, p. 69.

75. “Experimental Music: Doctrine,” S, p. 15.

76. Theodor W. Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture,” in *The Culture Industry*, p. 79. See also *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 123 and 127.

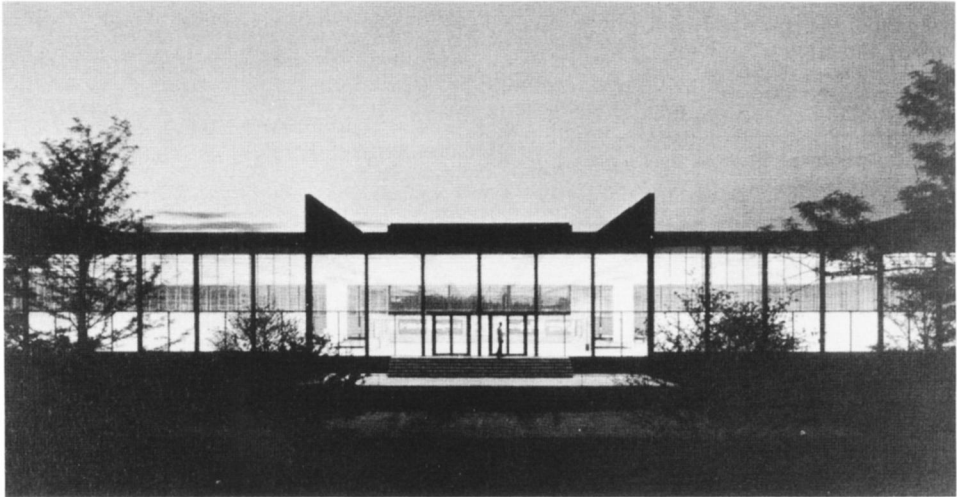
77. “Composition as Process: II. Indeterminacy,” S, p. 39.

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.*, p. 40.



Mies van der Rohe. *Crown Hall, IIT*.  
1950–56.



\*

Cage's project does recall the goals of the historical avant-garde: to reformulate perception as a means of anticipating life beyond the boundaries of commodity capitalism. However, rather than being limited to a merely ineffectual revival of Dada, Cage's neo-avant-garde project marks a thorough reformulation of avant-garde aesthetics in light of the historical circumstances of the postwar era. In the face of a revolutionary hope of proletarian mass subjectivity falsely realized as the debilitating norms of a bourgeois mass culture, Cage attempted to actualize an anticipatory form of existence that would be the prerequisite for a new form of sociability, a perception of difference intended to destabilize the overriding social logic of repetition by interpenetrating, infiltrating, burrowing under and hollowing out that logic until it simply fell apart under the strain. Only then could the anarchic society of which Cage dreamed become a reality.

Although this aim would motivate virtually all of Cage's subsequent work, the means by which he would pursue it changed radically in the 1960s. In many ways, the article "Rhythm Etc." marked the end of the period I have been describing and the beginning of that transition. By 1961, Cage had already begun to reformulate his ideas of space, structure, and transparency.<sup>80</sup> Like the project of the historical

80. This Cage explained by means of an architectural metaphor: "The thing that was irrelevant to the structures we formerly made, and this was what kept us breathing, was what took place within them. Their emptiness we took for what it was—a place where anything could happen. That was one of the reasons we were able when circumstances became inviting (changes in consciousness, etc.) to go outside, where breathing is child's play: no walls, not even glass ones which, though we could see through them, killed the birds while they were flying" ("Rhythm Etc." *YM*, p. 122). Cf. the discussion of the changes in Cage's aesthetic in the 1960s in Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage*, pp. 138–61.

avant-garde—like all avant-garde projects so far—Cage’s neo-avant-garde project would ultimately fail in its most revolutionary ambitions, in part because he did not see that capital did not share Le Corbusier’s anxiety at the dissolution of the model or standard, but would itself embrace an ever more differentiated mode of commodity production. A radical increase in differentiation alone would not be able to counteract the new forms of decentralized power that have emerged within the most recent stages of capitalist society.<sup>81</sup>

Yet Cage, so perceptive on other counts, seems largely to have ignored such developments, and he kept his optimistic faith in an architecture of glass long after it would appear to be outdated. In “Overpopulation and Art,” a piece he was writing at the time of his death in 1992, Cage could still state:

we live in glass hOuses  
 our Vitric surroundings  
 transparEnt  
 Reflective  
 Putting images  
 Outside  
 in sPace of what’s inside  
 oUr homes  
 everything’s as muLtiplied  
 As we are<sup>82</sup>

81. For a discussion of emergent forms of social control, see Gilles Deleuze, “Control and Becoming,” and “Postscript on Control Societies,” in *Negotiations*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 169–82.

82. In *John Cage: Composed in America*, ed. Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 16–17.