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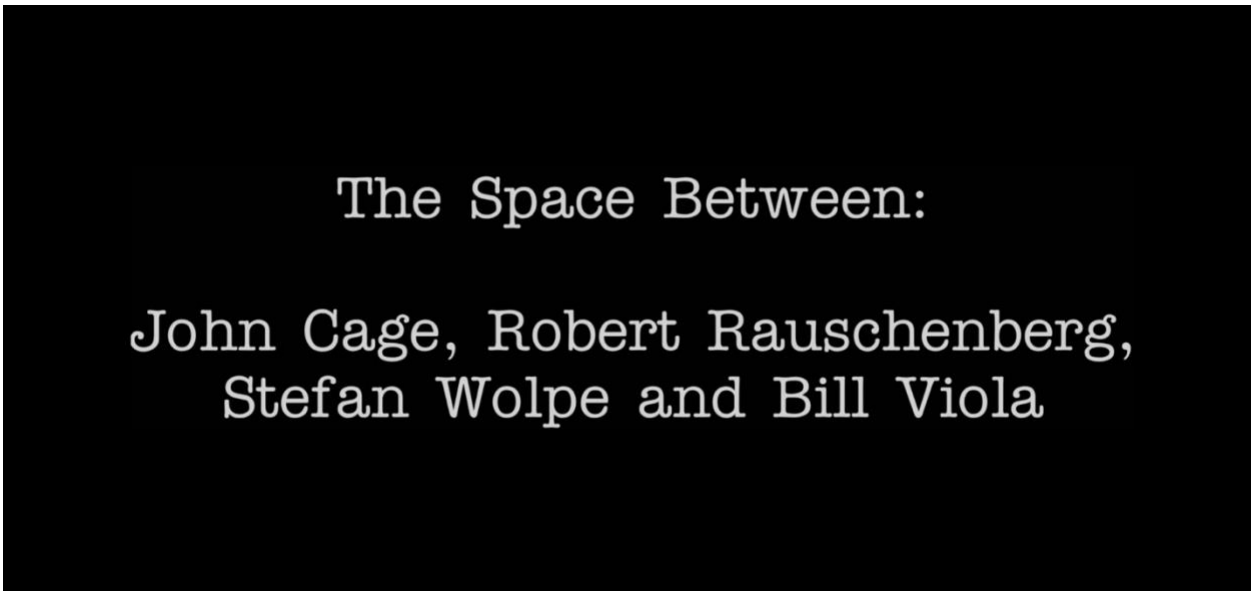
Abstract

The influence of Black Mountain College on the works of Cage, Rauschenberg, and Wolpe is of paramount importance. The fertile creative landscape allowed participants an opportunity to explore and push boundaries. From Rauschenberg's White Paintings and Cage's "happenings" to Stefan Wolpe's exploration of "unruly actions," a blossoming of possibilities began to root. While creators may embed meaning in their work, that meaning becomes transformed in the space between the work and the viewer. Culling from the ideas of Buddhism and the artist themselves, this paper explores that dialogue occurring in that "in-between-ness" and how our understanding of the art changes our sense of experience and perception.



Paul Beaudoin, *The Space Between: John Cage, Robert Rauschenberg, Stefan Wolpe and Bill Viola*. Video. https://vimeo.com/671295849 [View at article URL.]

SECTION ONE: Introduction—The Space Between **3:02**

> "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom."
> —Viktor E. Frankl

Maverick Hall. August 29, 1952. The Woodstock Artists Association presents a recital by composer John Cage and pianist David Tudor to benefit the Artists Welfare Program. The program includes works by Christian Wolff, Earle Brown, Pierre Boulez, and Morton Feldman. The penultimate piece, described in the printed program as 4 Pieces by John Cage, is now the stuff of legend. The unsuspecting audience, comprising largely of professional musicians was completely ill-prepared for the new work. David Tudor, sitting Zazen like at a concert grand, a stopwatch to indicate the precise timings of the movements set by the composer, made no intentional sound at all. The idea of sitting quietly confronted the very ontology of the traditional Western concert hall.

The listeners, in that moment, unable to translate or interpret the experience, were found themselves confused and angered.

For millennia, men were men, and mountains were mountains. What we shared with other humans was a way to clarify and preserve the identity and history of our species. We spoke, as it were, in a codified way, so that others would be able to correctly interpret the world they inhabit and kept us safe.

The artist's job was to preserve, in a compelling way, our shared experience. That all changed when photography landed on our doorstep. The seismic shift in the role artists would assume created a kind of crisis—and the solutions have been as puzzling as the worlds from which it came.

Now artists, like scientists, began to ask questions—even if it meant there were no answers. Artists responded by requiring the spectator to see art not only as an aesthetic experience but also to decode it as an active participant. The shared understanding of cultural symbols, language, and information became destabilized, often leaving the viewer unable to interpret the work.

Blank space, absence, silence, emptiness - however you call it, isn't a matter of abstraction. That potent and mysterious space engage the viewer with a conversation that is, for all intents and purposes, entirely imaginary, if not delusional. All art is subjective, unconditionally so. There cannot be anything that you see in the art that is not, in some part, already in yourself.

In *Metaphors for the Magnifico*, Wallace Stevens sums it up this way:

> Twenty men crossing a bridge,
> Into a village,
> Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
> Into twenty villages,
> Or one man
> Crossing a single bridge into a village.

SECTION TWO: Rauschenberg—The White Paintings **1:05**

The artists discovering Zen Buddhism in the 1950s were ripe for it. Finding a fresh aesthetic in an ancient tradition seemed to be precisely what the anti-Abstract Expressionists needed. The Heart Sutra, with its mantra of "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form," empowered a new generation of artists to move past the self-expressive action gestures that kept a whole generation before them feeling relevant and self-destructively alive.

> "I had been studying with [Josef] Albers and did the White Painting in 1951. I wanted to see how far you could push imagery. It was just a natural result: no gesture, no dada, no neologism. I just wanted to see what not painting would look like."
> –Robert Rauschenberg in Robert Rauschenberg Retrospective (1979)

SECTION THREE: Duchamp—The Creative Act **0:22**

> "What art is in reality, is this missing link, not the links which exist. It's not what you see that is art, art is the gap."
> —Marcel Duchamp "The Creative Act" (1957)

SECTION FOUR: Cage—Response to Mrs. Wolf **0:32**

> "What we hear is determined by our own emptiness, our own receptivity; we receive to the extent we are empty to do so. If one is full or in the course of its performance becomes full of an idea, for example, that this piece is a trick for shock and bewilderment, then it is just that. However, nothing is single or unidimensional. This is an action among the ten thousand: it moves in all directions and will be received in unpredictable ways. These will vary from shock and bewilderment to quietness of mind and enlightenment."
> —John Cage to Helen Wolf. April 9, 1954

SECTION FIVE: Bill Viola—The Undertone **2:33**

Can we have an aesthetic experience with the kind of emptiness that Cage implies? Is empty space truly empty? How do I, as a viewer, understand the world around me—this space that I occupy? The space between my eyes and my mind—can that too be empty? Can we listen to music and NOT be mindful of the relationships between the sounds themselves? In what context is it beneficial to just let sounds be sounds? There is no such thing as silence—we are constantly surrounded by sound and yet [Fade out text] If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it still make a sound?

> "When I was very young, I was living in New York City, and I must have been one of the last times I saw my grandfather when I was a kid, and that would have been, I would say in 1962 or something like that, '63, and he came over to our house from Florida. My aunt and my grandfather were living in Florida, and you know they were on my mother's side of the family, so he came over and he came

into my room, and he was actually very creative. I think I got a lot of my artistic creativity from my grandfather.

“I mean he was also kind of a funny kind of crazy guy, so wonderful for a little kid. So he came into my room, and we're looking around, and then it was wasn't quite summer but it was probably early spring, and we were talking and all of a sudden he stops, and in my room when he said what's that and I said, “What?” I called him Pop-Pop, that was our nickname for him, and I said, “Pop-Pop, what, what?” he says, “That! What's that sound?” I said, “What sound?” and I went to the window, and I was expecting to hear, I don't know, a fire engine or something.

And he said, “Listen to the sound,” and so I stopped and I heard it for the first time, and it's the sound of all of the cars, all the people, all the trees moving, anything that's moving is making sound, and it's a kind of background noise for the world. And most obviously if you're near the ocean you hear that very clearly, but when we're going through our daily lives we don't even recognize that. And I'm not talking about the car that goes by quickly, it's just some, even in the middle of the night, just, you know, put your head out the window and you hear that it's like a Shh …

“It's a constant sound that absorbs all the other sounds, and he taught me that, and so he pointed out again to something that was invisible he pointed that out to me, and I never forgot it, and I was very, very conscious of this kind of what I call it, like, kind of “undersound” the undersound that just constantly exists.”
—Bill Viola, “The Tone of Being”

SECTION SIX: Cage: The Perilous Night **1:54**

“I had poured a great deal of emotion into the piece, and obviously I wasn’t communicating this at all. Or else, I thought, if I were communicating, that all artists must be speaking a different language, and this speaking only for themselves. The whole musical situation struck me more and more as a Tower of Babel.”

> —John Cage in Calvin Tomkins's *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde*

SECTION SEVEN: Tower of Babel **0:08**

Cildo Meireles, "Babel" (with audio by Beaudoin)

SECTION EIGHT: Black Screen Glitch **0:12**

SECTION NINE: Mushrooms **0:14**

SECTION TEN: Cage—4'33" Mvt. 1 **0:33**

SECTION ELEVEN: Wolpe: Any Bunch of Notes/Quartet **1:15**

SECTION TWELVE: Wolpe and Olson **1:34**

Wolpe's close friendship with poet Charles Olson, then Rector of Black Mountain College, gave Wolpe a paradigm to reshape his creative output. It was while teaching at Black Mountain College that Wolpe's new direction synthesized "unruly actions" within a more structural or formal framework. In "Any Bunch of Notes," a lecture written at Black Mountain College, Wolpe sets out a kind of compositional edict:

> "The pitch (and the condition of its making and direction) is used like any other element is used in an ensemble of spectacle and reference. Its technique is a montage of disparate yet omnipresent elements, ordered intelligible to arouse concern, or to exhibit callousness (incapable of participation and consequence). Because it meddles in most sensitive spots, affairs, references, and

> confrontations of what is here on-earth-as-it-is, it startles with an unbounded panorama. Ejecting and playing with a total eye, all things are transfixed in a burden of foci. Still, nobody lifts the weight of the earth."
> —Stefan Wolpe, "Any Bunch of Notes "(1953)

SECTION THIRTEEN: Suzuki**—**In Every Sense **1:32**

> "There was an international conference of philosophers in Hawaii on the subject of Reality. For three days Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki said nothing. Finally the chairman turned to him and asked 'Dr Suzuki, would you say that this table around which we are sitting is real?' Suzuki raised his head and said Yes. The chairman asked in what sense Suzuki thought the table was real. Suzuki said, 'In every sense.'"
> —John Cage, "Indeterminacy," Story 116

SECTION FOURTEEN: Men are Men, Mountains are Mountains **2:36**

So, this space between, this emptiness from which we are asked to receive a work of art—where does it lead? Masao Abe addressed this concern in his essay "Emptiness as Suchness." The emptiness from a Western perspective is quite unlike the emptiness found in Buddhist philosophy.

> "I think that 'Everything is empty' may be more adequately rendered in this way: 'Everything is just as it is. 'A pine tree is a pine tree, a bamboo is a bamboo, a dog is a dog, a cat is a cat, you are you, I am I, she is she. Everything is different from everything else. And yet, so long as one and everything retain their uniqueness and particularity, they are free from conflict among themselves."
> —Masao Abe, "Emptiness is Suchness" in *Zen and Western Thought*, p. 223

So, when we are empty to receive the art object, we are open to the experience of receiving it as it is—nothing more, nothing less. Indeed, it can be a challenge to the Western mind to allow sounds to be themselves and forgo the relationships we thrust upon them as cultural conditioning has taught us.

What Cage so bravely challenged in Maverick Hall back in 1952 was the very ontology that has been handed to us in Western cultural history. The emptiness of 4’33” depends very much on how you understand the traditional rules of the concert hall, the composer, the performer, and the listener—even if they are all the same person. Rauschenberg and others did the same with visual images, and before long, these ground-shaking changes were embedded into every art form—often with Cage at center stage.

The space between the work and the viewer is as rich with information as it is empty. The temptation to usher in our self-consciousness (that is, our being aware of what it is or isn’t) can impose a barrier to the experience, leaving one confused, angered, or indifferent (even though that last one might please Duchamp). Most of the people I know WANT to understand the work on offer. They are fascinated, curious and open to deepening their understanding of the artwork and, consequently, broadening their perspective on the world they inhabit.

Are we also to expect the ever-advancing moment as Wolpe suggests? Or, can we approach art in a Zen-like way—empty to its experience and open to shaping our experience in understanding the world? Can we study art the way we study Zen? Is the art experience a kind of Zazen? Or could it be that art is ultimately a Zen koan?

You know the story, the one Cage delighted in retelling many times throughout his life:

> “’Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.’ After telling this, Dr Suzuki was asked, ‘What's the difference between before and after?’ He said, ‘No difference, only the feet are a little bit off the ground.’”

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