Indeterminacy....

Selections from...

Silence....

and

....A Year from Monday

Writings By
John Cage

1
One evening when I was
still living at Grand
Street and Monroe,
Isamu Noguchi
came to visit me.

There was nothing in
the room (no furniture,
no paintings).

The floor
was covered,
wall to wall,
with cocoa matting.

The windows
had no curtains,
no drapes.

Isamu Noguchi said,
““An old
shoe would look
beautiful in this room.””

2
You probably know the one about the two monks, but I"ll tell it anyway. They were walking along one day when they came to a stream where a young lady was waiting, hoping that someone would help her across. Without hesitating, one of the monks picked her up and carried her across, putting her down safely on the other side.

The two monks continued walking along, and after some time, the second one, unable to restrain himself, said to the first,""You know we"re not allowed to touch women. Why did you carry that woman across the stream?"" The first monk replied, ""Put her down. I did two hours ago.""

3
Once when several of us were driving up to Boston, we stopped at a roadside restaurant for lunch. Therewas a table near a corner window where we could all look out and see a pond. People were swimming and diving. There were special arrangements for sliding into the water. Inside the restaurant was a juke box. Somebody put a dime in. I noticed that the music that came

out accompanied the swimmers, though they didn"t hear it.

4
One day when the windows were open, Christian Wolff played one of his pieces at the piano. Sounds of traffic, boat horns, were heard not only during the silences in the music, but, being louder, were more easily heard than the piano sounds themselves. Afterward, someone asked Christian Wolff to play the piece again with the windows closed. Christian Wolff said he"d be glad to, but that it wasn"t really necessary, since the sounds of the environment were in no sense an interruption of those of the music.

5
One evening I was walking along Hollywood Boulevard, nothing much to do. I stopped and looked in the window of a stationery shop. A mechanized pen was suspended in space in such a way that, as a mechanized roll of paper passed by it, the pen went through the motions of the same penmanship exercises I had learned as a child in the third grade. Centrally placed in the window was an advertisement explaining the mechanical reasons for the perfection of the operation of the suspended mechanical pen. I was fascinated, for everything was going wrong. The pen was tearing the paper to shreds and splattering ink all over the window and on the advertisement, which, nevertheless, remained legible.

6
It was after I got to Boston that I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it. Anyway, in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, ""Describe them."" I did. He said, ""The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation.""

7
Years ago in Chicago I was asked to accompany two dancers who were providing entertainment at a business women’s dance party given in a hall of the YWCA. After the entertainment, the juke box was turned on so everybody could dance: there was no orchestra (they were saving money). However, the goings-on became very expensive. One of the arms in the juke box moved a selected record on to the turntable. The playing arm moved to an extraordinarily elevated position. After a slight pause it came down rapidly and heavily on the record, smashing it. Another arm came into the situation and removed the debris. The first arm moved another selected record on to the turntable. The playing arm moved up again, paused, came down quickly, smashing the record. The debris was removed by the third arm. And so on. And meanwhile all the flashing colored lights associated with juke boxes worked perfectly, making the whole scene glamorous.

8
After he finished translating into German the first lecture I gave at Darmstadt last September,

Christian Wolff said,

“The stories at the end are very good.

But they’ll probably say you’re naïve.

I do hope you can explode that idea.”

9
Down in Greensboro, North Carolina, David Tudor and I gave an interesting program. We played five pieces three times each. They were the Klavierstück XI by Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff’s Duo for Pianists, Morton Feldman’s Intermission #6, Earle Brown’s 4 Systems, and my Variations. All of these pieces are composed in various ways that have in common indeterminacy of performance. Each performance is unique, as interesting to the composers and performers as to the audience. Everyone, in fact, that is, becomes a listener. I explained all this to the audience before the musical program began. I pointed out that one is accustomed to thinking of a piece of music as an object suitable for understanding and subsequent evaluation, but that here the situation was quite other. These pieces, I said, are not objects, but processes, essentially purposeless. Naturally, then, I had to explain the purpose of having something be purposeless. I said that sounds were just sounds, and that if they weren’t just sounds that we would (I was of course using the editorial we) -- we would do something about it in the next composition. I said that since the sounds were sounds, this gave people hearing them the chance to be people, centered within themselves, where they actually are, not off artificially in the distance as they are accustomed to be, trying to figure out what is being said by some artist by means of sounds. Finally I said that the purpose of this purposeless music would be achieved if people learned to listen. That when they listened they might discover that they preferred the sounds of everyday life to the ones they would presently hear in the musical program. That that was all right as far as I was concerned.

10
However, to come back to my story. A girl in the college there came back backstage afterward and told me that something marvelous had happened. I said, “What?” She said, “One of the music majors is thinking for the first time in her life.” Then at dinner (it had been an afternoon concert), the Head of the Music Department told me that as he was leaving the concert hall, three of his students called, saying, “Come over here.” He went over. “What is it?” he said. One of the girls said, “Listen.”

11
During that Greensboro concert, David Tudor and I got a little mixed up.

He began to play one piece and I began to play a completely different one.

I stopped, since he is the pianist he is, and I just sat there,

listening.

12
When I told David Tudor that this talk on music was nothing but a series of stories, he said, "Don't fail to put in some benedictions." I said, "What in heaven's name do you mean by benedictions?" "Blessings," he said. "What blessings?" I said, "God bless you everyone?"

"Yes," he said, "like they say in the sutras: 'This is not idle talk, but the highest of truths'."

13
There was an American man from Seattle who went to Japan to buy screens. He went to a monastery where he had heard there were very special ones and managed to get an interview with the Abbot, who, however, didn't say a word during the entire time they were together. Through an interpreter, the American made known his desires, but received no comment of any kind from the Abbot. However, very early the next morning, he received a telephone call from the Abbot himself, who turned out to speak perfect English and who said that the American could not only have the screen he wanted for a certain price, but that, furthermore, the monastery possessed an old iron gate that he could also purchase. The American said, "But what on earth would I do with an old iron gate?" "I'm sure you could sell it to a star in Hollywood," the Abbot replied.

14
We've now played the Winter Music quite a number of times. I haven't kept count. When we first played it, the silences seemed very long and the sounds seemed really separated in space, not obstructing one another. In Stockholm, however, when we played it at the Opera as an interlude in the dance program given by Merce Cunningham and Carolyn Brown early one October, I noticed that it had become melodic. Christian Wolff prophesied this to me years ago. He said -- we were walking along Seventeenth Street talking -- he said, "No matter what we do it ends by being melodic." As far as I am concerned this happened to Webern years ago. Karlheinz Stockhausen once told me -- we were in Copenhagen -- "I demand two things from a composer: invention and that he astonish me."

15
Two monks came to a stream. One was Hindu, the other Zen. The Indian began to cross the stream by walking on the surface of the water.

The Japanese became excited and called to him to come back. "What's the matter," the Indian said.

The Zen monk said, "That's not the way to cross the stream. Follow me." He led him to a place where the water was shallow and they waded across.

16
Another monk was walking along when he came to a lady who was sitting by the path weeping.

"What's the matter?"

he said.

She said, sobbing,

"I have lost my only

child."

He hit her over the head and said, "There, that'll give you something to cry about."

17
In New York, when I was setting out to write the orchestral parts of my Concert for Piano and Orchestra which was performed September 19, 1958, in Cologne, I visited each player, found out what he could do with his instrument, discovered with him other possibilities, and then subjected all these findings to chance operations, ending up with a part that was quite indeterminate of its performance. After a general rehearsal, during which the musicians heard the result of their several actions, some of them -- not all -- introduced in the actual performance sounds of a nature not found in my notations, characterized for the most part by their intentions which had become foolish and unprofessional. In Cologne, hoping to avoid this unfortunate state of affairs, I worked with each musician individually and in general rehearsal was silent. I should let you know that the conductor has no score but has only his own part, so that, although he affects the other performers, he does not control them. Well, anyway, the result was in some cases just as unprofessional in Cologne as in New York. I must find a way to let people be free without their becoming foolish. So that their freedom will make them noble. How will I do this? That is the question.

18
Question or not (that is to say, whether what I will do will answer the situation), my problems have become social rather than musical. Was that what Sri Ramakrishna meant when he said to the disciple who asked him whether he should give up music and follow him, "By no means. Remain a musician. Music is a means of rapid transportation to life everlasting"? And in a lecture I gave at Illinois, I added, "To life,period."

19
People are always saying that the East is the East and the West is the West and you have to keep from mixing them up. When I first began to study Oriental philosophy, I also worried about whether it was mine to study. I don't worry any more about that. At Darmstadt I was talking about the reason back of pulverization and fragmentation: for instance, using syllables instead of words in a vocal text, letters instead of syllables. I said, "We take things apart in order that they may become the Buddha. And if that seems too Oriental an idea for you," I said, "Remember the early Christian Gnostic statement, 'Split the stick and there is Jesus!' "

20
Well, since Darmstadt, I've written two pieces. One in the course of a fifteen-minute TV program in Cologne. The other is Music Walk, written during two hours in Stockholm. Neither piece uses chance operations. The indeterminacy in the case of Music Walk is such that I cannot predict at all what will happen until it is performed. Chance operations are not necessary when the actions that are made are unknowing. Music Walk consists of nine sheets of paper having points and one without any. A smaller transparent plastic rectangle having five widely spaced parallel lines is placed over this in any position, bringing some of the points out of potentiality into activity. The lines are ambiguous, referring to five different categories of sound in any order. Additional small plastic squares are provided having five non-parallel lines, which may or may not be used to make further determinations regarding the nature of the sounds to be produced. Playing positions are several: at the keyboard, at the back of the piano, at a radio. One moves at any time from one to another of these positions changing thereby the reference of the points to the parallel lines.

21
Kwang-tse points out that a beautiful woman

who gives pleasure

to men

serves only to frighten

the fish

when she jumps in the water.

22
Once

when I was to give a talk at Columbia Teachers College,

I asked Joseph Campbell whether I should say something

(I forget now

what it was I was thinking of saying).

He said,

"Where is the 'should'?"

23
When I got the letter from Jack Arends

asking me to lecture at the Teachers College, I wrote back and said I'd be glad to, that all he had to do was let me know the date.

He did.

I then said to David Tudor,

"The lecture is so soon that I don't think I'll be able to get all ninety stories written, in which case, now and then, I'll just keep my trap shut."

He said,

"That'll be a relief."

24
A Chinaman

(Kwang-tse tells)

went to sleep and dreamed he was a butterfly.

Later, when he awoke,

he asked himself,

"Am I a butterfly

dreaming that I am a man?"

25
An Eskimo lady who couldn't speak or understand a word of English was once offered free transportation across the United States plus $500 providing she would accompany a corpse that was being sent back to America for burial. She accepted. On her arrival she looked about and noticed that people who went into the railroad station left the city and she never saw them again. Apparently they traveled some place else. She also noticed that before leaving they went to the ticket window, said something to the salesman, and got a ticket. She stood in line, listened carefully to what the person in front of her said to the ticket salesman, repeated what that person said, and then traveled wherever he traveled. In this way she moved about the country from one city to another. After some time, her money was running out and she decided to settle down in the next city she came to, to find employment, and to live there the rest of her life. But when she

came to this decision she was in a small town in Wisconsin from which no one that day was traveling. However, in the course of moving about she had picked up a bit of English. So finally she went to the ticket window and said to the man there, "Where would you go if you were going?" He named a small town in Ohio where she lives to this day.

26
Four years ago or maybe five, I was talking with Hidekazu Yoshida. We were on the train from Donaueschingen to Cologne. I mentioned the book by Herrigel called Zen in the Art of Archery; the melodramatic climax of this book concerns an archer's hitting the bull's eye though he did so in total darkness. Yoshida told me there was one thing the author failed to point out, that is, there lives in Japan at the present time a highly esteemed archer who has never yet been able to hit the bull's eye even in broad daylight.

27
The Four Mists of Chaos, the North, the East, the West, and the South, went to visit Chaos himself. He treated them all very kindly and when they were thinking of leaving, they consulted among themselves how they might repay his hospitality. Since they had noticed that he had no holes in his body, as they each had (eyes, nose, mouth, ears, etc.), they decided each day to provide him with an opening. At the end of seven days, Kwang-tse tells us, Chaos died.

28
Now and then I come across an article on that rock garden in Japan where there's just a space of sand and a few rocks in it. The author, no matter who he is, sets out either to suggest that the position of the rocks in the space follows some geometrical plan productive of the beauty one observes, or not satisfied with mere suggestion, he makes diagrams and detailed analyses. So when I met Ashihara, the Japanese music and dance critic (his first name is Eryo), I told him that I thought those stones could have been anywhere in that space, that I doubted whether their relationship was a planned one, that the emptiness of the sand was such that it could support stones at any points in it. Ashihara had already given me a present (some table mats), but then he asked me to wait a moment while he went into his hotel. He came out and gave me the tie I am now wearing. ¶ After he heard this lecture which I first gave in Brussels in the French Pavilion, Karlheinz Stockhausen said, "You should have said, 'the tie I was wearing yesterday'."

29
An old rabbi in Poland or some place thereabouts was walking in a thunderstorm from one village to another. His health was poor. He was blind, covered with sores. All the afflictions of Job were his. Stumbling over something he fell in the mud. Pulling himself up with difficulty, he raised his hands towards heaven and cried out, "Praise God! The Devil is on Earth and doing his work beautifully!"

30
Morris Graves used to have an old Ford in Seattle. He had removed all the seats and put in a table and chairs so that the car was like a small furnished room with books, a vase with flowers

and so forth. One day he drove up to a luncheonette, parked, opened the door on the street side, unrolled a red carpet across the sidewalk. Then he walked on the carpet, went in, and ordered a hamburger. Meanwhile a crowd gathered, expecting something strange to happen. However, all Graves did was eat the hamburger, pay his bill, get back in the car, roll up the carpet, and drive off.

31
Once when I was a child in Los Angeles I went downtown on the streetcar. It was such a hot day that, when I got out of the streetcar, the tar on the pavement stuck to my feet. (I was barefoot.) Getting to the sidewalk, I found it so hot that I had to run to keep from blistering my feet. I went into a five and dime to get a root beer. When I came to the counter where it was sold from a large barrel and asked for some, a man standing on the counter high above me said, "Wait. I'm putting in the syrup and it'll be a few minutes." As he was putting in the last can, he missed and spilled the sticky syrup all over me. To make me feel better, he offered a free root beer. I said, "No, thank you."

32
One spring morning I knocked on Sonya Sekula's door.

She lived across the hall.

Presently the door was opened just a crack and she said quickly,

"I know you're very busy: I won't take a minute of your time."

33
When Sri Ramakrishna

was asked

why,

if God is good,

is there evil in the world,

he replied,

"To thicken

the plot."

34

Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.

While studying Zen, things become confused.

After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains.

After telling this, Dr. Suzuki was asked, “What is the difference between before and after?” He said, “No difference,

only the feet are a little bit off the ground.”

35
Just the other day I went to the dentist. Over the radio they said it was the hottest day of the year. However, I was wearing a jacket, because going to the doctor has always struck me as a somewhat formal occasion. In the midst of his work, Dr. Heyman stopped and said, “Why don’t you take your jacket off?” I said, “I have a hole in my shirt and that’s why I have my jacket on.” He said, “Well, I have a hole in my sock, and, if you like, I’ll take my shoes off.”

36
Generally speaking, suicide is considered a sin. So all the disciples were very interested to hear what Ramakrishna would say about the fact that a four-year-old child had just then committed suicide.

Ramakrishna said that the child had not sinned,

he had simply corrected an error;

he had been born by mistake.

37
It was a Wednesday.

I was in the sixth grade. I overheard Dad saying to Mother, “Get ready: we’re going to New Zealand Saturday.” I got ready.

I read everything I could find in the school library about New Zealand. Saturday came.

Nothing happened. The project was not even mentioned, that day or any succeeding day.

38
An Indian lady invited me to dinner and said Dr. Suzuki would be there. He was. Before dinner I mentioned Gertrude Stein. Suzuki had never heard of her. I described aspects of her work, which he said sounded very interesting. Stimulated, I mentioned James Joyce, whose name was

also new to him. At dinner he was unable to eat the curries that were offered, so a few uncooked vegetables and fruits were brought, which he enjoyed. After dinner the talk turned to metaphysical problems, and there were many questions, for the hostess was a follower of a certain Indian yogi and her guests were more or less equally divided between allegiance to Indian thought and to Japanese thought. About eleven o'clock we were out on the street walking along, and an American lady said, "How is it, Dr. Suzuki? We spend the evening asking you questions and nothing is decided." Dr. Suzuki smiled and said, "That's why I love philosophy: no one wins."

39
Two wooden boxes containing Oriental spices and foodstuffs arrived from India. One was for David Tudor, the other for me. Each of us found, on opening his box, that the contents were all mixed up. The lids of containers of spices had somehow come off. Plastic bags of dried beans and palm sugar had ripped open. The tin lids of cans of chili powder had come off. All of these things were mixed with each other and with the excelsior which had been put in the box to keep the containers in position. I put my box in a corner and simply tried to forget about it. David Tudor, on the other hand, set to work. Assembling bowls of various sizes, sieves of about eleven various-sized screens, a pair of tweezers, and a small knife, he began a process which lasted three days, at the end of which time each spice was separated from each other, each bean from each other, and the palm sugar lumps had been scraped free of spice and excavations in them had removed embedded beans. He then called me up to say, "Whenever you want to get at that box of spices you have, let me know. I'll help you."

40
During my last year in high school, I found out about the Liberal Catholic Church. It was in a beautiful spot in the Hollywood hills. The ceremony was an anthology of the most theatrical bits and pieces found in the principal rituals, Occidental and Oriental. There were clouds of incense, candles galore, processions in and around the church. I was fascinated, and though I had been raised in the Methodist Episcopal Church and had had thoughts of going into the ministry, I decided to join the Liberal Catholics. Mother and Dad objected strenuously. Ultimately, when I told them of my intention to become an acolyte active in the Mass, they said, "Well, make up your mind. It's us or the church." Thinking along the lines of "Leave your father and mother and follow Me," I went to the priest, told him what had happened, and said I'd decided in favor of the Liberal Catholics. He said, "Don't be a fool. Go home. There are many religions. You have only one mother and father."

41
Artists talk a lot about freedom.

So,

recalling the expression "free as a bird," Morton Feldman went to a park one day and spent some time watching our feathered friends.

When he came back, he said, “You know? They’re not free: they’re fighting over bits of food.”

42
He is a large man and falls asleep easily.

One evening driving back from Poughkeepsie, he awoke to say,

“Now that everything’s so easy,

there’s so much to do.”

Then he went back to sleep.

43
Once Bill de Kooning gave a lecture in Philadelphia.

Afterward, he was asked what painters of the past had influenced him the most.

He said,

“The past does not influence me.

I influence it.”

44
During a counterpoint class at U. C.L.A., Schoenberg sent everybody to the blackboard. We were to solve a particular problem he had given and to turn around when finished so that he could check the correctness of the solution. I did as directed. He said, “That’s good. Now find another solution.” I did. He said, “Another.” Again I found one. Again he said, “Another.” And so on. Finally, I said, “There are no more solutions.” He said, “What is the principle underlying all of the solutions?”

45
On another occasion, Schoenberg asked a girl in his class to go to the piano and play the first movement of a Beethoven sonata, which was afterwards to be analyzed. She said, “It is too difficult. I can’t play it.” Schoenberg said, “You’re a pianist, aren’t you?” She said, “Yes.” He said, “Then go to the piano.” She did. She had no sooner begun playing than he stopped her to say that she was not playing at the proper tempo. She said that if she played at the proper tempo, she would make mistakes. He said, “Play at the proper tempo and do not make mistakes.” She began again, and he stopped her immediately to say that she was making mistakes. She then burst into tears and between sobs explained that she had gone to the dentist earlier that day and that she’d had a tooth pulled out. He said, “Do you have to have a tooth pulled out in order to make mistakes?”

46
In the poetry contest in China by which the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism was chosen, there were two poems. One said: "The mind is like a mirror. It collects dust. The problem is to remove the dust." The other and winning poem was actually a reply to the first. It said, "Where is the mirror and where is the dust?" Some centuries later in a Japanese monastery, there was a monk who was always taking baths. A younger monk came up to him and said, "Why, if there is no dust, are you always taking baths?" The older monk replied, "Just a dip. No why."

47
This summer I'm going to give a class in mushroom identification at the New School for Social Research. Actually, it's five field trips, not really a class at all. However, when I proposed it to Dean Clara Meyer, though she was delighted with the idea, she said, "I'll have to let you know later whether or not we'll give it." So she spoke to the president who couldn't see why there should be a class in mushrooms at the New School. Next she spoke to Professor MacGyver who lives in Piermont. She said, "What do you think about our having a mushroom class at the New School?" He said, "Fine idea. Nothing more than mushroom identification develops the powers of observation." This remark was relayed both to the president and to me. It served to get the class into the catalogue and to verbalize for me my present attitude towards music: it isn't useful, music isn't, unless it develops our powers of audition. But most musicians can't hear a single sound, they listen only to the relationship between two or more sounds. Music for them has nothing to do with their powers of audition, but only to do with their powers of observing relationships. In order to do this, they have to ignore all the crying babies, fire engines, telephone bells, coughs, that happen to occur during their auditions. Actually, if you run into people who are really interested in hearing sounds, you're apt to find them fascinated by the quiet ones. "Did you hear that?" they will say.

48
In 1954, when I went to Europe, I no sooner arrived in Paris than I noticed that the city was covered with posters publicizing a mushroom exhibition that was being held in the Botanical Gardens. That was all I needed. Off I went. When I arrived, I found myself in a large room filled with many tables upon which were displayed many species of fungi. On the hour from a large centrally-placed loudspeaker a recorded lecture on the deadly poisonous amanitas was delivered. During this lecture, nobody in the hall moved or spoke. Each person's attention was, so to speak, riveted to the information being given. A week later, I was in Cologne in Germany attending a concert of electronic music. There was also an audience and a large loudspeaker. However, many in the audience were dozing off, and some were talking to their neighbors.

49
I went to a concert upstairs in Town Hall. The composer whose works were being performed had provided program notes. One of these notes was to the effect that there is too much pain in the world. After the concert I was walking along with the composer and he was telling me how the performances had not been quite up to snuff. So I said, "Well, I enjoyed the music, but I didn't agree with that program note about there being too much pain in the world." He said, "What?

Don't you think there's enough?" I said, "I think there's just the right amount."

50
In 1949 Merce Cunningham and I went to Europe on a Dutch boat. As we were approaching Rotterdam, the fog became so thick that landing was delayed. To expedite matters, the customs officials came aboard the boat. Passengers formed into lines and one by one were questioned. Merce Cunningham was in one line, I was in another. I smoke a great deal, whereas he doesn't smoke at all. However, he was taking five cartons of cigarettes into Europe for me and I had that number myself. We were both traveling through Holland to Belgium and then France, and the customs regulations of all those countries varied with regard to cigarettes. For instance, you could at that time take five cartons per person into France but only two per person into Holland. When I got to my customs officer, all of this was clear to both of us. Out of the goodness of his heart, he was reluctant to deprive me of my three extra cartons or to charge duty on them, but he found it difficult to find an excuse for letting me off. Finally he said, "Are you going to go out of Holland backwards?" I said, "Yes." He was overjoyed. Then he said, "You can keep all the cigarettes. Have a good trip." I left the line and noticed that Merce Cunningham had just reached his customs officer and was having some trouble about the extra cartons. So I went over and told the official that Merce Cunningham was going to go out of Holland backwards. He was delighted. "Oh," he said, "in that case there's no problem at all."

51
About ten years ago down at Black Mountain College during a summer session, I arranged an amateur festival of the works of Erik Satie. There were altogether twenty-five concerts, most of them about thirty minutes long. A few were longer. For each one I prepared a talk about the music which was to be heard. This was necessary because most of the people there had a German point of view and the music I was presenting was French. Satie had little fondness for German music. He told Debussy, for instance, that what was needed was a music without any sauerkraut in it, and he remarked that the reason Beethoven was so well known was that he had a good publicity manager. So after about ten of the concerts and talks, I gave a good-sized talk about music in which I denounced Beethoven. A few days later, Patsy Lynch (now Patsy Davenport) knocked on my door and said, "I think I understand what you said about Beethoven and I think I agree. But I have a very serious question to ask you: How do you feel about Bach?"

52
One day

I asked Schoenberg

what he thought

about the international situation.

He said,

"The important thing to do

is to develop foreign trade."

53
One day while I was composing, the telephone rang. A lady's voice said, "Is this John Cage, the percussion composer?" I said, "Yes." She said, "This is the J. Walter Thompson company." I didn't know what that was, but she explained that their business was advertising. She said, "Hold on. One of our directors wants to speak to you." During a pause my mind went back to my composition. Then suddenly a man's voice said, "Mr. Cage, are you willing to prostitute your art?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, bring us some samples Friday at two." I did. After hearing a few recordings, one of the directors said to me, "Wait a minute." Then seven directors formed what looked like a football huddle. From this one of them finally emerged, came over to me, and said, "You're too good for us. We're going to save you for Robinson Crusoe."

54
One day down at Black Mountain College, David Tudor was eating his lunch.

A student came over to his table and began asking him questions.

David Tudor went on eating his lunch.

The student kept on asking questions.

Finally David Tudor looked at him and said,

"If you don't know,

why do you ask?"

55
There's a street in Stony Point in a lowland near the river where a number of species of mushrooms grow abundantly. I visit this street often. A few years ago in May I found the morel there, a choice mushroom which is rare around Rockland County. I was delighted. None of the people living on this street ever talk to me while I'm collecting mushrooms. Sometimes children come over and kick at them before I get to them. Well, the year after I found the morel, I went back in May expecting to find it again, only to discover that a cinder-block house had been put up where the mushroom had been growing. As I looked at the changed land, all the people in the neighborhood came out on their porches. One of them said, "Ha, ha! Your mushrooms are gone."

56
A composer friend of mine

who spent some time in a mental rehabilitation center was encouraged to do a good deal of bridge playing.

After one game, his partner was criticizing his play of an ace on a trick which had already been won.

My friend stood up and said, “If you think I came to the loony bin to learn to play bridge, you’re crazy.”

57
Once I was visiting

my Aunt Marge.

She was doing her laundry.

She turned to me and said, “You know?

I love this machine

much more than I do your Uncle Walter.”

58
A very dirty composer

was attempting to explain to a friend

how dirty a person was whom he had recently met.

He said,

“He has dirt between his fingers

the way you and I

have between our toes.”

59
Earle Brown and I spent several months splicing magnetic tape together. We sat on opposite sides of the same table. Each of us had a pattern of the splicing to be done, the measurements to be made, etc. Since we were working on tapes that were later to be synchronized, we checked our measurements every now and then against each other. We invariably discovered errors in each other’s measurements. At first each of us thought the other was being careless. When the

whole situation became somewhat exasperating, we took a single ruler and a single tape and each one marked where he thought an inch was. The two marks were at different points. It turned out that Earle Brown closed one eye when he made his measurements, whereas I kept both eyes open. We then tried closing one of my eyes, and later opening both of his. There still was disagreement as to the length of an inch. Finally we decided that one person should do all the final synchronizing splices. But then errors crept in due to changes in weather. In spite of these obstacles, we went on doing what we were doing for about five more months, twelve hours a day, until the work was finished.

60

I enrolled in a class in mushroom identification. The teacher was a Ph.D. and the editor of a publication on mycology. One day he picked up a mushroom, gave a good deal of information about it, mainly historical, and finally named the plant as Pluteus cervinus, edible. I was certain that that plant was not Pluteus cervinus. Due to the attachment of its gills to the stem, it seemed to me to be an Entoloma, and therefore possibly seriously poisonous. I thought: What shall I do? Point out the teacher's error? Or, following school etiquette, saying nothing, let other members of the class possibly poison themselves? I decided to speak. I said, "I doubt whether that mushroom is Pluteus cervinus. I think it's an Entoloma." The teacher said, "Well, we'll key it out." This was done, and it turned out I was right. The plant was Entoloma grayanum, a poisonous mushroom. The teacher came over to me and said, "If you know so much about mushrooms, why do you take this class?" I said, "I take this class because there's so much about mushrooms I don't know." Then I said, "By the way, how is it that you didn't recognize that plant?" He said, "Well, I specialize in the jelly fungi; I just give the fleshy fungi a whirl."

61

An Irish hero whose mother had died was required by his stepmother to set out on a journey to an island beneath the sea and to bring back some golden apples he would find there. Should he fail to return within a year, he would lose his right to the throne, relinquishing it to one of his stepbrothers. For his journey he was given a miserable shaggy nag. No sooner had he set out than the nag said, "Look in my ear. You will find a metal ball. Throw it on the path ahead of us and we will follow it wherever it goes." Unhesitatingly the prince did this, and so, proceeding by chance, they passed through many perilous situations. Finally, on the point of success, the horse said to the Prince, "Now take your sword and slit my throat." The Prince hesitated, but only for a moment. No sooner had he killed the horse than, lo and behold, it turned into a prince, who, except for the acquiescence of the hero, would have had to remain a miserable shaggy nag.

62

Schoenberg always complained that his American pupils didn't do enough work.

There was one girl in the class in particular who, it is true, did almost no work at all. He asked her one day why she didn't accomplish more. She said, "I don't have any time." He said, "How many hours are there in the day?" She said, "Twenty-four." He said, "Nonsense: there are as many hours in a day as you put into it."

63
David Tudor and I went up to New Haven to do a television class for the New Haven State Teachers College. That college specializes in teaching by means of television. What they do is to make a tape, audio and visual, and then broadcast it at a later date early in the morning. In the course of my talking, I said something about the purpose of purposelessness. Afterwards, one of the teachers said to the head of the Music Department, "How are you going to explain that to the class next Tuesday?" Anyway, we finished the TV business, drove back to the school, and I asked the teachers to recommend some second-hand bookstores in New Haven for David Tudor and me to visit. They did. A half-hour later when we walked into one of them, the book dealer said, "Mr. Tudor? Mr. Cage?" I said, "Yes?" He said, "You're to call the State Teachers College." I did. They said the television class we had recorded had not been recorded at all. Apparently someone forgot to turn something on.

64
On the way back from New Haven we were driving along the Housatonic. It was a beautiful day. We stopped to have dinner but the restaurants at the river's edge turned out not to be restaurants at all but dark, run-down bars with, curiously, no views of the river. So we drove on to Newtown, where we saw many cars parked around a restaurant that appeared to have a Colonial atmosphere. I said, "All those cars are a good sign. Let's eat there." When we got in, we were in a large dining room with very few other people eating. The waitress seemed slightly giddy. David Tudor ordered some ginger ale, and after quite a long time was served some Coca-Cola, which he refused. Later we both ordered parfaits; mine was to be chocolate, his to be strawberry. As the waitress entered the kitchen, she shouted, "Two chocolate parfaits." When David Tudor explained to her later that he had ordered strawberry, she said, "They must have made some mistake in the kitchen." I said, "There must be another dining room in this building with a lot of people eating in it." The waitress said, "Yes. It's downstairs and there are only two of us for each floor and we keep running back and forth."

65
Then we had to go back to New Haven to do the TV class over again. This time on the way back it was a very hot and humid day. We stopped again in Newtown, but at a different place, for some ice. There was a choice: raspberry, grape, lemon, orange, and pineapple. I took grape. It was refreshing. I asked the lady who served it whether she had made it. She said, "Yes." I said, "Is it fresh fruit?" She said, "It's not fresh, but it's fruit."

66
Betty Isaacs told me that when she was in New Zealand she was informed that none of the mushrooms growing wild there was poisonous. So one day when she noticed a hillside covered with fungi, she gathered a lot and made catsup. When she finished the catsup, she tasted it and it was awful. Nevertheless she bottled it and put it up on a high shelf. A year later she was housecleaning and discovered the catsup, which she had forgotten about. She was on the point of throwing it away. But before doing this she tasted it. It had changed color. Originally a dirty gray, it had become black, and, as she told me, it was divine, improving the flavor of whatever it

touched.

67
In 1952 I was asked to write a manifesto about new music. I wrote,

"Instantaneous and unpredictable." Then below I wrote, "Nothing is accomplished by writing a piece of music. Ditto for hearing a piece of music. Ditto for playing a piece of music."

Then there was a bracket and the words, "Our ears are now in excellent condition."

My signature followed and that was all there was to it.

68
When the depression began, I was in Europe. After a while I came back and lived with my family in the Pacific Palisades. I had read somewhere that Richard Buhlig, the pianist, had years before in Berlin given the first performance of Schoenberg's Opus 11. I thought to myself: He probably lives right here in Los Angeles. So I looked in the phone book and, sure enough, there was his name. I called him up and said, "I'd like to hear you play the Schoenberg pieces." He said he wasn't contemplating giving a recital. I said, "Well, surely, you play at home. Couldn't I come over one day and hear the Opus 11?" He said, "Certainly not." He hung up. ¶ Then, about a year later, the family had to give up the house in the Palisades. Mother and Dad went to an apartment in Los Angeles. I found an auto court in Santa Monica where, in exchange for doing the gardening, I got an apartment to live in and a large room back of the court over the garages, which I used as a lecture hall. I was nineteen years old and enthusiastic about modern music and painting. I went from house to house in Santa Monica explaining this to the housewives. I offered ten lectures for $2.50. I said, "I will learn each week something about the subject that I will then lecture on." ¶ Well, the week came for my lecture on Schoenberg. Except for a minuet, Opus 25, his music was too difficult for me to play. No recordings were then available. I thought of Richard Buhlig. I decided not to telephone him but to go directly to his house and visit him. I hitchhiked into Los Angeles, arriving at his house at noon. He wasn't home. I took a pepper bough off a tree and, pulling off the leaves one by one, recited, "He'll come home; he won't; he'll come home . . ." It always turned out He'll come home. He did. At midnight. I explained I'd been waiting to see him for twelve hours. He invited me into the house. When I asked him to illustrate my lecture on Schoenberg, he said, "Certainly not." However, he said he'd like to see some of my compositions, and we made an appointment for the following week.

69
Somehow I got through the lecture, and the day came to show my work to Buhlig. Again I hitchhiked into L.A., arriving somewhat ahead of time. I rang the doorbell. Buhlig opened it and said, "You're half an hour early. Come back at the proper time." I had library books with me and decided to kill two birds with one stone. So I went to the library to return the books, found some new ones, and then came back to Buhlig's house and again rang the doorbell. He was furious when he opened the door. He said, "Now you're half an hour late." He took me into the house

and lectured me for two hours on the importance of time, especially for one who proposed devoting his life to the art of music.

70
M. C. Richards went to see the Bolshoi Ballet. She was delighted with the dancing. She said, "It's not what they do; it's the ardor with which they do it." I said, "Yes: composition, performance, and audition or observation are really different things. They have next to nothing to do with one another." Once, I told her, I was at a house on Riverside Drive where people were invited to be present at a Zen service conducted by a Japanese Roshi. He did the ritual, rose petals and all. Afterwards tea was served with rice cookies. And then the hostess and her husband, employing an out-of-tune piano and a cracked voice, gave a wretched performance of an excerpt from a third-rate Italian opera. I was embarrassed and glanced towards the Roshi to see how he was taking it. The expression on his face was absolutely beatific.

71
M. C. Richards and David Tudor invited several friends to dinner. I was there and it was a pleasure. After dinner we were sitting around talking. David Tudor began doing some paper work in a corner, perhaps something to do with music, though I'm not sure. After a while there was a pause in the conversation, and someone said to David Tudor, "Why don't you join the party?" He said, "I haven't left it. This is how I keep you entertained."

72
When Xenia and I came to New York from Chicago, we arrived in the bus station with about twenty-five cents. We were expecting to stay for a while with Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst. Max Ernst had met us in Chicago and had said, "Whenever you come to New York, come and stay with us. We have a big house on the East River." I went to the phone booth in the bus station, put in a nickel, and dialed. Max Ernst answered. He didn't recognize my voice. Finally he said, "Are you thirsty?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, come over tomorrow for cocktails." I went back to Xenia and told her what had happened. She said, "Call him back. We have everything to gain and nothing to lose." I did. He said, "Oh! It's you. We've been waiting for you for weeks. Your room's ready. Come right over."

73
Xenia told me once

that when she was a child in Alaska,

she and her friends

had a club

and there was only

one

rule:

No

silliness.

74
When I was in high school I went out, as they say, for oratory. When the Southern California Oratorical Contest came around, the situation was ticklish. L.A. High had won the contest two years in succession. If we won the third year, the cup would stay in the school's possession forever. I was chosen to represent the school and I passed through the sectional contests and came to the finals, which were held in the Hollywood Bowl before an audience of about thirty-five people. My coach, however, informed me the day before that my speech in its written form had gotten a very low grade from the judges, that in order to win in the finals, every single judge would have to give me first place. I decided that the situation was hopeless, and that the only thing to do was to forget about the contest and just say what I had to say. Apparently that's what happened. The cup still belongs to the school.

75
In Zen they say:

If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight,

sixteen,

thirty-two,

and so on.

Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting.

76
At the New School once I was substituting for Henry Cowell, teaching a class in Oriental music. I had told him I didn't know anything about the subject. He said, "That's all right. Just go where the records are. Take one out. Play it and then discuss it with the class." Well, I took out the first record. It was an LP of a Buddhist service. It began with a short microtonal chant with sliding tones, then soon settled into a single loud reiterated percussive beat. This noise continued relentlessly for about fifteen minutes with no perceptible variation. A lady got up and screamed, and then yelled, "Take it off. I can't bear it any longer." I took it off. A man in the class then said angrily, "Why'd you take it off? I was just getting interested."

77
Once over in Amsterdam a Dutch musician said to me,

"It must be very difficult

for you in America

to write music.

You are

so far away

from the centers of tradition."

78
Now giving lecture on Japanese poetry. First giving very old Japanese poem, very classical: ¶ Oh willow tree, // Why are you so sad, willow tree? // Maybe baby? ¶ Now giving nineteenth-century romantic Japanese poem: ¶ Oh bird, sitting on willow tree, // Why are you so sad, bird? // Maybe baby? ¶ Now giving up-to-minute twentieth-century Japanese poem, very modern: ¶ Oh stream, flowing past willow tree, // Why are you so sad, stream? // Baby?

79
I was never psychoanalyzed. I'll tell you how it happened. I always had a chip on my shoulder about psychoanalysis. I knew the remark of Rilke to a friend of his who wanted him to be psychoanalyzed. Rilke said, "I'm sure they would remove my devils, but I fear they would offend my angels." When I went to the analyst for a kind of preliminary meeting, he said, "I'll be able to fix you so that you'll write much more music than you do now." I said, "Good heavens! I already write too much, it seems to me." That promise of his put me off. ¶ And then in the nick of time, Gita Sarabhai came from India. She was concerned about the influence Western music was having on traditional Indian music, and she'd decided to study Western music for six months with several teachers and then return to India to do what she could to preserve the Indian traditions. She studied contemporary music and counterpoint with me. She said, "How much do you charge?" I said, "It'll be free if you'll also teach me about Indian music." We were almost every day together. At the end of six months, just before she flew away, she gave me the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. It took me a year to finish reading it.

80
I once had a job washing dishes at the Blue Bird Tea Room in Carmel, California. I worked twelve hours a day in the kitchen. I washed all the dishes and pots and pans, scrubbed the floor, washed the vegetables, crates of spinach for instance; and if the owner came along and found me resting, she sent me out to the back yard to chop up wood. She paid me a dollar a day. One day I noticed that some famous concert pianist was coming to town to give a recital, and I decided to

finish my work as quickly as possible in order to get to the concert without missing too much of it. I did this. As luck would have it, my seat was next to that of the lady who owned the Blue Bird Tea Room, my employer. I said, "Good evening." She looked the other way, whispered something to her daughter. They both got up and left the hall.

81
Once when Lois Long was on a mushroom walk led by Guy Nearing, a mushroom was found that was quite rare. Guy Nearing told Lois Long that it was Plurotis masticatus. They then walked along and Lois Long, realizing she had already forgotten the name of the mushroom, said to Guy Nearing, "I just can't get the name of that mushroom into my head. In fact, I have a terrible time remembering any of these Latin names." Guy Nearing said, "When you don't know the name of a mushroom, you should say it first to the person in front of you, and then to the person in back of you. Soon, you'll find you remember it."

82
My grandmother was sometimes very deaf and at other times, particularly when someone was talking about her, not deaf at all. One Sunday she was sitting in the living room directly in front of the radio. She had a sermon turned on so loud that it could be heard for blocks around. And yet she was sound asleep and snoring. I tiptoed into the living room, hoping to get a manuscript that was on the piano and get out again without waking her up. I almost did it. But just as I got to the door, the radio went off and Grandmother spoke sharply: "John, are you ready for the second coming of the Lord?"

83
During recent years Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki has done a great deal of lecturing at Columbia University. First he was in the Department of Religion, then somewhere else. Finally he settled down on the seventh floor of Philosophy Hall. The room had windows on two sides, a large table in the middle with ash trays. There were chairs around the table and next to the walls. These were always filled with people listening, and there were generally a few people standing near the door. The two or three people who took the class for credit sat in chairs around the table. The time was four to seven. During this period most people now and then took a little nap. Suzuki never spoke loudly. When the weather was good the windows were open, and the airplanes leaving La Guardia flew directly overhead, drowning out from time to time whatever he had to say. He never repeated what had been said during the passage of the airplane. Three lectures I remember in particular. While he was giving them I couldn't for the life of me figure out what he was saying. It was a week or so later, while I was walking in the woods looking for mushrooms, that it all dawned on me.

84
There was a lady in Suzuki's class

who said once,

"I have great difficulty reading the sermons of Meister Eckhart,

because

of all the Christian imagery."

Dr. Suzuki said,

"That difficulty will disappear."

85
I was on an English boat going from Siracusa in Sicily to Tunis in North Africa. I had taken the cheapest passage and it was a voyage of two nights and one day. We were no sooner out of the harbor than I found that in my class no food was served. I sent a note to the captain saying I'd like to change to another class. He sent a note back saying I could not change and, further, asking whether I had been vaccinated. I wrote back that I had not been vaccinated and that I didn't intend to be. He wrote back that unless I was vaccinated I would not be permitted to disembark at Tunis. We had meanwhile gotten into a terrific storm. The waves were higher than the boat. It was impossible to walk on the deck. The correspondence between the captain and myself continued in deadlock. In my last note to him, I stated my firm intention to get off his boat at the earliest opportunity and without being vaccinated. He then wrote back that I had been vaccinated, and to prove it he sent along a certificate with his signature.

86
Morris Graves introduced Xenia and me to a miniature island in Puget Sound at Deception Pass. To get there we traveled from Seattle about seventy-five miles north and west to Anacortes Island, then south to the Pass, where we parked. We walked along a rocky beach and then across a sandy stretch that was passable only at low tide to another island, continuing through some luxuriant woods up a hill where now and then we had views of the surrounding waters and distant islands, until finally we came to a small footbridge that led to our destination -- an island no larger than, say, a modest home. This island was carpeted with flowers and was so situated that all of Deception Pass was visible from it, just as though we were in the best seats of an intimate theatre. While we were lying there on that bed of flowers, some other people came across the footbridge. One of them said to another, "You come all this way and then when you get here there's nothing to see."

87
I took a number of mushrooms to Guy Nearing, and asked him to name them for me.

He did. On my way home, I began to doubt whether one particular mushroom was what he had called it.

When I got home I got out my books and came to the conclusion that Guy Nearing had made a

One day when I was across the hall visiting Sonya Sekula, I noticed that she was painting left-handed. I said, “Sonya, aren’t you right-handed?” She said, “Yes, but I might lose the use of my right hand, and so I’m practicing using my left.” I laughed and said, “What if you lose the use of both hands?” She was busy painting and didn’t bother to reply. Next day when I visited her, she was sitting on the floor, painting with difficulty, for she was holding the brush between two toes of her left foot.

101
Peggy Guggenheim, Santomaso, and I were in a Venetian restaurant. There were only two other people dining in the same room and they were not conversing. I got to expressing my changed views with regards to the French and the Italians. I said that I had years before preferred the French because of their intelligence and had found the Italians playful but intellectually not engaging; that recently, however, I found the French cold in spirit and lacking in freedom of the mind, whereas the Italians seemed warm and surprising. Then it occurred to me that the couple in the room were French. I called across to them and said, “Are you French?” The lady replied. “We are,” she said, “but we agree with you completely.”

102
Richard Lippold called up and said, “Would you come to dinner and bring the I-Ching?” I said I would. It turned out he’d written a letter to the Metropolitan proposing that he be commissioned for a certain figure to do The Sun. This letter withheld nothing about the excellence of his art, and so he hesitated to send it, not wishing to seem presumptuous. Using the coin oracle, we consulted the I-Ching. It mentioned a letter. Advice to send it was given. Success was promised, but the need for patience was mentioned. A few weeks later, Richard Lippold called to say that his proposal had been answered but without commitment, and that that should make clear to me as it did to him what to think of the I-Ching. A year passed. The Metropolitan Museum finally commissioned The Sun. Richard Lippold still does not see eye to eye with me on the subject of chance operations.

103
The question of leading tones came up in the class in experimental composition that I give at the New School.

I said, “You surely aren’t talking about ascending half-steps in diatonic music. Is it not true that anything leads to whatever follows?”

But the situation is more complex, for things also lead backwards in time.

This also does not give a picture that corresponds with reality. For, it is said, the Buddha’s enlightenment penetrated in every direction to every point in space and time.

104
In connection with my current studies with Duchamp,

it turns out that I'm a poor chess player.

My mind seems in some respect lacking, so that I make obviously stupid moves.

I do not for a moment doubt that this lack of intelligence affects my music and thinking generally.

However, I have a redeeming quality: I was gifted with a sunny disposition.

105
Mies van der Rohe said,

"The least

is the most."

I agree with him completely.

At the same time,

what concerns me now

is quantity.

106
A lady carrying many packages got on a Third Avenue bus. Before she was able to get a seat, the bus lurched forward. The packages fell, several of them on a drunken bum who had been muttering to himself. Looking up at the lady blearily, he said, "Whashish?" The lady answered cheerfully, "Those are Christmas presents, my good man; you know, it's Christmas."

"Hell," he said, "thawashlashyear."

107
David Tudor gives the impression of not being overly fond of mushrooms. But one night he had two helpings of morels and then finished the dish completely, including the juice. The next afternoon while he was shaving I read out loud the following quotation from Leonardo da Vinci: "Lo! Some there are who can call themselves nothing more than a passage for food, producers of dung, fillers up of privies, for of them nothing else appears in the world nor is there any virtue in their work, for nothing of them remains but full privies." David Tudor said, "Perhaps they were good Buddhists."

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