

The Rhetoric of Silence: John Cage, Exigence and the Art of the Commonplace

by

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A thesis  
presented to the University of Waterloo  
in fulfilment of the  
thesis requirement for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
English - Rhetoric and Communication Design

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2009

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## Abstract

This thesis approaches the work of American avant-garde composer John Cage from an unconventional perspective by utilizing rhetorical theory to examine the intellectual history informing his collected writings in the text *Silence* (1961). That historical period encompasses the whole of the commonplace art movement, which sought to have everyday items and experiences supplant art objects. In applying Lloyd F. Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation to the history of the art of the commonplace, a new concept of influence between artists emerges, one where exigences and situations shape popular notions of art. Briefly stated, a recurring exigence appeared throughout this period, bringing with it the necessary parameters for the inclusion of the commonplace within the realm of the art. From William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson through to Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol, this exigence can be seen constraining the actions of artists towards a fitting, persuasive method. It is in John Cage that one finds this new method. Demonstrated through numerous examples of Cage's work, this methodology skews the traditional perception of the artist, forgoing the ego, invoking indeterminacy and using structure to emphasize the process of composition itself. This enabled pieces of music and writing that lacked any discernable intention and therefore invited readers to engage the material therein for what it was originally: sounds and words. The result is, at long last, a persuasive and compelling reason to accept commonplace experiences alongside art works and it is evidenced by the Pop movement that would follow shortly thereafter.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank my advisor, Prof. Kevin McGuirk, for his continual guidance and insightful knowledge. From the outset of this thesis to its conclusion, his suggestions and references helped shape this expansive discussion.

I would also like to thank my reader, Prof. Ken Hirschkop for taking the time to read this paper and providing feedback that would help improve the quality of the argument.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank my family and friends. Their unflappable support was a boon to this thesis that never went unnoticed or unappreciated.

**Contents**

Introduction ..... 1

The Rhetorical Situation..... 5

4'33" ..... 13

The Exigence of the Commonplace ..... 17

The Commonplace Art Movement ..... 20

Reproducing the Commonplace in Art..... 26

Lecture on Nothing ..... 32

The Obstructing Ego..... 39

The Eastern Influence ..... 45

Emerson, Thoreau and the Zen Mind ..... 48

2 Pages, 122 Words on Music and Dance ..... 52

The American Rhetorical Situation ..... 57

Removing the Ego ..... 64

Indeterminacy ..... 74

References ..... 85

## Introduction

In rhetoric, exigences give rise to various rhetorical responses. Rhetorician Lloyd F. Bitzer defines an *exigence* as “an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 6). Such an imperfection can be entirely mundane, such as a by-law issue with the local town council, or it can be indicative of a much broader complication. And while the history of art may not be the first place a rhetorician turns to, it contains one of the more storied and intriguing instances of an exigence. I am referring to the period of crisis when artists and critics began questioning the function of the art object and its role as a representation of Nature and reality. This period of history, ranging from the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, produced numerous influential and prominent artists who perceived something that was “other than it should be.” These canonical writers each successively remarked on the imperfection of the art object and their own writings served to usher in an age of introspection and critical analysis.

Among these artists was William Wordsworth, a renowned poet of his age and now a canonical mainstay. Known for his poetic treatment of the pastoral landscape and lifestyle, it is, ironically, with him that this crisis is first voiced; ironic because his vocalization would engender the works of others who would condemn the poem for its idealization of the everyday. These same artists would also denounce the painting for its abstraction of reality, which was deemed an inferior representation of the sheer beauty of the natural, commonplace experience. In fact, insofar as art mimicked the everyday, it was declared that poems and paintings were at best poor substitutes and at worst misleading objects that detracted from the enjoyment of one’s surroundings. For these men, the mundane experience of daily life rendered the art object

obsolete. It had no office in extracting an idealized scene from an ongoing process. It then became, over the decades, a sort of spiritual crisis for the art object as its very function in society was called into question. Other artists, however, chose to ignore the crisis and they continued, quite successfully, creating pastoral paintings and poems, and the debate fell dormant for a time.

When it resurfaced, it did so with a renewed exigence. It wasn't simply a matter of recognizing the crisis but it had now become a matter of reconciling it. How, for instance, could one use art to reproduce the everyday? During this period various artists attempted to break down the distinction between art and commonplace object. Wine racks, urinals, Brillo boxes, soup cans; all were submitted to art galleries as works that could both be part of the mundane experience *and* appreciated for their own intrinsic value. Each submission was an attempt to move away from idealizing an experience and towards recognizing the import of observing what those idealized paintings and poems had taught us to overlook. In this respect, no one was more successful than John Cage.

For instance, after seating concert hall patrons before a stage, Cage presented them with a piano and a pianist, only to have silence, as nary a key was struck. The audience expected music but what Cage gave them was sounds. As people muttered and shifted and coughed and sneezed in the concert hall, Cage was demonstrating one of the ways of reconciling the art object with the everyday. His work during the nineteen fifties, especially his writing, typifies this mode of reconciliation. The majority of these texts were collected and printed in 1961 in *Silence*.

In looking back, it becomes apparent that this period of crisis is defined by two unique stages. First, the defect or imperfection was detected and vocalized and secondly, attempts were made to resolve the issue. This span of intellectual history is diverse and complex and yet it lends itself to a very unconventional form of interpretation. It is the purpose of this paper to apply

rhetorical theory to this period of intellectual history, so that the exigence that defined it might be better understood. In this respect Lloyd F. Bitzer proves an invaluable resource, for he describes the developmental model of an exigence in two primary stages. In the first, the exigence is recognized by a rhetor or rhetors, though they lack the necessary resources to resolve it. In the second stage, rhetor and audience alike perceive the exigence, and the resources are present for a resolution. Although Bitzer did not necessarily envision his model being used to discuss the intellectual evolution of the art object, it will, nevertheless, be shown to exemplify just how such an evolution took place.

However, if such an approach is considered unconventional, then applying rhetorical theory to the avant-garde works of John Cage would assuredly be deemed downright unorthodox. And yet that is precisely what must be done to perceive the full extent of Cage's attempt to reconcile this crisis. It is from a rhetorical perspective that one comes to appreciate the ingenuity of Cage's method; a method that seeks to reproduce, through the forms of traditional art, the very process of the everyday. Such an examination should prove informative as both an application of rhetorical theory to a period of intellectual history and to Cage scholars interested in the impact of the history and function of rhetoric in his seminal works.

This paper will begin by introducing the rhetorical theory that will be used. Then the period of intellectual history integral to Cage's work will be briefly discussed. From that period numerous factors or constraints arise, such as structure and the role of the author, all of which follow from tradition. However, since the exigence calls for a radical rethinking of traditional methods, these constraints inhibit the resolution of the exigence. The focus, then, of the paper becomes an analysis of those constraints and how they are subverted or eliminated by Cage in his

attempt to develop a new method. All of this is couched within rhetorical theory in order to exhibit this process in its simplest form.

## The Rhetorical Situation

In 1968 Lloyd F. Bitzer's essay "The Rhetorical Situation" was first published in the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. In the paper Bitzer proposed that certain circumstances give rise to a special situation, one that "calls [a] discourse into action" (2). Such a situation is inherently rhetorical for rhetoric "is a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action" and said situation presents an opportunity to "produce action or change in the world" ("The Rhetorical Situation" 4). This 'rhetorical situation' arises from "a natural context of persons, events, objects, relations, and an exigence which strongly invites utterance" (Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation" 5). Bitzer proceeds to qualify the relationship between rhetoric and situation with seven necessary criteria:

(1) rhetorical discourse comes into existence as a response to situation, in the same sense that an answer comes into existence in response to a question, or a solution in response to a problem; (2) a speech is given rhetorical significance by the situation, just as a unit of discourse is given significance as answer or as solution by the question or problem; (3) a rhetorical situation must exist as a necessary condition of rhetorical discourse, just as a question must exist as a necessary condition of an answer; (4) many questions go unanswered and many problems remain unsolved; similarly, many rhetorical situations mature and decay without giving birth to rhetorical utterance; (5) a situation is rhetorical insofar as it needs and invites discourse capable of participating with situation and thereby altering its reality; (6) discourse is rhetorical insofar as it functions (or seeks to function) as a fitting response to a situation which needs and invites it. (7) Finally, the

situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution.” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 5-6)

These criteria help identify what constitutes a rhetorical situation, namely an unanswered question or unaddressed problem that is capable of resolution through discourse. Within this framework, a ‘fitting response’ is understood to be one that satisfactorily addresses the question at hand. Such a question need not be directly or even overtly stated and it may occur naturally, arising from various circumstances while accruing urgency. A sufficiently pressing question is referred to by Bitzer as an *exigence*: “Any *exigence* is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 6). It is worth noting that only those exigences that can be altered through discourse are rhetorical, eliminating such inevitabilities as death and the changing of the seasons.

Another definitive quality of an exigence is its capacity to be perceived by a rhetor as either clear or obscure, thereby accounting for a single exigence engendering a myriad of responses (Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation” 7). Thus, a rhetor may recognize an exigence obscurely and subsequently craft a response that may prove unfitting and ineffective. Or as Bitzer himself rephrases it, “One might say metaphorically that every situation prescribes its fitting response; the rhetor may or may not read the prescription accurately” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 11). However, when it is perceived clearly and “when it is strong and important, then it constrains the thought and action of the perceiver” with the potential to engender a fitting response (Bitzer “The Rhetorical Situation” 7).

Along with *exigence*, Bitzer identifies two other key components of a rhetorical situation: audience and the constraints of the situation. According to Bitzer’s definition of the rhetorical, it logically follows that an audience is necessary. However, said audience “consists only of those

persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation” 8). It is on this issue that Bitzer eliminates scientific and poetic discourses. In his estimation “a poet’s creative purpose is accomplished when the work is composed” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 8). And while a poet presents his/her works to an audience, that audience consists of “persons capable of participating in aesthetic experiences induced by the poetry” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 8). However, history provides numerous examples to the contrary, especially when one considers political-activist art. We could spend paragraphs debunking Bitzer’s claim here that art is an end in itself, however the examples throughout this paper sufficiently demonstrate the fallacy of this stance, especially those taken from John Cage. However, Cage is not a traditional rhetor, and the persuasive capacity of his works lie not in the text itself but in the process of composition. This will become clearer as this paper progresses.

The second component of a rhetorical situation is the constraints inhibiting or inducing the actions of a rhetor. In his entry on the rhetorical situation in *The Encyclopedia of Rhetoric* James Jasinski refers to these constraints as “obstacles that influence or impede an advocate’s ability to engage an exigence successfully” such as “history (past events, traditions, etc.), people, present events, recognized facts, values and beliefs, discursive conventions, written documents (contracts, letters, etc.), authoritative documents (the Bible, the U.S. Constitution), physical location, and other important economic, social, and cultural factors” (Jasinski). It is important to note that constraints are not exclusively inhibitory. They can not only localize an exigence but certain ‘functional constraints’ actually serve to help bring about a fitting resolution.

It follows from this definition that constraints give rise to exigences, as well as define the context in which they persist. Constraints, so far as they encompass “history,” “facts,” “values

and beliefs,” “economic, cultural, and social factors” all serve to differentiate the perspective of one audience member from the next. They can hinder us and keep us apart but, as Kenneth Burke notes, rhetoric is that which allows us to mediate those differences: “If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity” (Burke 22).

Bitzer would later expand upon functional constraints in a 1980 essay entitled “Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective.” In the paper he indicates that a rhetor may possess certain qualities or experiences that rather than inhibit a response actually assist in manifesting a fitting one. Such resources may be as superficial as an attractive running mate in an election or as poignant as a crucial experience in international politics. Either way, these functional constraints serve to aid in the resolution of an exigence.

However, the main contribution of “Functional Communication” was its postulation of a developmental model of the rhetorical situation. Here Bitzer outlines four distinct stages that represent the evolution of an exigence, the first two of which are of primary importance to this paper. The first of those stages begins when

...an exigence comes into existence (we assume that someone recognizes it). However, a situation is not fully developed or mature until audience and constraints are also present, because only then can a message harness constraints sufficient to influence the audience to modify the exigence. The duration of Stage 1, therefore, will continue until audience and constraints become available. During this time any discourse which seeks to modify the exigence directly will be fruitless because either audience or constraints are lacking. Thus messages created during Stage 1 will have a subordinate purpose grounded in a subordinate exigence: to cultivate an audience inasmuch as one is needed or to generate constraints, which are lacking. (“Functional Communication” 34)

In the context of this paper Stage 1 roughly will be said to span from the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also pertinent to note the rhetor's inefficacy at this stage as it will be demonstrated that the inability to address an exigence comes to define some highly influential texts and even entire careers throughout the past two hundred years.

The second stage is demarcated by a maturity of the exigence, such that “[a] situation is mature when its constituents are present and in a favourable relationship to each other: the exigence is present and perceived, often by speaker and audience; the audience is capable of modifying the exigence and can be easily addressed; operative constraints are available” (“Functional Communication” 34). Bitzer remarks that “The duration of this stage may be no more than a moment” or it “may continue for a lengthy period of time” (“Functional Communication” 34-5). In the context of this paper the duration of this stage is roughly from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s.

Of the first two stages of the developmental model Bitzer outlines one particular scenario:

Although some situations mature easily and yield to a single rhetorical response at a peak moment during Stage 2, other situations will not mature unless the rhetor launches a campaign of discourse—until he presents messages at strategic moments during the first and second stages in order to form an audience, interest and educate it, develop constraints, dramatize the exigence, and then modify it at the most opportune time.

(“Functional Communication” 35)

It is my contention that the history of commonplace art exemplifies this particular scenario of the developmental model such that artists from William Wordsworth through to Marcel Duchamp presented “messages at strategic moments...in order to form an audience, interest and educate it,

[and] develop constraints,” while John Cage’s work during the 1950s served to “dramatize the exigence, and then modify it at the most opportune time.”

In the final two stages the exigence becomes increasingly difficult to address until it ‘disintegrates’ at which point resolution is deemed impossible. This developmental model will prove instrumental in my analysis of the commonplace art movement, which is comprised of those artists that advocated the recognition and examination of everyday objects in place of the art object. Collectively these artists were addressing an aspect of the artworld which was other than it should be. This ‘commonplace exigence’ represented a defect in how the audience perceived objects and it is the motivating factor behind each contribution to the commonplace art movement. However, before we delve further into this topic there is one final rhetorical concept that will prove illuminating.

In regards to Bitzer’s aforementioned scenario where the rhetor “presents messages at strategic moments” in order to “modify [the exigence] at the most opportune time” consider the following definition of the rhetorical concept of *kairos* as recognizing “the opportune moment” to “bring what people believe and think closer to the demands of the situation”(Sutton). It would appear as though this specialized scenario within Bitzer’s developmental model, the very same scenario which I contend the commonplace art movement underwent, is an instance of a *kairos*. By introducing such a term we can gain a new appreciation for not only the skill but the timing that was requisite for Cage’s rhetorical response. The term itself is ambiguous, as Jane Sutton relates: “The origin and etymology of *kairos* is uncertain” such that the term comes to signify three qualities; “first, *kairos* calls for decisive action; second, it refers to the right moment to speak; third, it expresses what is appropriate” (Sutton). It is my contention that John Cage’s *Silence*, along with his other works in 1950s, fulfills all three definitions, further emphasizing the

import of a rhetorical analysis as well as highlighting the fortuitous timing of his work. That being said, such timing was no mere coincidence.

Throughout this paper I will be arguing that the artworld in America in the 1950s was the second stage of a rhetorical situation and that in that time operative constraints were collated or created by Cage which enabled him to contribute to the resolution of the exigence of that situation. That such a resolution occurred is evidenced, in part, by Arthur Danto proclaiming that art “has passed over into a kind of consciousness of itself and become...its own philosophy” (Danto vii). Such a “consciousness of itself” signified that the situation now represented the exigence; both the question and the answer were now present in the situation. However, before moving forward it may be beneficial to provide a brief example of these concepts so that they may be clearly understood before moving into a more complex scenario.

#### An Example of the Developmental Model of a Rhetorical Situation

Consider the exigence presented by global warming. Here we have an urgent issue that can be handled with discourse such that a rhetor may step forward and convince law makers that action must be taken to prevent unchecked pollution. Here, the audience consist of the legislators who are capable of passing laws that would restrict or prohibit pollution. Some constraints might include the economic climate (banning pollution may dissuade companies from building factories or may force the closure of plants) or the political climate (the party in power may not be concerned with the environment). Decades prior to the general global acceptance of climate change, scientists, environmentalists and advocacy groups recognized the growing environmental crisis brought on by excessive pollution. However, they lacked the proper audience and the necessary constraints. People were not sufficiently convinced that there was an

exigence or that it was attributable to pollution. Thus, any efforts to pass legislation in an effort to resolve this exigence were fruitless. However, this engendered a subordinate exigence whereby rhetors cognizant of this exigence set about to “cultivate an audience” and to “generate constraints.” A key rhetor in this vein would be Al Gore whose globe spanning lectures on the urgency of action against global warming have generated a widespread audience that is now capable of recognizing the exigency.

Moving into the second stage, climate change would have to be perceived by the audience as an urgent issue that requires immediate attention. What’s more, operative constraints would have to be available such as sufficient methods by which pollution could be reduced and the election of representatives whose agenda is to enforce such methods.

An example of a *kairos* in this instance could consist of pro-environmental leaders being simultaneously elected in countries around the world thereby enabling a concentrated global effort to rectify the damages caused by pollution on the planet, thereby resolving the exigence.

## 4'33''

John Cage's 4'33'' calls for audience members to gather in a theatre for a piano performance where no note is ever struck. Instead, during a four and a half minute demonstration, the pianist lifts and closes the lid covering the keys, demarcating the three movements. The time length and the representation of the movements are the only formal elements of structure present in the piece and as such Cage is able to emphasize the realization that the apparent silence that permeated the hall between orchestral performances is a fallacy. The common sounds of an audience, the creaking of chairs, shuffling of feet, even the noises out on the street, were allowed to enter into the musical space. That space had long been reserved for organized, rehearsed, and regurgitated works. In other words, it was for strictly structured, memorized, and uncommon sounds. Music, like a well written speech, allowed the composer to present from that stage a fixed, concrete message of carefully chosen elements. Conversely, 4'33'' appropriated the space for a loosely structured, unpredictable, and common performance. To make a rhetor out of Cage for such a piece would, at first blush, seem absurd. But a careful examination reveals that the persuasive capacity of 4'33'', indeed all of Cage's works during this period, resides not in the material itself but in its method of composition.

Consider the elements that Cage employs in composing the 'silent' piece. There is a pianist that never strikes a key, a piano that is never played, a stage that is never performed upon, and a concert hall that contains no music. Such a setting provides the structure intended to focus the audience, an effect heightened by the absence of the expected. What remains is the unintended sounds of dozens of concert hall patrons and the chaos of the city beyond the doors. In Cage's terminology, this is referred to as "purposeful purposelessness." This simple statement provides the artist with a rhetorically charged methodology. The purposelessness of a cough, of a

blaring car horn, of wood moaning as a patron shifts in his/her seat; these mere sounds exhibit the ever-present noises denigrated by music. For John Cage, the ideal set of notes, tones, rhythm, and timbre, essentially the art of music, have abstracted sounds so far from reality that the audience has forgotten the origin of noise: “Why should they imagine that sounds are not interesting in themselves? I’m always amazed when people say, ‘Do you mean it’s just sounds?’ How they can imagine that it’s anything but sounds is what’s so mysterious” (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 249-50).

This position reveals a stance being taken in the ongoing crisis in the art world. On the one side there is music; the harmonious ordering of sounds, that distinguishes itself from the cacophony of everyday noise. And yet, from a “purposeful purposelessness” perspective, music is abstract, an idealized detractor from appreciating common sounds. *4’33’’* emphatically argues for the latter through a rhetorically charged process.

When Bitzer discredited the rhetorical capacity of art, claiming its end was achieved in its composition, *4’33’’* rebuts by including the audience in the composition itself. And while there are poetic audiences which merely seek to, as Bitzer claims, “participate in an aesthetic experience,” those present at a *4’33’’* performance are not only participating in the creation of that experience, they are actively demonstrating the fallacy of separating music from sounds.

Bitzer counteracts by stating that “the rhetorical audience must be capable of serving as mediator of the change which the discourse functions to produce” (“The Rhetorical Situation” 8). But consider two audiences, one having just seen a performance of Mozart’s *Piano Concerto No. 24* and the other audience having just departed from a concert hall following a performance of *4’33’’*. The former will no doubt be discussing how the piece was performed by the musicians and, subsequently, with what accuracy or majesty. They will, in short, be discussing the import

of the aesthetic experience, thereby offering commentary and criticism without necessarily considering what such sounds offer that everyday sounds do not. In contrast, the 4'33'' audience is left to consider just such a distinction. The piece, in its shift from structuring sounds to providing just a structure, forces questions about the import of commonly occurring noises; as a demonstration it invariably prompts discussions of perceptual change, just as a rhetorical work should. This does not mean, nor did Bitzer intend it to, that the audience *must* accept what is being suggested but rather a rhetorical audience must be capable of engaging a rhetorical work just as a mediator must engage an answer in determining how well it suits the question.

With 4'33'', Cage took the very basic structure of music (both in time/movements and literally the concert hall) and used it to demonstrate the pervasive quality of sound. And just as a work of art asks the audience to participate in an aesthetic experience, 'silence' in a concert hall requests the very same attention. Such an act suggests that an appreciation of commonplace sounds leads to an experience that can parallel, or perhaps even exceed, that produced by music. After all, music is simply organized, uncommon sounds. Cage's argument here is that if one learns to forgo this idealized scenario, the world becomes rife with pleasing experiences; what's more, even those pleasing moments of serenity, studied and formalized by music for reproduction, can be found to occur naturally.

This 'sound' demonstration of the crisis between art and the everyday serves as a preamble for Cage's writing, where he attempts to reproduce the same effect: "I hope to let words exist, as I have tried to let sounds exist" he says (Charles 151). It is this endeavour to reproduce the everyday in language that results in the most persuasive attempt to reconcile the art object with the everyday and resolve the crisis.

A crisis, in so far as is it can be resolved through discourse, is nearly synonymous with an exigence. It persists as something waiting to be done, a problem awaiting resolution. Given that this crisis revolves around the import of commonplace sights, sounds, and experiences, I will refer to this it throughout the paper as the exigence of the commonplace or simply, the commonplace exigence. This terminology captures the divide within the art world, while introducing the rhetorical theory that will prove instrumental in analyzing Cage's work. It also represents a subtle, though markedly distinct, application of both Bitzer's rhetorical situation and the concept of exigence, as they are generally reserved for concrete scenarios, best exemplified in political matters. A recurring example is the death of a country's leader and the necessity for a proper eulogy. Here, the exigence is readily present, as it appears in newspapers and broadcasts across the country, and its resolution is a rather straight-forward affair in what is a rather finite situation.

I will be arguing for a different type of exigence throughout this paper, one that is far less finite. Whereas the typical rhetorical situation is embedded in social and historical circumstances, it is my contention that the intellectual history of art in the West provides a unique situation, with its own particular exigence.

## The Exigence of the Commonplace

The great deniers of influence—Goethe, Nietzsche, Mann in Germany; Emerson and Thoreau in America...these men are enormous fields of the anxiety of influence

– Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*

Within the typical rhetorical situation, social and historical influences comprise the constraints that provide rhetors with the necessary parameters and resources to resolve an exigence. While these factors certainly contribute to the rhetorical situation of the commonplace, there is a distinct and particular influence impacting on those artists who participated in its resolution. Various critics and theorists have attempted to identify and explicate the peculiar influence that exists in the art world. Perhaps most notable among them is Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, a theory that identifies a fundamentally causal chain of influence operating between the 'Great' poets throughout history. The theory demonstrates how, for example, the considerable influence of John Milton caused anxiety that would later appear in the works of William Wordsworth. In this case, Wordsworth actively responded to Milton's influence by "deliberately misinterpreting" his poetry. The result, according to Bloom, is a work or series of works that demonstrates a 'swerving' (what Bloom denotes as a *clinamen*) from the poetry of the "father poet," such that in Wordsworth we find a 'new' or 'revised' Milton.

Bloom's theory, insofar as it addresses the intricate relationship between influential artists, can prove illuminating in examining the interrelationships of such pivotal art of the commonplace figures as Marcel Duchamp, D.T. Suzuki, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau and William Wordsworth. These artists, to varying degrees, impacted on one another, creating sites of anxiety, thereby lending themselves to interpretation under

Bloom's theory. Where the anxiety of influence proves insufficient, is in the multifaceted origins of John Cage's writing.

Cage attributes his personal philosophy to a multitude of sources and research confirms that his works are born from a collection of artists from varying fields. It follows that the writings that fill *Silence* arise more from a milieu rather than a single "field" of influence. Rhetorical theory, attuned to identifying constraints and sources of influence, provides us with a set of concepts and a developmental model that make it beneficial to rethink influence in terms of a rhetor and a rhetorical situation. From this perspective, the anxiety behind Cage's writing is not between himself and his predecessors but instead the two are united in their collective attempt to resolve an exigence. This is not a traditional exigence, but one that resides in the intellectual history of the art object. That history, though invariably intertwined with social and cultural influences, remains unobserved by rhetorical theory. And yet it proves elucidating in analyzing the intricate relationship between past and present artists and the situations in which they operate.

It is my contention that while various factors connect the proponents of commonplace art, what truly binds these artists together is their consistent attempts to address a persistent exigence. Said exigence is the apparent fallacy of distinguishing between art objects and those mundane experiences encountered in everyday life. It follows that those artists advocating the natural, everyday experience over the art object were engaged in similar attempts to resolve the commonplace exigence. Such attempts were intellectual efforts to persuade respective audiences to rethink the art object, efforts that invariably created constraints for subsequent artists. Thus, in analyzing Cage's involvement in the commonplace art movement it becomes necessary to depict his place in this unique rhetorical process of influence.

I will argue that this process first began with William Wordsworth and that it persisted in Western art, continually being recognized and addressed by poets and philosophers as an aspect of the art world that was ‘other than it should be.’ The works produced by these artists will be shown to be attempts to resolve the exigence as they endeavour to correct the misconception that everyday objects are inferior to art objects. Cage finds his place among these artists as their most persuasive contributor. His works exemplify the principle tenements of the movement while introducing key insights in both philosophy and methodology, both of which are readily apparent in his works. Yet the context that produced those works is the product of Cage’s predecessors; as the fruition of the movement is the result of a developing situation. Thus, when necessary, I will discuss the intellectual history to provide a proper context for Cage’s writings, for each attempt to address the commonplace exigence marked a contribution, such that, by the 1950s a significant body of work was influencing not just artists but everyday people. This ensured that Cage’s audience was a rhetorical one when it came to the matter of commonplace art, meaning they were able to enact and embrace the change his work endeavoured to bring about. The teleology here is implicit in light of the rhetorical reading, as an exigence implies a resolution, and as such, any attempt to discuss Cage’s work without addressing the origin of that teleology would be remiss. Thus, in George J. Leonard’s *Into the Light of Things* one finds this progressive movement in the history of art mapped out.

## The Commonplace Art Movement

It is the contention of this paper that the foundation on which Cage built some of his most seminal works developed from the rhetorical labour of such pivotal predecessors as William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. These artists, though operating some one hundred years prior to Cage, provided crucial precursory works. These contributions, however, are not readily perceived as rhetorical and so in scholarly efforts one finds a different name attached to the same connection. For George J. Leonard, that connection is a sort of “religious reorientation.” As previously stated, the ongoing crisis as to whether art should continue to denigrate the commonplace had within it a spiritual component, in that it was an introspective question that probed to the very essence of art itself. Commonplace art proponents, after all, would have poems and paintings cast aside in favour of ‘natural experiences.’ For Leonard, this served as an orientation, that “suggests getting one’s bearings, redirecting oneself, suggests a change in where one looks for something” (Leonard 24). The implication here, and the argument of Leonard’s text, is that the religious experience, though typically idealized and supernatural, was being sought after by certain poets and writers in the natural world. “Wordsworth and Emerson would re-orient humanity’s devotion from the next world to this one,” Leonard proclaims (24).

Up until this point the traditional orientation was that artists and poets were attempting to replicate the divine in their artworks, such that, it was the office of art to produce the ideal depiction of an object or a moment. This would eventually lead to the degradation of commonplace experiences, as the eyes and ears of the audience were attuned by artists towards the idyllic. Thus, traditional artists sought to depict something of the divine, while those of the new movement wished to reveal the ideal in the everyday. But while this matter is undoubtedly

steeped in a religious context, it unfolds according to rhetorical principles and theories. One need not supplant one with the other. Instead, in mapping rhetorical theory to this period of intellectual history, rhetoric should be seen to encompass Leonard's religious interpretation, if only because of the pervasive presence of rhetoric throughout this process. This pervasiveness becomes apparent in the progression of Leonard's argument, which I will briefly summarize in the following pages. Such a summary will not only establish the significance of a rhetorical reading but it also provides the necessary context for analyzing Cage in the same mode.

### Into the Light of Things

The progression of Leonard's argument is set to the chronological development of this new religious orientation, a timeline that begins with William Wordsworth and his prediction of a 'blissful hour' when the audience would be capable of appreciating the mundane with the same capacity as a Romantic poet. Wordsworth's efforts were marked by a decided resignation that his audience was incapable of treating the everyday with the same reverence that they bestowed upon art works. Instead, the cause was re-appropriated into the American context by Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson, both of whom perceived the issue at hand and sought to rectify it, each in his own way. This process of perceiving or recognizing a new movement or "orientation," I would argue, is in fact a sophisticated example of the development of an exigence within a rhetorical situation. After all, it becomes clear that these artists perceived something that was "other than it should be" and they sought to resolve the complication through their writing.

The fact that audiences were generally not persuaded by their arguments, then, becomes not so much a matter of their mastery of the medium, as an endemic aspect of the rhetorical

situation. This follows from the artists' position in first stage of the development and thus, in accordance with Bitzer's theory, they were incapable of resolving the exigence. The necessary constraints, those factors and resources that sufficiently ground a resolution, were not present. Instead, it falls to these figures, who first articulated the problem at hand, to create the resources needed to substantiate a resolution. Those constraints include bodies of work that have endeavoured to persuade the audience of such resolution. In the first stage of commonplace art, that resolution was portrayed as the abolition of the sanctified art work and the concurrent acceptance of the everyday as its aesthetic replacement. Those bodies of work contributing to the argument include Wordsworth's *Prospectus*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and Emerson's *Art*.

The task then falls to those in the second stage to utilize those constraints and, with an audience previously exposed to such notions, finally achieve a measure of resolution. This developmental model is, in many ways, a simplified account of influence operating within this period of intellectual history.

Whether or not this period constitutes a religious orientation is irrelevant in this context for in this rhetorical approach one need not confound the matter with abstract notions in order to explicate matters of influence. However, this is precisely what Leonard does with his inclusion of and reliance on the concept of the *Weltanschauung*.

### Weltanschauung

For Leonard, the *Weltanschauung* is integral not only in his analysis of Cage's work but in guarding his argument against the rigid causality that is the 'anxiety of influence.' Leonard characterizes Bloom's theory as "an elegant version of the simplest idea of causal relationships" (Leonard 81). He counters with the influential capacity of the *Weltanschauung*, a concept that

explains why “the truly successful teachers—‘the teachers of the teachers’—need not be read at all” for “[t]hey have become incorporated into the *Weltanschauung*,” meaning that they are now part of the collective knowledge of a society (80). It then follows that “[a]ny really successful writer no longer has to be read” (83). From this standpoint, a causal chain of influence such as father-poet to son-poet is simply insufficient: “As soon as we recall the familiar idea of the *Weltanschauung*, we realize Bloom’s theory pointedly ignores it. Theories such as Bloom’s require direct contacts, require the later poet to be consciously aware of the ‘precursor’s’ work in a detail which is often quite unlikely...it is too simple an idea of cultural causal relationships to stand by itself” (Leonard 81). For these reasons Leonard proceeds to analyze Cage in terms of causal and *Weltanschauung* influences, thereby divesting himself from what he perceives to be the largest threat to his line of argument: Harold Bloom.

Indeed, analyzing Cage in Bloomian terms of paternal-influence and ego-anxiety would be far too reductionist and antithetical to Cage’s ego-less work. However, the *Weltanschauung* is at best insufficient and at worst misleading when it comes to a rhetorical analysis of Cage. For example, in dismissing Bloom, Leonard claims that integral terms to the ‘anxiety of influence,’ such as *kenosis* (an “undoing” of a influential poet’s strength) and *askesis* (an artist’s diminishing of external influences towards solipsism) are too convenient, capable of explaining away pertinent complications: “Kenosis, askesis, and the rest are so sweeping, they can explain *any* lack of resemblance or lack of evidence as some intricate kind of influence” (82). But then Leonard proceeds to introduce the notion of the *Weltanschauung*, a term that by its very definition is outside of causality and objectivity. It doesn’t convey meaning; it “betrays” it (Kuhns 89). Definitively trying to determine what constitutes a culture’s *Weltanschauung* is about as exact as asserting the definitive list of canonical texts. It is ever-changing, constantly

being revised and far too subjective to suit our needs here. Besides, Leonard's reliance on the *Weltanschauung* complicates what is essentially a developmental series of rhetorical situations.

For these reasons I have supplanted the *Weltanschauung* with the rhetorical situation, thereby adopting a more refined framework in which to work. Thus, we can analyze the two principal stages in commonplace art without having to delve into questions of what constitutes the *Weltanschauung* of each era. Instead, the commonplace exigence provides a very concrete influence, one that is apparent in the works and criticism of this period, epitomizing the very nature of the crisis and creating a central site of influence.

However, in criticizing concepts hindered by subjectivity, I must address Bitzer's notion of 'fittingness'; a subjective concept that would appear to typify the all-too convenient terminology for which Leonard criticizes Bloom. When I speak of Cage's text *Silence* as an 'appropriate' or 'fitting' response to the rhetorical situation at hand I mean that that text reconciles the disparity between the exigence and the situation; it represents a clear recognition of the exigence, tailors its argument to that particular rhetorical audience and is predicated (though not necessarily consciously) on those past attempts to address the same exigence. I hope to exhibit this last point by demonstrating the restrictive constraints that stymied previous proponents of the commonplace (such constraints, it will be shown, were either eliminated over time or subverted by Cage himself). It is important to note that 'fittingness' is not to be associated with morality, but rather it indicates that the artist engaged the situation in a successful attempt to alter "what people think and believe." Failing to address the demands of the situation, such as failing to recognize the immutability of a larger exigence, can result in an art work that appears 'ahead of its time' (as evidenced by Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau). Such works often create operative constraints for subsequent rhetors as they can shape future

rhetorical situations but they also highlight the obstacles that prevented such works from resolving the exigence when it was first recognized.

It is an integral part of this thesis to demonstrate the development of these constraints. Initially they arise from tradition as inhibitory and resistant to change but over time they are subverted or modified to become operative. Chief among them are form, structure, the ego of the author, and, most resistant of all, the long held belief of what constitutes 'art.' Throughout this paper these constraints will be explicated in both their inhibitive and operative forms. Cage, as a contributor to the transformation of such constraints, utilizes them to invent a method of reproducing the commonplace in works of art, thereby allowing everyday experiences to coexist in the same capacity as traditional art objects.

## Reproducing the Commonplace in Art

“I hope to let words exist, as I have tried to let sounds exist”

– John Cage, *For the Birds*

John Cage’s writing stems from a simple, however uncommon, philosophy. It is an amalgam of American tradition, Eastern philosophy, personal experience, and artistic influences. All of which have converged into a worldview that accepts meaning as inherent in the everyday. Cage revealed as much when he stated that “As soon as you surpass the level of the word, everything changes; my essays...didn’t deal with the question of the impossibility or possibility of meaning. They took for granted meaning exists” (Charles 114). For Cage, metaphysical notions at the very least obscure our perceptions of mere real things. At their worst, they misconstrue reality as something inferior to the ordered, formal patterns attainable through traditional artistic methods. What’s more, if one does away with metaphysical, abstract notions what is invariably left is the everyday process.

One of the fundamental differences in Cage’s approach to the commonplace exigence is his belief that what he is trying to persuade the audience of is self-evident. From this position he presents a decidedly different mode of persuasion, one of demonstration rather than dissemination. Such a revised approach provides a more fitting response to the exigence, just as a more sufficient answer better satisfies a question. While previous answers to the exigence helped shape that outcome, as they contributed to the constraints that developed over a century and a half, they were attempts hindered by a lack of constraints, doomed by the limitations of the first stage of a rhetorical situation. Those limitations include the traditional concepts of form and structure and the notion of the poet as the source of insight and knowledge. Through various

factors, however, those impediments were subverted or eliminated or converted into operative constraints. In order to analyze Cage's resolution it is necessary to examine these constraints, all of which are related to the traditional notion of the art object as 'ideal.'

### The Ideal Commonplace

I, long before the blissful hour arrives,  
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse  
Of this great consummation

-William Wordsworth, *Prospectus*

In *Into the Light of Things* George J. Leonard maintains that the influence of William Wordsworth instigated a spiritual movement that, though ill-fitted to his own time, would nevertheless, one day, encounter an opportunity by which it could be incorporated into cultural belief. This is not to overstate Wordsworth's predictive abilities, for he aptly recognized that the situation was incapable of supporting such change. One reason for this was the impending industrial revolution, which Wordsworth perceived as a move away from 'natural' everyday objects. In fact, much of the history of the art of the commonplace is concerned with the industrial revolution. Artists in the movement approach this influx of technology and machinery into everyday lives from a variety of perspectives. But, as we shall see, a fitting response to the exigence develops from the acceptance of all objects, 'natural' or 'man made,' into the definition of the commonplace. The task before Wordsworth, however, was simply to convince the audience of the import of the former.

In understanding Wordsworth, Leonard directs us to a passage written by Samuel Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* claiming that it was Wordsworth's task "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us" (442). In other words, it was the objective of the poet to disseminate the virtues of the commonplace through the traditional form of poetry. This task, according to Leonard, was one that Wordsworth embraced and, what's more, it became a goal of his to confer this skill on the common person. Yet, he realized the latter was beyond his means to achieve. This followed from his belief that the masses still had to be guided; they needed poetry and poets to demonstrate how and why one should appreciate commonplace things. In short, people needed Wordsworth and poets like him "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day." Or to put it in Bitzer's rhetorical terms, Wordsworth perceived an exigence but did not believe the audience was capable of being the mediators of change. What's more, such change was too drastic to be immediately manifested; few constraints were present and those that were, were not at all operative. Thus, this time period marks the beginning of the first stage of the commonplace exigence.

Leonard attests to this when he surmises that "[w]hat [Wordsworth] offers, then, is not a theory of mind, not even a theory of what 'poetry' *is*, but a daring Vision of what poetry must become" (Leonard 55). Such a statement emphasizes that Wordsworth was cognizant of the commonplace exigence as well as his own inability to directly address it. For Leonard, this teleological assertion about poetry reveals itself in Wordsworth's "Prospectus." Therein, says Leonard, between the passage predicting Paradise and that of fitting the mind to the world, resides a passage connecting the two ideas:

I, long before the blissful hour arrives,  
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse,  
Of this great consummation...( Wordsworth 53)

For Leonard this passage reveals Wordsworth as “he prays for strength while waiting for the ‘blissful hour’ of full transfiguration: the very event which Danto, Sandler, and the others observed in the 1960s, the hour when the art object could at last be put aside and all mere real things were finally, and reverentially appreciated in its stead” (57). And thus, the “Prospectus” is “[his] prayer for the ‘end of art’” (Leonard 57). That over a hundred and seventy years later a critic proclaimed an end had been reached is hardly a coincidence but in the context of this paper it is important to note the sense of a conclusion Wordsworth’s ‘blissful hour’ conveys on art.

Consider the above passage in a larger context:

...Paradise, groves  
Elysian, Fortunate Fields – like those of old  
Sought in the Atlantic Main – why should they be  
A history only of departed things,  
Or a mere fiction of what never was?  
For the discerning intellect of Man  
When wedded to this goodly universe  
In love and holy passion, shall find these  
A simple produce of the common day.  
-I, long before the blissful hour arrives  
Would chant, in lonely peace, the spousal verse  
Of this great consummation (Wordsworth 52-3)

This passage identifies, among other things, an exigence waiting to be addressed in that the “intellect of Man” is not yet “wedded to this goodly universe,” and thus we are unable to perceive Paradise. In other words, all that is needed to reach Paradise is to recognize it in the “simple produce of the common day.” However, this is a recognition Wordsworth does not believe he can persuade his audience of: “I, long before the blissful hour arrives.” In accordance with Bitzer’s definition, a situation is only rhetorical if the audience can be the mediators of change. And yet Wordsworth clearly believes the opposite; only time will bring about this “blissful hour” and until then the poet remains “in lonely peace” in his recognition of paradise in “the simple produce of the common day.”

Nevertheless, Wordsworth may expedite the process by telling the audience of the virtues of the mundane, everyday experience. Thus, each passage extolling the ‘simple produce’ acts to constrain the focus of the audience, thereby establishing parameters for subsequent artists who wish to further the cause. In this manner Wordsworth participates in the first stage of the development of the situation by simply relying on his considerable influence as a poet to have the commonplace, at the very least, present in minds of the audience. He then leaves it to subsequent artists, now addressing a more cognizant audience, to further the argument.

In a similar vein Walt Whitman sought to embrace this methodology of ‘directing the gaze without telling one what to see.’ In contrast to the instructional methods of a ‘great poet,’ Whitman proclaims that we will “no longer take things at second or third hand nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books” adding that “You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me” (Whitman 22). And so despite similar agendas between Wordsworth and Whitman, the latter took steps to recast the audience, altering the rhetorical act in the process. Furthermore, in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman, unlike Wordsworth, steadfastly

believes that his audience is capable of being the mediators of change; they need read only one last text. If it is as Coleridge claims, that Wordsworth's task was "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention to the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us," (Coleridge 442) then Whitman's method is a reductionist version.

Wordsworth, so far as Coleridge was considered, was imparting something about the commonplace; like Virgil in his *Georgics*, Wordsworth was using language to elevate the everyday. Emerson, Whitman, and all those who followed thereafter utilized language as no more than a referent, a gesture.

*Leaves of Grass* was a step closer but it retained the traditional mode: an enlightened poet intentionally organizing material through ideal form and structure. In essence, this method praised the mundane through the most refined and uncommon method of the poem. But to reevaluate and reinvent the traditional method was far too radical to happen in but an instant of intellectual history. It took over a century for the intellectual, philosophical, and theoretical resources to accrue before one could fittingly address the exigence, which called for a new methodology. The resulting method produced many of Cage's works in the 1950s, including his lectures, but it also initiated a rebellion against traditional form and structure.

## Lecture on Nothing

“What we re-quire is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking”

-John Cage, *Lecture on Nothing*

During the 1950s John Cage produced numerous lectures that discussed his own personal philosophy. In terms of content, they provide innumerable insights into the composer/poet’s unique perspective on silence and music and the misconceptions he believed those terms conveyed. But the word ‘lecture’ itself is a term steeped in tradition, with a set of rules and forms and structure that accompany it. In a lecture the content is often put ahead of its performance. In the university and college setting where Cage first delivered these ‘lectures’ it would have been procedure to stand before the lectern and deliver a well rehearsed message, hitting topics like a musician would hit notes. If one was to consider this lecture a performance it would be defined by its internal characteristics; its attention to detail, its logical progression. Cage’s lectures, an admitted attempt to reproduce that same musical insight epitomized by *4’33’’*, took the term ‘lecture’ and exposed its processes.

For instance, the following is an excerpt from the foreword to the print version of Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing”:

“There are four measures in each line and twelve lines in each unit of the rhythmic structure. There are forty-eight such units, each having forty-eight measures. The whole is divided into five large parts, in the proportion 7. 6. 14, 14, 7. The forty-eight measures of each unit are likewise divided. The text is printed in four columns to facilitate a rhythmic reading. Each line is to be read across the page from left to right, not down the columns in sequence. This should not be done in an artificial manner (which might result

from an attempt to be too strictly faithful to the position of the words on the page), but with the *rubato* which one uses in everyday speech” [emphasis in the original] (109)

Thus, despite all the structuring, all the attention to divisions and rhythmic measures, the lecture is to be delivered with the “rubato” of the everyday, just as *4'33''* was performed in three movements, demarcated with the pianist opening and closing the lid covering the keys, and yet it embodied mundane sounds. But this time rather than appropriating the concert hall, Cage adopted the lecture hall as the space in which he was going to demonstrate the value of silence and the commonplace. In both instances, Cage’s use of form and structure is merely a means of focusing the audience, like the space itself focuses one on a stage or a lectern:

How could I better tell what structure is than simply to tell about this, this talk which is contained within a space of time approximately forty minutes long? That forty minutes has been divided into five large parts, and each unit is divided likewise. Subdivision involving a square root is the only possible subdivision which permits this micro-macrocosmic rhythmic structure, which I find so acceptable and accepting. As you can see, I can say anything. It makes very little difference what I say or even how I say it” (“Lecture on Nothing” 111-12).

Very few lecturers would proclaim that “it makes very little difference what I say or even how I say it” but that is because their *modus operandi* is the delivery of specific ideas. Cage wants to abandon that mode of rhetoric so that he might introduce a new one. The audience in such a performance is not being persuaded of an ideal sound or idea. Instead, by emphasizing the structure, Cage is able to let the ongoing process, the very sounds and words that make silence an impossibility, be heard. In other words, “Lecture on Nothing” performs the commonplace in its

manner of operation rather than referring to the idea of the commonplace. This is an important distinction from artists who acted before him.

Those familiar with the works of Emerson and Whitman may readily recall their attempts to explicate the inferior nature of art works. Emerson writes: “Away with your nonsense of oils and easels, of marble and chisels; except to open your eyes to the masteries of eternal art, they are hypocritical rubbish” (Emerson 212-13). While Whitman asserts that “The land and sea, the animals fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests mountains and rivers, are not small themes...but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects” (Whitman 7). While these artists certainly share a similar agenda with Cage, their methods differ fundamentally. And since it is methodology that the commonplace movement seeks to rectify, a revised method must be posited persuasively. However, Whitman and Emerson failed to do so, instead relying on the ideal to espouse its antithesis.

### Whitman, Emerson and the Ideal

Long enough have you dream'd contemptible dreams,  
Now I wash the gum from your eyes,  
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of  
Every moment of your life  
– Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Exigence is a term that is described at times as a question awaiting an answer. From this perspective Wordsworth recognized the question as: ‘Why separate the everyday from the work

of art?’ But he was incapable of providing a persuasive answer. Instead, he called for later poets to bring about such a response to herald in the ‘blissful hour.’ However, simply by addressing the question he changed the rhetorical situation for all those who came after him. Namely, his work created operative constraints, providing a foothold for others to climb higher. He initiated the first stage of a rhetorical situation, one that is by definition incapable of having its exigence resolved. But it wasn’t long after Wordsworth’s “Prospectus” was published that poets and artists began to come up with answers of their own. Leonard writes that

attacks on the art object strikingly similar to those made at the so-called ‘end of art’ can be found in the works of Wordsworth, Ruskin, Carlyle, Emerson and Whitman. Many of these attacks are as scathing as any the sixties concept artists ever made. If they are unfamiliar to the modern reader, that is because they were indeed *so* scathing, that criticism has avoided them as anomalies (12).

I would like to propose another reason for why such ‘scathing criticisms’ of the art object would be unknown to the reader: the criticisms were failures. This is not to impugn the talent of Whitman or the wit of Emerson, but if they were as exacting and fitting as those of the concept artists of the 1950s and 1960s, who in Leonard’s estimation achieved the ‘end of art,’ then clearly something distinguished the two situations. That distinguishing factor was not the message but the means by which it was conveyed.

When Emerson remarks in his aptly titled essay “Art,” “Away with your nonsense of oils and easels, of marble and chisels; except to open your eyes to the masteries of eternal art, they are hypocritical rubbish” he is clearly taking the stance that natural, commonplace occurrences are superior to the art object (Emerson 212-13). Leonard refers to this position as “Emerson’s influential decision to continue the transfiguration of the commonplace in the face of the

industrial revolution” (Leonard 131). Thus, Emerson picks up where Wordsworth left off in what would be a vain bid to overcome the constraints of the situation. But it was not without a measure of success as “Emerson’s decision to embrace the new simple produce profoundly affected Whitman” (Leonard 131).

Whitman’s lifelong work, *Leaves of Grass*, was a call to do away with the art object. Or as Leonard puts it: “Whitman spends his life refining *Leaves of Grass* partly because it is not only to be the greatest poem, but the *last* poem the reader ever needs to read” (18). In other words, a work that was to signify that the ‘blissful hour’ had arrived. In rhetorical terms such a work would be one that fittingly addressed the exigence. And so it is in this vein that Whitman says:

Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of  
all poems,

You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions  
of suns left,)

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through  
the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me,

You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self. (Whitman 22)

With passages like these it is no wonder Whitman is portrayed by Leonard as a follower of Wordsworth in the commonplace art movement. And yet *Leaves of Grass* did not result in ‘the

end of art' nor did it bring the everyday into the art gallery. Instead, what remains is the consistent desire to address the issue of the commonplace through traditional form and structure.

Two poems and an essay on the virtues of the mundane aspects of everyday life; all three of which rely on highly structured arguments, carefully selected words and the persuasive capacity of the ego. The commonplace is neither highly structured nor carefully selected and it is indifferent to the ego of any one individual. Such methods, traditional though they may be, are antithetical to the point they are being used to prove. If the question is 'Why differentiate the everyday from art?' these men responded with artifice to espouse the everyday. In contrast, Cage utilizes limited to nonexistent artifice, thus enabling a reproduction of the everyday and offering one of the first objects to argue persuasively for the dissolution of such a distinction. 4'33'' and "Lecture on Nothing" are objects that, if considered 'art,' have effectively accomplished that feat for they lack the traditional qualities that the term is predicated upon.

That is not to say that Cage's work is independent of tradition. For instance, "Lecture on Nothing" echoes Whitman's sentiments that the audience "shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me" (Whitman 22). However, the difference between methodologies ensures that Cage is persuasive through exemplification of the commonplace, rather than simply referring to it. In other words, Whitman uses a poem to tell the virtues of the everyday and thereby idealize the commonplace, whereas Cage employs the lecture to show the poetry of the everyday and thereby demonstrate its pervasive presence.

A large component of that new methodology is Cage's reliance on structure: "Structure is simple be-cause it can be thought out, figured out, measured. It is a discipline which, accepted, in return accepts whatever, even those rare moments of ecstasy, which, as sugar loaves train horses, train us to make what we make" ("Lecture on Nothing" 111). Structure, then, can allow for the

absence of that rhetorical mode attributed to traditional methods where idealizing certain aspects of experience was the primary means of persuading the audience. From Cage's perspective, art was concerned with the replication of those "rare moments of ecstasy," something artists achieved by refining and reducing structure until their forms produced nothing but those ideal moments.

Whitman and Emerson, still operating in that mode, attempted to discredit that refined structure but they did so through its various systemic methods, namely the poem and the critical essay. You could call them victims of tradition, indoctrinated by the history of art, but, rhetorically speaking, they were simply limited by the situation. The exigence was present but it had only recently been recognized; too little discourse has occurred on the subject to afford the necessary radical shift. This follows from the principles of the developmental model; radical, spontaneous changes rarely occur for both the audience and the rhetors require a supportive context that follows from the resources, facts, and data that go into any decision with fundamental implications. Thus, such traditional efforts to change tradition fall short only to become subordinate to the cause by providing the reasonable grounds needed to diverge at a later point. Furthermore, those reasonable grounds themselves materialize out of a context, for *Leaves of Grass* and *Art* follow from the *Prospectus*.

In this manner, the means to a resolution are often present in the first stage, but in a crude, undeveloped form. Such is the case with Eastern philosophy as it influenced Emerson and Thoreau, yet it wasn't until Cage's time that it had been become sufficiently incorporated into the situation that its import to commonplace art could be apprehended. During that intermediate time, constraints would emerge, the most important of which was the realization that idealization followed from the ego.

## The Obstructing Ego

...boredom takes over only if we arouse it in ourselves. That's why I said a while go [sic] that *we are no longer there*. There is no more boredom as soon as there is no more ego. We have in common this particular need to break without ego. Then everything is endlessly reborn. And there is no longer the slightest bit of boredom

– John Cage, *For the Birds*

In Christopher Shultis' *Silencing the Sounded Self: John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition* he approaches Cage's work from a decidedly different perspective than George J. Leonard. For Shultis, the ideas that inform some of Cage's greatest insights developed from relatively recent philosophical debate between dualism and nondualism. Put simply, where dualism perceives the mind as distinct from the world which it perceives, nondualism makes no such division, instead maintaining that the two coexist. Outlining the arguments for each side of this debate is well beyond the scope of this paper. Rather, these perspectives will be handled in a somewhat limited scope. However, it is beneficial to consider them in their historical contexts. For instance, the majority of those poets considered canonical write from a dualistic perspective, such as Wordsworth figuring the mind of the poet as conferring "the charm of novelty" on everyday objects as a means of elevating them. But such a perspective constitutes a historical inhibitory constraint of the situation in regards to addressing the commonplace exigence. Dualism has been a mainstay of Western thought, a culturally accepted perspective and one that remained relatively unchallenged for some time and thus became traditional. But traditions can become impediments, especially when a radical change is deemed necessary.

Where Cage differentiates himself from tradition is in his attentiveness to process. His incorporation of chance techniques, the acceptance of ‘mere sounds,’ his relinquishing of control to the printing press (as in *2 Pages, 122 Words* where the printer determined the positioning of words and phrases on the page) all stem from this simple perspective. Shultis summarizes the debate thusly:

Although processes can be constructed in a variety of ways, they are *initiated* in only two: by an artistic self that controls the process, or by an artistic self that coexists within that process. John Cage addressed this issue as follows: ‘Changed, mind includes even itself. Unchanged, nothing gets in or out.’ The changed mind is an open mind, where the ego does not control the flow of experience. Thus, for Cage, an openly coexistent process required a ‘changed mind’ that could allow outside and inside to coexist. (Shultis xvii)

Shortly thereafter Shultis would characterize this distinction as “the connection between sound and silence in music and between projection and observation in poetry” (xx). In other words, Cage was challenging representations of reality in his attempts to exemplify the everyday process. This ultimately led to the conclusion that one cannot so much represent reality as exhibit a part of that ongoing process we call reality. In this manner artworks can forgo idealization and instead focus the audience on the far more common, and perhaps more pertinent, aspects of experience. Such works, by demonstrating rather than representing, provide case studies by which one can explore individual instances of that process. *4'33''* and *2 Pages, 122 Words* follow this methodology by confining and constraining one’s experience to the degree that they force one to address the sounds of the audience and the role of form and structure in writing and what happens when a mind isn’t strictly controlling those shapers of experience. Such a

divergent approach will prove instrumental in Cage's ability to both overcome the obstructive constraints of the situation and produce a fitting work of rhetoric.

According to Shultis, by embracing nondualism Cage divested himself from Western tradition, thereby enabling a unique approach to the everyday. For whereas others endeavoured to recast the commonplace as novel, necessitating a reevaluation of the language used to refer to the everyday, nondualism enables one to relinquish such notions of control over the environment and simply accept common occurrences 'as they are.' Wordsworth's "Prospectus," Emerson's "Art", and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* all argued for a radical paradigm shift by praising the commonplace. Nondualism informed Cage that that approach was insufficient. Such a paradigm shift would merely rearrange the symbols that referred to the objects. What the situation truly called for was to do away with symbols altogether; to remove the process of abstraction that idealized certain aspects of experience over others. After all, if the commonplace was as valuable as the art object, then all that was needed was a removal of the constraints on sounds and words and the truth would be evident: "If, at this point, one says, 'Yes! I do not discriminate between intention and non-intention,' the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear," Cage proclaims (*Silence* 14). Thus, whereas Wordsworth would imbue the mundane with novelty through the skills of a poet, Cage maintains that such alchemy is but a trick, for the novelty already persists, one need only remove one's ego and "[t]hen everything is endlessly reborn. And there is no longer the slightest bit of boredom" (Charles 49).

At various points throughout *Silencing the Sounded Self*, Shultis points out that in relying on symbols and representations, artists were incapable of permitting change to enter into their methodology and memory assured that this would hold true. It has been said you can never cross the same river twice. And yet the name of the river may never change. In other words, the

language of music and poetry relies heavily on memory, of past performances, of pleasant sounds recorded in the mind, of abstract concepts or archetypal images never before seen in reality (Shultis 115). But such abstraction seeks to remove what is, in essence, a part of a greater process, just as the name of a river does not reflect that it is ever-flowing, ever-changing. Thus Cage remarks: “Why should they imagine that sounds are not interesting in themselves? I’m always amazed when people say, ‘Do you mean it’s just sounds?’ How they can imagine that it’s anything but sounds is what’s so mysterious” (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 249-50). In other words, Cage is making the claim that memory has enabled people to abstract music from the realm of sound and that this will forever be an impediment to discovering the inherent ‘novelty’ of everyday things:

There is a beautiful statement, in my opinion, by Marcel Duchamp: ‘To reach the impossibility of transferring from one like object to another the memory imprint.’ And he expressed that as a goal. That means, from his visual point of view, to look at a Coca-Cola bottle without the feeling that you’ve ever seen one before, as though you’re looking at it for the very first time. That’s what I’d like to find with sounds—to play them and hear them as if you’ve never heard them before. (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 237)

The task for Cage, then, is to discover a method for overcoming the constraint of tradition. The presence of the ego and the reliance on memory have been mainstays of poetic discourse since its inception and, as such, it is little wonder that those present in the first stage of the rhetorical situation could not fulfill the exigence of commonplace art. Shultis remarks on the preceding quote, saying “To move away from memory, one must move away from language” (115). This further resonates with Cage’s statement that “Since words, when they communicate, have no

effect, it dawns on us that we need a society in which communication is not practiced, in which words become nonsense as they do between lovers, in which words become what they originally were: trees and stars and the rest of [the] primeval environment” (Empty Words 184).

And when a work of art diverges from what one remembers, questions of intention immediately arise. Intention, as the exertion of the ego, is a means of organizing and categorizing and so when one encounters something new it is only natural to look towards a rationale. However, remove the intention to mean *something* from sound (4’33’’) and language (as will be shown in *2 Pages, 122 Words*) and one moves closer towards exhibiting the process of the everyday, one that is, by its very nature, novel and meaningful. If change is always equated with intention, then the audience is perpetually asking the same questions; but remove the reliance on memory *and* authorial intention and the questions shift from the artist to the work itself, leading one towards the recognition that change *is* reality. Only then can one “look at a Coca-Cola bottle without the feeling that you’ve ever seen one before, as though you’re looking at it for the very first time” or to hear sounds “as if you’ve never heard them before” (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 237).

Shultis is quick to point out that such a mode is not attributable to Western thought. He quotes Zen master Haung Po to explicate the parallels between Cage and Buddhism: “[A]s soon as thought or sensation arises, you fall into dualism. Beginningless time and the present moment are the same. There is no this and no that” (Shultis 57). While such an influence enabled Cage to embrace nondualism in his work, it also modified the rhetorical situation. Here was a rich and storied philosophical mindset that already embodied the notions of a commonplace art and, as we shall see, was already intertwined with those American artists attempting to address the

commonplace exigence; but not in a Wordsworthian sense, rather in an ego-less, intention-less mode. This is precisely, I will argue, what the exigence called for.

## The Eastern Influence

We learned from Oriental thought that those divine influences are, in fact, the environment in which we are. A sober and quiet mind is one in which the ego does not obstruct the fluency of the things that come in through our sense and up through our dreams

—Christopher Shultis, *Silencing the Sounded Self*

In his essay *Cage and Asia: history and sources* David W. Patterson takes an exacting approach towards analyzing the influence of Taoism, Buddhism, and Zen philosophies on Cage in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He notes that “[Cage’s] appropriations of terms and concepts from these sources were far more explicit than those from previous sources, and he applied them vigorously to his own aesthetic statements. The ‘Lecture on Nothing,’ ‘Lecture on Something,’ and ‘Juilliard Lecture’ are the earliest products of this new rhetoric” (Patterson 50). In his close examination of Cage during this period, Patterson notes a “rhetorical lurch” that occurs between Cage’s “Forerunners of Modern Music” (1949) and his “Lecture on Nothing” (1949-50), stating that the later exhibited “a startlingly new and well-developed rhetoric” (51). And yet this Eastern influence was not a replacement but a supplement to Cage’s world view. Patterson depicts Cage as one who makes “rhetorical borrowings” from various Eastern philosophies, subsuming those aspects of Oriental thought that he saw fit to include. Oftentimes Cage would reference these influences to a single author: D.T. Suzuki.

However, Patterson spends several pages problematizing this attribution of influence. For instance, over the years Cage has cited various moments in the late 1940s when he was impacted by Suzuki’s lectures despite the fact that Suzuki himself didn’t arrive in America until 1950 (Patterson 53). And Suzuki, having recognized the influence Zen was having on the

Western avant-garde sought to distance himself by stating those artists had “grossly misrepresented or misinterpreted” his school of thought (qtd. in Patterson 55). While Suzuki’s reaction was not overtly directed at Cage, Patterson posits that “one can nevertheless infer a great deal about [Suzuki’s] attitude toward Cage’s artistic applications of East Asian philosophical concepts” (Patterson 55). Patterson then proceeds to surmise the influence of Eastern philosophy on Cage:

...the most elemental facet of Cage’s contact with Asian culture is the way in which he studied, absorbed, and sifted through a variety of texts during the 1940s and 1950s, extracting with single-minded discrimination only those malleable ideas that could be used metaphorically to illuminate the artistic themes that were always the focus of his writings or reshaped to reinforce the tenets of his own modernist agenda. (Patterson 59)

George J. Leonard, however, takes a different approach to Cage, Suzuki, and Zen. He refers to a period of crisis in Cage’s life in 1945 where the musician’s resolve to continue making music in the same vein began to falter and he became “determined to find another reason” (qtd. in Leonard 146). Leonard notes that during this period of personal turmoil Cage “ended his marriage, doubted his sexual orientation [and] tried psychiatry” (146). This anxiety continued until he was reinvigorated by a young student named Gita Sarabhai, who, according to Cage, “in the nick of time...came like an angel from India” (*John Cage* 76). This encounter, Leonard asserts, marked the beginning of Cage’s infatuation with Eastern thought. Upon meeting Sarabhai, she related to him that the purpose of music, according to her Indian music instructor, was to “sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences” (qtd. in Leonard 146). Cage was impacted by such notions and thus he delved into Eastern philosophy, an act that eventually led him to Zen and Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki.

Thus, in contrast with Patterson's claim, Cage's discovery of Zen was not a matter of scouring for evidence that supported his ideology. Rather, in being "determined to find another reason," he abandoned his old agenda and adopted a new one. And in a somewhat ironic manner, during his professional and personal identity crisis he happened upon the one philosophy that limited self expression, identity and ego. It was, however, precisely this influence that enabled Cage to move forward in resolving the commonplace exigence for it revealed the interference of the ego:

Emotions, like all tastes and memory, are too closely linked to the self, to the ego. The emotions show that we are touched within ourselves, and tastes evidence our way of being touched on the outside. We have made the ego into a wall and the wall doesn't even have a door through which the interior and exterior could communicate! Suzuki taught me to destroy that wall. What is important is to insert the individual into the current, the flux of everything that happens. And to do that, the wall has to be demolished; tastes, memory, and emotions have to be weakened; all the ramparts have to be razed. (Charles 56)

Not only does this demonstrate the impact Suzuki had on Cage but it also reveals a determination to persuade the audience of the veracity of this position. It is "important" to put audience members "into the current" or process, as he often refers to it. The wall in all of us 'has to be demolished.' Such prescriptive statements suggest Cage has recognized an exigence and accordingly his subsequent work endeavours to address that exigence. However, Cage is not the first proponent of the commonplace to encounter Zen.

## Emerson, Thoreau and the Zen Mind

Arthur Christy in *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* provides a through account of the connection between American Zen Buddhism and the mid-nineteenth century artists who espoused commonplace art. Christy remarks that “one could go through Thoreau’s *Journal*, culling passage after passage to illustrate his fondness for Oriental books” (Christy 190). And Emerson’s infatuation preceded Thoreau’s: “Alcott and Thoreau caught the Oriental contagion from Emerson, who had commenced his browsing about 1834. All three men had read the Orientals before they published a single book” (Christy 48). It is little wonder, then, that Cage, whose rhetorical situation was defined by his status as an American artist and advocate of the commonplace, found malleable ideas in Eastern philosophy. The entire field in which he was operating was permeated with such ideas, albeit in Americanized forms. Even Suzuki, who, as previously stated, felt the need to defend his teaching from the “impure” version the Beat poets had adopted, was criticized for his brand of Buddhism, which is sometimes referred to as American Zen Buddhism. It is in this respect that Leonard asks “What if Suzuki got [his philosophical ideas] from Emerson and Thoreau?” (151).

Thus, a study of Suzuki reveals not only the brand of Buddhism most influential to Americans but the reverberations of American tradition and the impact of the commonplace artists. And so Leonard remarks that “[t]rying to understand Cage’s relationship with Suzuki” is something “we must [do] to understand his mature art” (Leonard 150). Such a necessity is largely attributable to the fact that “Suzuki’s satori [literally ‘understanding’] is largely identical to transfiguration of the commonplace” (Leonard 161).

Upon reading Emerson, Suzuki remarked that “digging down into the recesses of my own thought...that was the reason why I had felt so familiar with [Emerson]—I was indeed, making

acquaintance with myself then. The same can be said of Thoreau” (Suzuki 343-44). The impact Emerson had on Suzuki was something the student of Zen openly acknowledge: “I am beginning to understand the meaning of the deep impressions made upon me while reading Emerson in my college days” (qtd in Leonard 151). And Leonard notes that Suzuki’s first published essay was titled “On Emerson.” In fact *Into the Light of Things* dedicates considerable space in detailing the connection between those 19<sup>th</sup> century artists and the 20<sup>th</sup> century Zen philosopher. However, within the scope of this paper the most prominent fact is not of similitude but differences. Despite the presence of Buddhism in both Emerson and Thoreau, Cage arrived at his distinct realization on ego, one that would destabilize a major constraint, from Suzuki’s unique brand of Buddhism.

Stepping back for a moment we can see that from Wordsworth to Cage a recurring theme to address the commonplace exigence. The principal ideas and influences involved are interconnected. What’s more, that Emerson and Thoreau influenced Suzuki, who in turn influenced Cage, certainly lends itself to a Bloomian analysis, as Leonard concedes (151.) But it also reveals something about the rhetorical situation Cage was encountering in the 1950s. In light of the historical presence of nondualism, passivity, Zen thought and the erasure of the ego it engenders, it stands to reason that these influences have become part of the context of the situation. That Oriental philosophy accompanied commonplace art throughout its development in the American tradition is not a coincidence. Rather, it is indicative of an emerging ideology that changed the situation and created operative constraints for those artists who sought to convince the American audience that the art/everyday divide was erroneous. After all, Eastern philosophers said just as much over two millennia ago, it just required an ambitious translator to adapt such notions to the American context.

Cage once remarked, years after having written *Silence*, that: “[in] Reading Thoreau’s *Journal*, I discovered any idea I’ve ever had worth its salt” (*Conversing with Cage* 46). Such a remark is a testament to the similitude of their attempts to address the same exigence. But it’s also indicative of a deeper affinity between the two American artists. Not only were they spurred by the commonplace exigence, but both recognized the interference the ego presented and each changed their methodology accordingly. The methods Thoreau employed to reduce that interference were detailed by Cage in an interview with Daniel Charles:

“And that’s what links me the most closely with Duchamp and Thoreau. In both of them, as different as they may be, you find a complete absence of interest in self expression. Thoreau wanted only one thing; to see and hear the world around him. When he found himself interested in writing, he hoped to find a way of writing which would allow others not to see and hear how he had done it, but to see *what* he had seen and to *what* he had heard. He was not the one who chose his words. They came to him from what there is to see and hear. You’re going to tell me that Thoreau has a definite style. He has his very own way of writing. But in a rather significant way, as his *Journal* continues, his words become simplified or shorter. The longest words, I would be tempted to say, contain something of Thoreau in them. But not the shortest words. They are words from common language, everyday words. So, as the words become shorter, Thoreau’s own experiences become more and more transparent. They are no longer his own experiences. It is *experience*. And his work improves to the extent that he disappears. He no longer speaks, he no longer writes; he lets things speak and write as they are. I have tried to do nothing else in music. Subjectivity no longer comes into it” (Charles 233-34)

Cage is suggesting that a hundred years earlier, Thoreau developed a means of limiting the ego similar to his own. And yet it is the contention of this essay that Cage was the climax of this movement, not Thoreau or Emerson. Neither managed to manifest the commonplace in his works, at least not to the degree that Cage achieved, for precise reason that the ego was always present. Their writings were prescriptive, preaching the virtues of enjoying the everyday rather than demonstrating its pervasive and efficacious capacity. And while Suzukian Buddhism served to reveal this constraint, Cage would further adapt the philosophy to devise his own methods for limiting the presence of the ego, something he achieved through removing form and structure and by introducing chance into the composition process:

[R]ather than taking the path that is prescribed in the formal practice of Zen Buddhism itself, namely, sitting cross-legged and breaking and such things, I decided that my proper discipline was the one to which I was already committed, namely, the making of music. And that I would do it with a means that was as strict as sitting cross-legged, namely, the use of chance operations, and the shifting of my responsibility from the making of choices to that of asking questions. (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 45)

The first portion of this remark would seem to confirm Patterson's reading of Cage as one who looks for "malleable ideas" to suit his agenda. But then Cage states that he is shifting his mode from "making choices" to "asking questions." In short, chance enables him to abandon an agenda so that he can explore the commonplace like no other before him. Such a methodological shift is the direct result of operative constraints and a mature rhetorical situation, both of which reveal themselves in Cage's writing.

## 2 Pages, 122 Words on Music and Dance

Thus far we have established that Cage's achievements came not from what he chose to say but how he chose to say it. This followed from the realization that one must *reproduce* the commonplace, rather than simply refer to it, thereby exhibiting the intrinsic value of everyday occurrences. That value is directly related to the unintentional nature of the commonplace, which derives its beauty and inspiring qualities from happenstance. That is not to say that everyday occurrences are truly random but they do constitute experiences that simply exist, devoid of the intention to persuade. Thus, to sufficiently reproduce the commonplace one must adhere to these principle tenements. Such reproductions must, therefore, recognize the interference of the ego and eliminate the intentionality that it introduces. Any attempt to manipulate the material gives the audience cause to focus on the intention of the artist, whereas the impetus behind commonplace art is to validate the pleasure in observing the untouched: "But one thing is certain. If one is making something which is to be nothing, the one making must love and be patient with the material he chooses. Otherwise he calls attention to the material, which is precisely something, whereas it was nothing that was being made; or he calls attention to himself, whereas nothing is anonymous" ("Lecture on Nothing" 114).

Anonymity, perhaps the very antithesis of ego, was counter to the tradition that portrayed artists as possessing informed and insightful minds, capable of re-organizing the world into intelligible forms. For instance, as much as Wordsworth prayed for the 'everyman' to see the poetry in the everyday, he nevertheless embraced a pedagogical mode to achieve such a realization. As Leonard notes, "[Wordsworth] did subscribe to an idea of what the mind does that led him to believe men might become poets, someday—with his help, and the help of certain poets like him" (56). Wordsworth's high upbringing, his Cambridge education, his scholarly

lifestyle all served to distance him from the actual, everyday experience of the average individual. And so we see that “Wordsworth’s critical work and poetic practice show real skepticism that the average mind could” handle such a task as seeing the merit of the commonplace (Leonard 56).

In contrast with such instructional poetry, Cage’s “nothing” is an observable experience. It is the difference between telling and showing, between referring and exemplifying. Both men are driven to resolve the exigence, to persuade the audience of the value of the commonplace. But Wordsworth relied on artifice to convey this message, regardless of the fact that the everyday is the antithesis of artifice. Cage, in adopting music, poetry, and speech, was able to reproduce, in familiar structures and forms, endless instances of the commonplace. This is a far more persuasive demonstration, and therefore a more fitting response to the exigence. Its persuasion follows from a more cohesive ideology in that the objects and works that it creates are present for appraisal and criticism. One does not so much criticize Wordsworth’s concept of the commonplace, as his artistic ability used to espouse it. On the other hand, Cage’s unique relationship between structure and material forces the audience to confront the exigence directly, while offering a resolution to the crisis; by using the traditional forms of art objects to reproduce the everyday, Cage has effectively reconciled the two disparate positions. This is exemplified in Cage’s “2 Pages, 122 Words on Music and Dance.”

The work itself presents text scattered across two pieces of paper. At times the word to word progression is readily apparent in individual snippets of structure. But at other times it is unclear where to proceed. In a foreword to the piece Cage describes his method of composition:

“The number of words was given by chance operations. Imperfections in the sheets of paper upon which I worked gave the position in space of the fragments of text. That

position is different in this printing, for it is the result of working on two other sheets of paper, of another size and having their own differently placed imperfections.” (*Silence* 96)

Such indeterminacy in reading progression as manifested by Cage’s use of chance operations and the acceptance of imperfections in the paper itself exhibit the artist’s earnest embrace of the vagaries of the everyday. Gone is the intention to communicate a specific message and in its place is a demonstration of the pervasiveness of meaning; for whatever one derives from “2 Pages” is invariably indicative of the same meaning which permeates the unintentional and oftentimes ‘imperfect’ world in which we live. By choosing the words from which to draw, Cage has, like *4’33*, ’’ used structure to narrow the scope to provide emphasis.

The affect of the work is apparent even prior to reading the text, for in its visual arrangement the reader is immediately confronted with fundamental questions of progression:

**2 Pages, 122 Words on Music and Dance**

To obtain the value  
of a sound, a movement,  
measure from zero. (Pay  
attention to what it is,  
just as it is.)

A bird flies.

Slavery is abolished.

the woods

A sound has no legs to stand on.

The world is teeming: anything can  
happen.

	sound	movement
<p>Points in time, in space</p>	<p>love mirth the heroic wonder tranquillity fear anger sorrow disgust</p>	<p>Activities which are different happen in a time which is a space: are each central, original.</p>
<p>The emotions</p>	<p>are in the audience.</p>	<p>The telephone rings. Each person is in the best seat.</p>
<p>Is there a glass of water?</p>		<p>War begins at any moment.</p>
		<p>Each now is the time, the space.</p>
<p>lights</p>	<p>inaction?</p>	<p>Are eyes open?</p>
	<p>Where the bird flies, fly.</p>	<p>ears?</p>

**FOUR STATEMENTS ON THE DANCE / 97**

The simple act of allowing chance to determine the position of words and phrases immediately has ramifications on progression and authorial intent. How one moves from passage to passage invariably impacts on one's interpretation and without the linearity and grammatical conventions in place the reader is free to engage the material as wholly open to interpretation. This is furthered by the vertical/horizontal interplay that takes place for when one attempts to read the piece in a conventional manner, from left to right/top to bottom, the process is frustrated. For instance, on the second page the words "The emotions" and "are in the audience" have between them a vertical column. And while the words listed are related in subject, it is unclear how one should interpret the relationship between the two directions.

It is important to note that within "Lecture on Nothing" Cage details his method of composition and "2 Pages" is prefaced by Cage with the specific intention of explaining the

method of composition. This enables the reader to immediately forgo questions of intended meaning and to focus instead on the process itself. In this manner, the piece strives to be an instance where the art work is not an imitation of nature but a reproduction of the natural process. This is a crucial distinction for it retains the sentiments of those who would do away with oils and easels as a means of idealizing experience but it goes further by demonstrating the import of doing so in a focused and concise manner. In fact, in just two pages and a hundred and twenty-two words, Cage reveals the value of composing with a “purposeful purposelessness” for it provides an instance where we can examine our individual methods of reading, an insightful, introspective experience that only an intention-less work can provide.

Thus, “2 Pages” at once highlights the constrictive nature of conventional form while simultaneously demonstrating a new method. This new method embodies the sentiments of previous commonplace proponents. However, it is by virtue of the developed situation that the necessary constraints are present. Cage’s mastery, then, resides in his ability to assemble those constraints into a new method, resulting in pieces like *4’33’’* and “2 Pages” that have as their focal points the process of composition. Having analyzed the development of those constraints in the areas of structure and ego, we are now able to examine how Cage was able to assemble them into a new method that acts as a fitting resolution.

## The American Rhetorical Situation

We now jump forward to the 1950s. In Bitzer's second stage of a rhetorical situation "the exigence is present and perceived, often by speaker and audience" ("Functional Communication" 34). And what's more, the exigence "can easily be addressed" and "operative constraints are available" ("Functional Communication" 34). Was this the rhetorical equivalent of 'the blissful hour' that Wordsworth presaged? George J. Leonard argues that this time period was indeed that 'hour' but he does so from a religious perspective, citing the evolution of the art of the commonplace and the influx of Eastern philosophy as a spiritual evolution of sorts. And while this paper does not seek to contradict such a claim, it does suggest that a rhetorical reading provides pertinent insights with less obfuscation.

In order to substantiate the claim that the rhetorical situation in the artworld of 1950s America is not only an instance of Bitzer's second stage but also, that in that stage John Cage and his contemporaries were able to develop a sufficient resolution, then several criteria must first be met. The first of those criteria is that the audience must be capable of mediating the change sought by the commonplace art movement. In other words, those observers of art in America in the 1950s must have been capable of not only being persuaded that a Brillo box could be a work of art but the position that *all objects* should be considered from the same perspective. This begins with the exigence being present and perceived by the artist and the audience.

### The American Artworld in the 1950s

There can be no doubt that America in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was in a state of flux. History tells us as much. During this period many unaddressed exigences surged to the forefront of public awareness and many new exigences were recognized. The long standing exigence of racial inequality led to Martin Luther King's fitting "I Have a Dream" speech. America's participation in foreign combat created a new exigence inviting discourse and anti-war rhetoric. Each of these rhetorical acts arose from a politicized, historical situation. As Bitzer notes, "Rhetorical works belong to the class of things which obtain their character from the circumstances of the historic context in which they occur" ("The Rhetorical Situation" 3). One cannot abstract a rhetorical work from its situation for it attains its definitive quality as 'rhetorical' from that situation. Bitzer likens this to a moral action, such that an action attains the quality of being moral or immoral based on the context in which it occurs. That is to say, it is not a 'moral action' as such until it occurs in a situation which provides it with such a character (such as the firing of a gun in itself is not moral or immoral but in a given context we can attribute ethical descriptors based on the circumstances). In the same manner it is not a 'rhetorical work' without a situation of a certain kind demanding such a response. Such a situation enables "[t]he rhetor [to alter] reality by bringing into existence a discourse of such a character that the audience, in thought and action, is so engaged that it becomes mediator of change" ("The Rhetorical Situation" 4).

Now consider Wordsworth postponing the 'blissful hour' to some indeterminate time in the future. Such a proclamation suggests a degree of resignation on the part of the poet that his audience was incapable of mediating such change. In contrast, the commonplace artists of the 1950s had no such reservations about their audience. In fact, it is in the audience that the commonplace art movement has its most resounding effect. At the Stable Gallery in 1964 Arthur

Danto observed museum patrons experiencing one of the first exhibitions of Warhol's now famous Brillo boxes. As Leonard notes "[t]he art didn't fascinate Danto. The sophisticated audience did...[for] they had discovered they could enjoy the Brillo boxes just the way they enjoyed sculptures" (Leonard 3). In other words, Danto was witnessing an audience persuaded of the idea that the commonplace object was as worthy of consideration as the other, more 'traditional' objects found in the gallery. And commonplace the Brillo box was. It was a factory-made object, produced in the thousands, and it contained the very epitome of the mundane: steel wool pads used for scrubbing and cleaning.

The Brillo boxes themselves represented what could be called the 'industrial commonplace'; those objects that comprised the 'mere things' of twentieth-century life in the West, such as the items in an average household and those encountered daily on supermarket shelves. Such commercial products, so long as they persisted outside the art gallery, came to typify the mundane aspects of life. In contradistinction to the art object, they were inferior items for they were numerous, cheap, and readily accessible, much like an everyday encounter with Nature. But what of the intentional design of said boxes? It was rendered secondary to the utility of the object itself, and thus the aesthetic import of the container was never questioned. After all, Brillo boxes belonged under the kitchen sink or in the cupboard where other functional, commonplace objects resided. They were first defined by their utility to one's everyday life and second, if at all, by their aesthetic import. Warhol, then, reverses this hierarchy by submitting the Brillo boxes to the gallery. Such an act had little to do with the aesthetic design of the box. Instead, it placed the commonplace item in the space reserved for the art object. This attempt to redefine what was considered 'commonplace' came about as a direct result of the industrial revolution.

For Wordsworth, the commonplace was predominately one's everyday experience with Nature, a sublime encounter that was inspiring because it lacked an intended construction and yet remained intricate, nuanced and therefore potentially efficacious. The industrial revolution threatened to overwhelm this commonplace experience with unnatural, 'man made' objects that seemed antithetical to the organic experience offered by Nature. However, the twentieth-century became so permeated with such industrial objects that it was more common to encounter factory made items than a pastoral sunset or a mountainous landscape. The everyday experience, then, became artificially constructed while retaining the mundane and inferior aspects that traditional art objects sought to demean through idealization. The Brillo boxes and their acceptance by the audience revealed a willingness to forgo idealization and to begin to accept all aspects of experience. Thus, at long last the exigence became present and perceived by both artist and audience. Soon thereafter the public would snatch up other such commonplace, household items as the Campbell Soup cans, marking the revaluation of a highly functional item, such as a container of sustenance, in terms of its contribution to the everyday experience. From then on Pop culture would forever change the artworld.

Looking back, critics have commented on the similarities between Warhol and Cage, connecting them with Marcel Duchamp, a predecessor who developed during a period where numerous groups and movements were destabilizing the institution of Art. Such a time period brought about Surrealism and new objectivity, the likes of which greatly undermined traditional thought and significantly shaped the art world in the 1950s. However, Duchamp is of particular interest here for his close relationship with Cage and his similar methodology. This is not to overshadow the import of other movements during his time or to overstate Duchamp's significance but in the context of this paper he is an interesting contributor to a very crucial

period in the intellectual history of art. For instance, Duchamp made a similar rhetorical act to the Brillo box some forty years prior when he submitted a urinal as a work of art. But much to his dismay his 'ready-mades' actually became subsumed into the artworld, rather than destabilizing it: "I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty," Duchamp moaned in 1962 (Richter 207-208). The urinal, like Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, was intended to be a climax, a turning point. It directly pointed to the art/everyday divide and implored the audience to ask the simple, hard question: why?

Instead it faced an unprepared audience. And so when Cage states "Marcel did it all before me!" there is a measure of repetition, a recognition of similar endeavours to address the same exigence (qtd. in Leonard 230). For his part, Cage was not shy about his affection for Duchamp: "I always admired [Duchamp's] work, and once I got involved with chance operations, I realized he had been involved with them, not only in art but also in music, fifty years before I had. When I pointed this out to him, Marcel said, 'I suppose I was fifty years ahead of my time'" (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 234). But of course John Cage was not Marcel Duchamp. He was "a duchamp unto my self", meaning a personalized version of that subversive character as evidenced by the lowercase 'd,' which seems to suggest the name is more of an adjective than a noun (X: The Writings 53).

And despite Duchamp's obvious dismay at what was intended to be a disruptive act, his efforts were not in vain. Rather they served as operative constraints for Cage: "Duchamp's subversion of causality and psychological depth, coupled with his predilection for chance operations and his refusal to distinguish between 'life' and 'art'...prepared the ground for Cage's own aesthetic" notes Marjorie Perloff in her essay "'A duchamp unto my self' : 'Writing

through' Marcel" (101). Leonard depicts their relationship as even more emphatic: "it was Cage, the would-be disciple, who led the movement which turned his master's work into an imitation of his own" (230). Here Leonard is demonstrating Bloom's 'apophrades' where the work of the later artist recasts that of the earlier one. Leonard describes this with his own terminology as when "the later figure so changes our *Weltanschauung* that the earlier figure is seen through the later" (Leonard 230). However, rhetorical theory offers an even simpler explanation: both artists were attempting to address the same exigence.

From this perspective the similarities in their artistic endeavours, their participation in the same 'genre,' and their apparent master-disciple relationship all indicate a devotion to a similar problem. "When [an exigence] is perceived and when it is strong and important, then it constrains the thought and action of the perceiver," Bitzer tells us ("The Rhetorical Situation" 7). And so it is with the recurrence of the commonplace exigence that Duchamp is seen through Cage's work, for both were constrained into modes that subverted the divide between art and commonplace. The difference, however, is that Duchamp inaccurately perceived the exigence, whereas Cage saw it clearly. It is only logical that here "the earlier figure is seen through the later" for we see in Cage's work what Duchamp, Thoreau, Whitman, and Emerson all obscurely attempted to realize. In this sense it is not so much a matter of success but, as both a method and opportunity, to clearly communicate with an audience, which begins with the speaker's understanding of the exigence.

And so when Leonard states that "Historically, it was not Marcel Duchamp (as many once thought) or Warhol (working later, and indirectly under Cage's influence) but John Cage" who brought the recognition of the commonplace to America, Leonard is acknowledging the clarity which Cage brought to the argument for commonplace art (Leonard 162). That clarity

follows from Cage's experiments to move away from the ideal by removing the presence of the ego.

## Removing the Ego

“the separation of mind and ear had spoiled the sounds”

–John Cage, *Silence*

In his essay “The Ear That Would Hear Sounds in Themselves: John Cage 1935-1965” Francis Dyson details the origin of the composer/poet’s unique interest in percussion, tracing it to one figure: “Profoundly influenced by abstract filmmaker Oskar Fischinger, Cage’s understanding of sound, indeed his fundamental ontology, veered toward the animistic and transcendentalist view of objects Fischinger held” (Dyson 376). Reportedly, in the summer of 1932, Fischinger quite accidentally happened upon his own realization on objects and sounds when he heard his wife drop a key in the next room. He was intrigued by the notion that he knew the exact object that produced the sound, and this led him to conclude that sound was a unique characteristic expressed by the object (Dyson 377-76). Cage reveals that Fischinger related this realization to him when the two first met:

“When I was introduced to [Fischinger], he began to talk with me about the spirit which is inside each of the objects of this world. So, he told me, all we need to do to liberate that spirit is to brush past the object, and to draw forth its sound. That’s the idea which led me to percussion. In all the many years which followed up to the war, I never stopped touching things, making them sound and resound, to discover what sounds they could produce. Wherever I went, I always listened to objects.” (Charles 74).

This notion of objects ‘articulating’ sounds, as Dyson puts it, is a fitting notion for a rhetor responding to the commonplace exigence. For instance, it supposes sound to be, in itself, an expression of everyday objects. Dyson attributes this realization, in part, to Cage’s “practical

application of the Hindu and Zen philosophies he internalized” (383). This introduces an intrinsic meaning to the objects; a marked shift away from subjectivity for the listener was now breaking down the divide between ear and mind. While we hear everyday sounds, generally we perceive them from a dualistic perspective.

For example, a key hitting the floor is commonly considered as a matter of sensory perception not as a piece of metal expressed through sound. If one is to express the value of everyday objects, it is beneficial to exhibit how such an expression is important. Wordsworth, Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau all strove towards this same goal from various perspectives, but each sought to expound the virtue of the everyday without sufficiently demonstrating the merit in doing so. How can you persuade an audience of the value of a key hitting the floor without first indentifying the import of doing so in the first place? The nondualism supported by Suzukian Zen, with Fischinger’s realization subsumed into it, provided Cage with the philosophical foothold, while technology enabled the next step: “During this period [1952 to 1965] Cage’s rhetorical register expanded with philosophical insights gleaned from his audiophonically based experiments,” Dyson asserts (385). The impetus behind such experiments is candidly explained by Cage:

I want to listen to this ashtray. But I won’t strike it as I would a percussion instrument. I’m going to listen to its inner life, thanks to suitable technology...at the same time I’ll be enhancing that technology since I’ll be recognizing its full freedom to express itself...It would be extremely interesting to place [the ashtray] in a little anechoic chamber and listen to it through a suitable sound system. Object would become process; we would discover, thanks to procedure borrowed from science, the meaning of nature through the music of objects. (Charles 221)

For Cage, technology enables the object to be viewed as a process. It provides a means of focusing on a 'mere thing' to the level of detail where one can witness the object expressing itself. This stance posits that the ashtray, for instance, is not an abstract symbol like the word that refers to it, but rather it is constantly expressing its existence: one need only listen closely. That is the process that Cage seeks to observe through technology and to reproduce in his works.

In exhibiting existence as a process it follows, implicitly, that there can be no hierarchy, no high or low. Cage exemplifies this through mundane objects because if the process can be demonstrated to exist there, in the most 'inferior' of objects, then it follows that it exists everywhere. In other words, it is not a matter of elevating the everyday to the level of art, but of demonstrating that all things coexist and those salient things (*vis-à-vis* artworks) appear more prominent merely as a matter of convention and tradition.

This notion that an object cannot persist outside of process occurred to Cage after he experienced an anechoic chamber first hand at Harvard in 1951:

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. For certain engineering purposes, it is desirable to have as silent a situation as possible. Such a room is called an anechoic chamber, its six walls made of special material, a room without echoes. I entered one at Harvard University several years ago and heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music. (*Silence* 8)

In many ways, Cage's work attempts to replicate this anechoic experience by creating a scenario where the audience is forced to confront a common aspect of their experience and accept its active presence in the everyday. This new methodology follows from the recognition of the fallacy of 'silence,' the erroneous notion that one can hear 'nothing' and it forced Cage to augment his personal paradigm:

it appeared to me, when I went through my work, or what was to become my work, that the experience I had had in the sound-proof room at Harvard was a turning point. I had honestly and naively thought that some actual silence existed. I had not really put silence to the test. I had never looked into its impossibility. So when I went into that sound-proof room, I really expected to hear nothing. With no idea of what nothing could sound like.

The instant I heard myself producing two sounds, my blood circulating and my nervous system in operation, I was stupefied. For me, that was the turning point. (Charles 115-16)

In this sense 'silence' represents a realization about sound; that it is persistent, whether we choose to perceive it or not. Or, as in Shultis' characterization, it is a realization that "there were only intended and unintended sounds" (92). This, in conjunction with his recent exposure to Suzuki, substantiated an exploration of sounds themselves. And so listening to the 'inner life' of an object became not an exercise in analyzing human perceptions but an exercise in accepting a particular sound as a characteristic of a particular object; a recognition of its contribution to the process. Up until this point poets and philosophers espousing the art of the commonplace argued for a different method of interpretation, one that assumed inherent meaning but failed to demonstrate it.

From this anechoic experience onward Cage maintained that we need to stop interpreting and start listening. He plainly asserts this in an interview with Daniel Charles:

John Cage: If silence does not exist, we have only sounds. But at that moment, you begin to realize that there is no more need for structure. Little by little, I gave up on structure altogether.

Daniel Charles: Is that realizing what Suzuki, who introduced you to Zen, calls non-obstruction?

J.C.: Yes, the sound no longer comprises an obstacle to silence; silence is no longer a screen with regard to sound” (Charles 40).

Interpretation, insofar as it is a manner of restructuring input into intelligible forms, is another means of abstraction, of dualistic thinking. Cage’s realization about ‘silence’ is, in fact, merely a musical example of nondualism. As Cage notes in his lecture “Process as Composition”:

“The mind may be used either to ignore ambient sounds, pitches other than the eighty-eight, durations which are not counted, timbres which are unmusical or distasteful, and in general to control and understand an available experience. Or the mind may give up its desire to improve on creation and function as a faithful receiver of experience.” (*Silence* 31)

The aspect of dualism that is destabilized here is the belief that perception can control reality; the concept of ‘silence’ (which is itself a representation of nothingness) suggests that sound (beingness) exists merely in our perception of it. Nondualism maintains that you cannot escape reality, a realization Cage was forced to make when he experienced *the inability to experience* silence. In the context of the commonplace exigence, this revised perspective not only affirms the intrinsic, individualized meaning of everyday objects, it provides a sound philosophical basis on which to do so.

This position also enabled Cage to consider experience as an ongoing process. In *Silence* Cage notes that “The highest purpose is to have no purpose at all” (155). Often Cage refers to this as ‘purposeful purposelessness,’ which is representative of his reluctance to subject sounds and words to the constraints of ego and intention. But it also reveals a reverence for the intrinsic qualities of objects, such that exalting the novelty of the everyday would be antithetical, as such an approach would endeavour to abstract those objects from the very process in which they persist. This appears in Cage’s writing in the 1950s as a tendency to ‘show’ rather than ‘tell’ the audience of the import of listening to the everyday.

### Silence

In a paragraph introducing the print version of his lecture “Composition as Process” Cage remarks on the method of composition:

...I decided to make a lecture within the time length of the Music of Changes (each line of the text whether speech or silence requiring one second for its performance), so that whenever I would stop speaking, the corresponding part of the Music of Changes itself would be played. The music is not superimposed on the speech but is heard only in the interruptions of the speech—which, like the lengths of the paragraphs themselves, were the result of chance operations. (*Silence* 18)

Immediately one can apprehend the fact that Cage is not content with simply ‘telling’ but rather the lecture itself is a performance, a demonstration of the of the fallacy of being able to hear silence.

In the lecture itself, which was originally given at Darmstadt, Germany in September 1958, Cage states that “there is a tendency in my composition means away from ideas of order

towards no ideas of order” (*Silence* 20). He then proceeds to detail the principal ideas informing his piece “Music of Changes,” remarking how “chance operations determined stability or change of tempo” which meant that “the structure became indeterminate: it was not possible to know the total time-length of the piece until the final chance operation, the last toss of coins affecting the rate of tempo, had been made” and thus “Being indeterminate, though still present, it became apparent that structure was not necessary” (*Silence* 20-1).

This, in turn, limited the presence of authorial intention in the piece itself, further reaffirming for Cage that the traditional method of composition was an abstraction impeding his work: “And the presence of the mind as a ruling factor, even by such an extraordinary eventuality, would not have been established. For what happened came about only through the tossing of coins. It became clear, therefore, I repeat, that structure was not necessary” (*Silence* 22). But this is not to deny that the individual ego exists, but rather it shifts the focus of the audience from shaping perceptions towards analyzing how we perceive: “The mind, though stripped of its right to control, is still present. What does it do, having nothing to do? And what happens to a piece of music when it is purposelessly made?” (*Silence* 22). These rhetorical questions are intended to mimic that shift in what is being observed, for chance enables “the shifting of [Cage’s] responsibility from the making of choices to that of asking questions” (Kostelanetz, “Conversing with Cage” 45).

Prior to Cage the methodology was to convince the audience to choose the everyday over the artwork. By inviting indeterminacy into the structure and introducing chance, Cage is proposing that we give up on preconceived choices altogether. Poetry, paint and music, while part of the ongoing process, interfere with this recognition because they engender abstraction: “It becomes evident that music itself is an ideal situation, not a real one” Cage says (*Silence* 31).

However, if one can exhibit the everyday in a piece of ‘music’ or writing, to show the sound in silence, then the work is participating in that process (albeit in a focused manner to highlight such a quality). Of the proponents of the commonplace, Thoreau came closest to this realization when he reduced the presence of his agenda, utilizing short words that carried little signs of intention and thereby limiting such abstract idealism. *Leaves of Grass* on the other hand idealized the commonplace through its very mode of persuasion. Emerson remarked in his essay, “Art,” that “In happy hours, nature appears to us one with art, art perfected—the work of genius” (Emerson 333-34). Such idealization was antithetical to the situation for the exigence in fact called for an end to idealization altogether. It is for this reason that Cage abandons ‘telling’ and embraces ‘showing’ for the time of abstraction and idealizing has reached its end. It is from this perspective that Cage maintains that “there are, demonstrably, sounds to be heard and forever, given ears to hear. Where these ears are in connection with a mind that has nothing to do, that mind is free to enter into the act of listening, hearing sound just as it is, not as a phenomenon more or less approximating a preconception” (*Silence* 22-3).

One may counter by claiming that the ego is apparent in Cage’s work. After all, he chooses the selection of words from which he randomly draws. And even the parameters of chance are determined by a structure laid out in the *I Ching*. Cage is cognizant of this presence but he is also aware that it is present in a different capacity: “The mind reappears as the agent which established the boundaries within which this small play took place. Something more far-reaching is necessary: a composing of sounds within a universe predicated upon the sounds themselves rather than upon the mind which can envisage their coming into being” (*Silence* 27-8). Despite the ‘necessity’ of a broader spectrum (or perhaps no spectrum at all) there is a measure of progression at work here. In his bid to persuade the audience, Cage’s work

successively expands in scope. From beginning to end, from the closed system of the concert hall in 4'33'' to the outdoor performances that he would later orchestrate, the pedagogy behind Cage's work is almost rendered "meta" when compared with the verbose idealism of Wordsworth. And what's more, each piece, to varying degrees, accommodates the situation at hand. Cage writes of the work *Music for Piano*: "Structure no longer being present, that piece took place in any length of time whatsoever, according to the exigencies of an occasion" (*Silence* 30).

A consequence of this perspective, however, is that it requires one to admit that everyday, commonplace objects are not simply those that occur in Nature. Assuredly, there is more romantic import in determining the 'inner life' of a piece of oak or a chunk of granite than that of a key or an ashtray, but Cage makes no such distinction in respect to the 'music of objects' and he is therefore able to readily subsume industrial objects into his methodology. Dyson refers to this position as considering "sound in its semantic and referential ambiguity, the listening subject as fully integrated with the flows of life and aurality" (383).

Such an acceptance of the everyday object, whether born from the soil or assembled in a textile factory, marks a shift from those previous poets endeavouring to address the same exigence. Wordsworth, for instance, was discouraged by the looming spectre of the industrial revolution; a period of change that would forever alter what was considered to be 'mere real things.' George J. Leonard remarks on the "sad irony that Wordsworth, unluckily, had launched his project to transfigure the natural world the moment before technology began to overwhelm it" (124). The threat technology posed to discovering the everyday wonder and novelty of nature was a constraint of Wordsworth's rhetorical situation. Indeed, one must concede the difficulty of accepting industrial objects into the same category as sunsets and cataracts. Maintaining the

separation of nature from 'man-made' objects in defining what is 'real' seemed so clear that it wasn't until Marcel Duchamp challenged the art world with his aforementioned 'Fountain' urinal in 1917 that critics and art enthusiasts were truly forced to consider the implications of industrial objects. But Cage's commonplace consists of more than accepting the everyday to include reproducing the everyday.

## Indeterminacy

Thus far we have identified the primary constraint on the commonplace exigence as the ego of the rhetor, which prevents the work from ‘speaking for itself.’ And while limiting form and structure help alleviate this constraint such works remain permeated with questions of authorial intention and the desire, on the part of the reader, to apprehend a message being conveyed. Content, for instance, is readily traceable to the author such that regardless of how words are presented on a page one still questions the decision to include such words over others. In these instances the ego continues to intervene in the process, skewing our perception and retaining our focus on the author rather than the process. It is for this reason that Cage chose to employ chance so that he might mitigate such interference. I say mitigate because his works nevertheless retain a degree of intention. What instruments are randomly played, what selection the words are randomly chosen from, remain in the author’s domain. But the intended effect is more to direct our gaze than to tell us what we are seeing or how to see it. Again *4’33’’* is a fitting example for it appropriates a musical space to exhibit the fallacy of silence. Replicating that same effect in language, however, is not small task. As Shultis notes of this ambition: “For language to exist as sounds exist, it must be something other than just non-intentional—it must cease to intentionally ‘mean.’ This is the process Cage has set in motion” and it is something that removing form and structure alone could never achieve (120). Rather, one must allow indeterminacy into the composition process, an act that shifts the focus from the author to the work itself. Thus, when one reads an aleatory work, one is no longer analyzing the mind of another but is instead interacting with a commonplace occurrence, which in this sense is that which is beyond the control of the ego and authorial intention. The impact this has on addressing the commonplace exigence is significant.

As that which calls discourse into action, an exigence is a pressing moment that would see a rhetor persuade the audience. With that in mind consider George J. Leonard's characterization of aleatory works: "...their whole point is proving to the audience that they no longer need artists or their special objects" (162). Not only does this resonate with Wordsworth's 'blissful hour,' for that is precisely Leonard's agenda, but it also reveals a great insight into the exigence itself for if we accept this objective then aleatory art is essentially synonymous with a fitting rhetorical response to the commonplace exigence. And if one doubts Cage's personal desire to manifest such a change in the audience one is easily dissuaded by the composer/poet's own words:

"Our inflexible attitude towards change must cease. My own experience proved to me that all I need to do is to listen to the sounds around me. They change. I always and everywhere listen to the sounds surrounding me, but if I were to feel that one of them didn't please me or wasn't suitable for me—if I would have preferred that it didn't exist or hadn't happened—then you could immediately see why such a notion of preference is in a way illegitimate, since in fact the sound did occur" (Charles 95)

In this passage Cage exhibits a desire to manifest change, to address the exigence he perceives. He also takes the position that what he is arguing towards is self-evident for we can "immediately" be persuaded of the 'illegitimacy' of preferring one sound over another or one object over another as soon as we are presented with the fallacy of distinguishing between the two, a demonstration made possible by reproducing the commonplace in an environment or setting traditionally used for emphasizing such distinctions.

As a quick aside, it is worth noting that aleatory works are not always accompanied by such a strong philosophical background. For instance, a group of primarily French writers and

mathematicians formed in 1960 called the Oulipo produced numerous works that incorporated chance techniques into their writing methods. However, they did so primarily as a means of experimentation and as a whole they lacked the strong philosophical basis that led Cage to utilize chance operations and the *I Ching*. That both turned to aleatory methods attests to the strong presence of the exigence at the time but in the works of Oulipo members one gets the sense that the exigence was not clearly perceived. And while Cage can be portrayed as an experimenter he was far more concentrated in his efforts. It wasn't simply a matter of interpreting randomly generated results for Cage: "Most people who believe that I'm interested in chance don't realize that I use chance as a discipline. They think I use it—I don't know—as a way of giving up making choices. But my choices consist in choosing what questions to ask" (Kostelanetz, "Conversing with Cage" 17).

Cage finds the methodology for his demonstrably commonplace works in the *I Ching*, otherwise known as The Book of Changes. As David W. Bernstein notes in the essay "Cage and high modernism":

The notion that the universe is organized according to two basic qualities—yin and yang—constitutes the philosophical foundation for the *I Ching*. *Yin*, represented by a broken line, is 'female,' passive and nurturing; *yang*, represented by a solid line, is 'male,' active, and dominant. The *I Ching* is organized according to sixty-four hexagrams, each consisting of six lines. The oracle is consulted by tossing three coins...Two heads and a tail is a solid line; two tails and a head is a broken line. Three tails is a solid line moving to a broken line; three heads is a broken line moving to a solid line. Six tosses generate a hexagram; if any of the lines is 'moving,' then a second hexagram results with the appropriate changes. (201)

Bernstein adds in a note that “Given that there are sixty-four hexagrams and any hexagram can change into any other, there exist 4,096 possible combinations” (266). Needless to say, the *I Ching* sufficiently replicated the complexity that produced the commonplace. When interviewer Daniel Charles questioned Cage on whether Suzukian Zen simplified his interpretation of the world Cage replied:

“I would say the opposite. It is our manner of thinking that is so simple, which our experience is always and in every case extremely complex. When we think, we continually return to those opposed pairs, sound and silence, Being and Nothingness. We do this to simplify experience which is far beyond that simplicity. Ultracomplex and not at all reducible to the number two.” (Charles 93).

Thus, chance operations for Cage were not a means of purporting that the everyday is chaotic and random but rather it exhibits a complexity beyond the human mind to disentangle. The sheer number of potential outcomes in the *I Ching* sufficiently replicates that complexity and it is in this sense that such works that follow from “The Book of Changes” exhibit that quality of the everyday. Christopher Shultis observes this aspect of the ancient text in C.G. Jung’s introduction to Richard Wilhelm’s German translation of the *I Ching*. In the introduction Jung writes:

“The axioms of causality are being shaken to their foundations: we know now that what we term natural laws are merely statistical truths and thus must necessarily allow for exceptions. We have not sufficiently taken into account as yet that we need the laboratory with its incisive restriction in order to demonstrate the invariable validity of natural law. If we leave things to nature, we see a very different picture: every process is partially or totally interfered with by chance, so much so that under natural circumstances a course of

events absolutely conforming to specific laws is almost an exception.” (qtd. in Shultis 93-4)

Two points from this excerpt are pertinent to our discussion. Firstly, the ‘interference by chance’ to which Jung is referring is not that which we would call random but rather it appears so based on the misconception that “natural laws” are unequivocal rather than “merely statistical truths.” This is similar to the means by which modern computers produce ‘random’ numbers for they do so based on complex algorithms, oftentimes relying on the ever-changing internal clock to create complexity, thereby instilling a sense of randomness or chance. The second pertinent point we can derive from Jung is his juxtaposition of the ideal with the ‘natural.’ He notes that governing laws arise primarily in the laboratory and yet such an environment is so far abstracted from the interference of the everyday that the resulting laws can be difficult to perceive in “natural circumstances.” It is for this reason that we have the scientific disclaimer ‘All things being equal.’ However, as intimated in the above passage, the *I Ching* opposes this idealized scenario and it is for this reason Cage readily incorporates it into his works.

Idealization, for Cage, is a constraint as it maintains a fallacious dualistic perspective and it prevents the acceptance of things as they are. He notes in “Lecture on Something” that “trying to force life into one’s own idea of it, of what it should be, is absurd” (134). This is a key distinction between Cage and his commonplace predecessors for in Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman the natural is idealized over the artwork. Cage, combating such idealization, seeks to demonstrate that the commonplace is pervasive in all aspects of existence. By idealizing nature one invariably engages in exclusion (such as in the exclusion of industrial objects). Such refutation ultimately prevented others from accepting that definitive quality of the everyday;

namely, the complexity bordering on randomness that pervades the ongoing process of existence. Cage's acceptance of this complexity followed from the *I Ching*:

That is precisely the first thing the *I Ching* teaches us: acceptance. It essentially advances this lesson: if we want to use chance operations, then we must accept the results. We have no right to use it if we are determined to criticize the results and to seek a better answer. In fact, the *I Ching* promises a completely sad lot to anyone who insists on getting a good answer. If I am unhappy after a chance operation, if the result does not satisfy me, by accepting it I at least have the chance to modify myself, to change myself. But if I insist on changing the *I Ching*, then it changes rather than I, and I have gained nothing, accomplished nothing! (Charles 94-95)

### Chance and Wordlines

However, given Jung's aforementioned remarks that disparaged of the scientific, it is worthwhile to introduce N. Katherine Hayles and her attempt to "recontextualize in scientific terms the deep aesthetic and ethical issues Cage's work raises about our attempt to grasp through our intentions a world that always exceeds and outruns those intentions" as it appears in her essay "Chance Operations: Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science" (227).

For Hayles, the use of chance operations in Cage's work such as *Silence* is, in part, an attempt to mitigate the appropriation of the environment into human forms. Similar to Cage's rejection of musical form and structure in order to allow sounds to 'simply exist,' Hayles posits that indeterminacy can "subvert the anthropomorphic perspective that constructs continuity from a human viewpoint of control and isolation" (228). Determinacy, on the other hand, is a form of continuity that is strictly sequential, a simplified chain of cause and effect that "implies an ability

to isolate the causal chains from ‘extraneous’ influences, for example, when a scientific experiment is said to be controlled” (228). Hayles derives one definition of chance from the fictional work of Stanislaw Lem:

Chance, the narrator suggests, is the intersection of independent causal chains. Each is deterministic on its own, but the intersections create unthinkable complexity and inevitable unpredictability. In this view, the world comes into existence as threads of independent wordlines—a term describing how subatomic particles move through spacetime—whose intersections create the warp and woof of the universe. (Hayles 227)

Again, that which is indeterminate is not random, but simply too complex to distil in its entirety into human thought. Hayles then turns to Cage’s “Indeterminacy,” a series of ninety stories which appear in *Silence*. What makes this series unique is that “The continuity of the stories as recorded was not planned” (“Indeterminacy” 260). Such a lack of intentional flow or progression signified, in Hayles estimation, a forgoing of prototypical methods of distilling the complexity of the everyday into sequential events: “Escaping the narrow bounds of anthropomorphic control, [the stories] point toward the much more numerous connections of aleatory encounters that, woven together, comprise the ongoing process of the universe as it is” (Hayles 229).

In Cage, Hayles points out, indeterminacy isn’t just a means of not imposing one’s own will but accepting the independence of other ‘wordlines’ as well, such as those imperfections a piece of paper accrues over time (a method Cage employed both in his musical compositions as well as in his writings). This reveals that the “Connection between wordlines...need not necessitate domination and control of one by another. In the fabric of the universe, human intention is one thread among many, not the whole cloth” (Hayles 230). The aleatory, then, enables us to appreciate the whole tapestry: “Chance, understood as connections between

independent wordlines, has the liberating power to release us from the limitations of our expectations. Given a head start by subversive intentionality, chance has a chance to outrun intention and thereby open us to the world as it is, not merely as we think it will or should be” (Hayles 231).

Acceptance, as afforded by chance operations, thusly enables one to reproduce those Zen principals in works of music and writing. That is because chance allows independent causal chains to interact with one another, producing that which potentially exists in the everyday: events outside of human control. In the introduction to “Indeterminacy” Cage offers an interesting metaphor for how the collected stories should be read: “I suggest that they be read in the manner and in the situations that one reads newspapers—even the metropolitan ones—when he does so purposelessly: that is, jumping here and there and responding at the same time to environmental events and sounds” (261). A daily newspaper uses carefully formed structure to relate what are oftentimes the mundane aspects of 20<sup>th</sup> century life. Reading one out of context best exemplifies the commonplace quality of the modern newspaper for its reports are removed from a personal connection, distanced from the individual ego. Purposelessly reading through such a paper provides an experience of that day-to-day process. Similarly, the stories that comprise “Indeterminacy,” personal anecdotes and asides, replicate this ‘out of context’ experience, while the purposelessness is introduced through the random relationship between stories. And like the newspaper, structure is rigidly adhered to: “In oral delivery of this lecture, I tell one story a minute. If it’s a short one, I have to spread it out; when I come to a long one, I have to speak as rapidly as I can” (“Indeterminacy” 260). Through this method Cage reproduces the commonplace as it functions in an effort to persuade the audience address the process that persists beyond the ideal forms art has distilled it into: “My intention in putting the stories

together in an unplanned way was to suggest that all things—stories, incidental sounds from the environment, and, by extension, beings—are related, and that this complexity is more evident when it is not oversimplified by an idea of relationship in one person’s mind” (“Indeterminacy” 260).

Reproducing the commonplace then is not simply a matter of furthering the agenda espoused by Wordsworth et al but is instead an act of embodying the very essence of the movement: to accept and appreciate that which is beyond one’s control. Idealization is, then, the antithesis for it endeavours to take control of experience, to abstract it from the complexity and appropriate it as personal and human. It follows that idealization of the commonplace is even more of an affront, for one is apprehending the majesty of that which occurs outside of human intentions and then attempting to reduce it to nothing but its import to human thought. And so Cage rebukes traditional practices and the conventions of language for it is the task of these things to attempt to convey the ideal.

However, as Gordana P. Crnković notes in the essay “Utopian America,” “If practice is regarded as the mimetic embodiment of thought, and language as the verbalization of thought, both language and practice will always seem inadequate in comparison with their ideal sources. Cage finds this model intolerable because it casts material practice as an imperfect mimesis of ideal reality rather than as a not-yet-known reality in itself” (171). Crnković’s assertions were echoed by Cage when he stated: “We would not have language if we were not in process. But I don’t believe normal language can *provide* us with that process. That’s why I insist on the necessity of not letting ourselves be dragged along by language. Words impose feelings on us if we consider them as objects, that is, if we let them, too, be what they are: processes” (Charles

151). In order to prevent ourselves from being “dragged along by language” he utilizes indeterminacy through the *I Ching*, thus recreating rather than representing.

As the commonplace exigence persisted throughout the industrial revolution constraints shifted, resources became available and eventually the commonplace exigence was perceived by both rhetor *and* audience. From Wordsworth to Whitman it became clear that the office of art was not to mimic the hills and valleys or to provide a dead poet’s eyes through which one could read the world. No, they concluded, the function of art is not to imitate nature. “[T]he function of Art is,” according to Cage, “to imitate Nature in *her manner of operation*” [emphasis added] (*A Year from Monday* 31). The ‘Nature’ here to which Cage is referring is not the pastoral, idyllic one Wordsworth esteemed but rather nature as that complexity that comprises our existence; that process that persists despite the application of forms and structures. The one that produces stories in no particular order. To “Imitate Nature in her manner of operation” leads one to ‘chance operation’ which leads one to John Cage and *Silence*.

### In the End

The resolution of an exigence, like an answer to a question, brings with it a sense of closure. But, oftentimes an answer produces the next series of questions. Warhol remarked that “Once you ‘got’ Pop, you could never see a sign the same way again. And once you thought Pop, you could never see America the same way again” (qtd. in Leonard 171). The commonplace, at long last able to coexist with the art object, would soon enter a new stage and create new rhetorical situations and produce new exigences.

But while the credit for such a ‘transfiguration’ popularly goes to Warhol, the preceding pages of this essay argue otherwise. Cage’s work prepared the audience for such a moment,

cultivating their minds through sound and language, to the point where they could accept such commonplace objects in art galleries and concert halls. For while Warhol was just then supplanting art pieces with everyday objects, Cage was already being taught to college students (Leonard 150). Thus, his philosophy and methodology became part of the situation and proved instrumental in resolving the commonplace exigence. As previously mentioned, this period was epitomized by Cage's decision to shift his "responsibility from the making of choices to that of asking questions (Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* 45). In a way, his work began to revolve around exigences, around questions and answers. But, as Cage himself notes: "If there are no questions, there are no answers. If there are questions, then, of course, there are answers, but the final answer makes the questions seem absurd, whereas the questions, up until then, seem more intelligent than the answers ("Lecture on Nothing" 118).

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