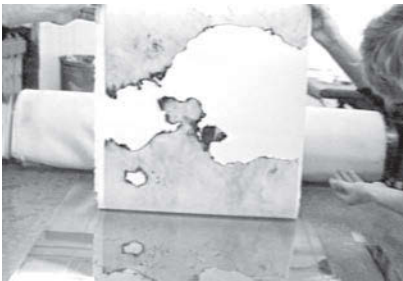


# Overview



## JOHN CAGE: NO DAWDLING

*An excerpt from a memoir in progress  
by Kathan Brown*

John Cage was born in 1912 in Los Angeles. His father, John Milton Cage Sr., was an inventor; in the year of his son's birth he set a world record by staying underwater for twenty-four hours in a submarine of his own design. Among many other inventions, including improvements to the internal combustion engine, the elder Cage developed a crystal radio for home use.

The younger John Cage began piano lessons at the age of nine, was valedictorian of his high school class, and entered Pomona College at the age of sixteen. Two years later he dropped out, hitchhiked to Houston and from there made his way by ship to France. His parents supported him in painting, composing music, and traveling in Europe until they lost their house in the Depression. John returned to Los Angeles, worked as a gardener and a dishwasher, and practised daily on a piano that was housed in the printing shop of a friend. Later he studied with several important new music composers and eventually with Arnold Schoenberg, who took him as a student on condition that he give up painting and "devote his life to music."

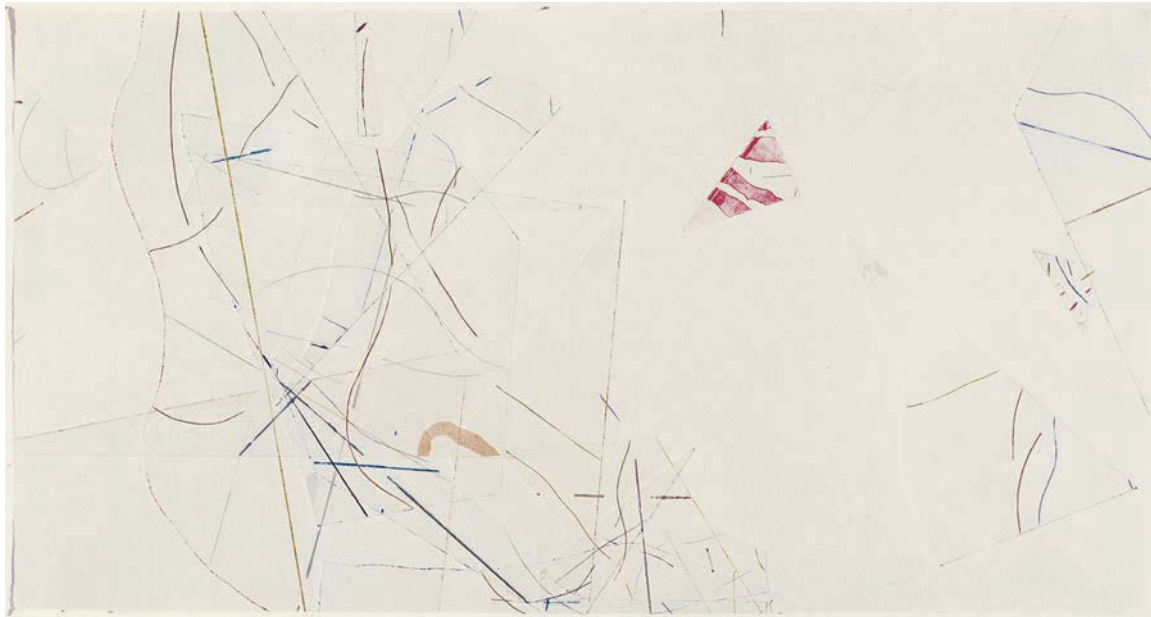
Cage was sixty-five years old in 1977 when I invited him to come to California from his home in New York to make etchings at Crown Point Press. In reply to my invitation, he told me of the promise he had made to Schoenberg. Then he added another story. He had once received an invitation from a friend to walk with her in the Himalayas, and he had not accepted. "I have always

regretted this," he concluded. Because of that regret, beginning in January, 1978, he worked with us almost every year, fifteen times before his death fifteen years later.

The number one favorite video that I have shot of artists in our studio is of John Cage working in 1986 on the series called *Eninka*. Cage is slowly and deliberately walking toward the press, which is flanked by two printers. He is carrying an armload of loosely balled-up newspapers, which he deposits on the press bed and calmly lights on fire. The printers jump back, then at a signal from Cage lay a sheet of thin paper over the fire, pull down the press blankets, and smother the flames by frantically turning the press handle.

Cage is laughing. But he becomes solemn when the printers pull back the blankets to see burned fragments on the press bed. The situation looks hopeless, but slowly the printers separate the printing paper fragments from those made of newspaper, and—with Cage watching energetically—float them in a bath of water to straighten them. There are more steps, and eventually the burned paper takes on a coherent form, mounted on another sheet. Cage is now gazing at a stopwatch, timing how long an iron ring is heated before a printer uses it to brand the print. Finally, he is laughing again, everyone is laughing, delighted at the result.

Crown Point's fiftieth year is a hundred years after Cage was born. We celebrated our twentieth and his seventieth in 1982 with



John Cage, *Changes and Disappearances #16*, 1979-82. One in a series of 35 related color etchings with photoetching, engraving and drypoint in two impressions each. 11 x 22 inches.

an exhibition of his work in our gallery in Oakland, and at the opening he read his just-completed mesostic poem “Composition in Retrospect.” It was published for the first time in the show’s catalog, and the reading was broadcast that night by KPFA, a local public radio station.

“Act in accord with obstacles,” one stanza says, “using them to find or define the process you’re about to be involved in, the questions you’ll ask. If you don’t have enough time to accomplish what you have in mind, consider the work finished.” In the mesostic form, a key word runs down through the poem’s center. You can see in the illustration here that in the text I just quoted, the word “circumstances” plainly appears. Cage created scores for both his music and his works of visual art by asking questions about the obstacles, available time, and circumstances connected to the particular work.

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if you doN't have enough time  
to aCcomplish  
what you havE in mind  
conSider the work finished

Cage would generally spend two weeks with us each year, and in some years, because of time and circumstances, he created series that he could complete in two weeks. He often used fire for these,

and sometimes centered them on drawing around stones in honor of the stone garden of Ryoanji in Kyoto, Japan. When planning for a project of short duration, he made scores that were relatively simple.

In printing with fire, Cage would specify in a score the number of newspaper sheets and the length of time the sheets should burn before covering them with printing paper and running them through the press. There was always at least one more step so other marks could appear but, overall, Cage’s art works that involved burning and/or drawing around stones are quite simple. These are Cage’s best-known works of visual art, but they are narrow slices of his total production. I don’t believe either the simple or the complicated slices are better or more beautiful. But they are different. “I always go to extremes,” Cage said.

At the other extreme from the fire prints are the series titled *Changes and Disappearances*, *On the Surface*, and *Dereau*. I’ll use *Changes and Disappearances* (1979-1982) as an example. Instead of trying to finish this series in two weeks, we would stop when it was time for Cage to leave, and when he came back we would pick up where we had left off.

Oh, it’s going to be horrendous,” Cage exclaimed, laughing, when a printer pointed out that a single print could have up to two hundred colors. We laughed with him. When I think of Cage, I often think of a saying by Montaigne: “The most manifest sign of wisdom is continual cheerfulness.”

Each of Cage’s thirty-five *Changes and Disappearances* images contains combinations from a pool of small shaped plates. Normally, an artist makes the plates, changing them and proofing as he or she goes, and then the printers print the final prints, the edition. Normally, all the edition prints are the same. But in this series, Cage added new lines, mixed new colors, and changed plate positions as the edition prints were being made. He didn’t do this capriciously. For each print he created a score and a set of maps that together gave instructions for making and printing the work,

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Time	Color	Plate	Score	Notes
25	7:31	2C	150°	Plate
35	1:45	2C	510°	Plate + 25W
35	24:47	2A	151°	Orchestr.; Yell. D. Jk 50:50
37	28:46	2A	5°	Orchestr.; Cel V. H. 70:30
37	11:14	2C	250°	Plate; Ultra V. 10:30
17	29:13	2C	359°	Plate
27	33:12	2A	120°	Orchestr.; Cel V. 40:60 + 1/2 W
37	43:14	2C	251°	Plate + 1/2 W
24	50:38	2A	111°	Plate + 1/2 W
9	36:57	2E	90°	Orchestr.
67	39:39	2A	249°	Plate; Mans B. 10:30 + 3/4 W
49	37:50	2A	216°	Plate; Mans + 1/2 W
50	36:45	2A	227°	Plate; Mans; Cel V. 70:30
51	26:46	2C	40°	Plate; Mans V. 80:20 + 1/2 W
60	60:17	2C	312°	Plate; Cel V. Med. 60:40
45	41:44	2C	150°	Plate; Ultra V. 40:60
60	14:35	2C	324°	Plate; Ultra V. 50:50 + 1/2 W
19	50:14	2C	2°	Plate; Ultra V. 40:60 + 1/2 W
64	40:47	2C	106°	Plate; Cel V. 50:50
35	51:16	2A	63°	Plate; Mans; Cel V. 70:30 + 3/4 W
17	47:09	2C	35°	Plate
11	8:11	2A	113°	Plate + 25W

John Cage, score for *Changes and Disappearances* #16, 1979-82.

including individual colors for each line and individual positions for each plate.

If you know nothing else about Cage, you probably know of his music composition that is nicknamed “Silence.” It was first performed in 1952 by a pianist sitting quietly at a piano before a concert-hall audience and not performing as expected. Some members of the audience coughed, whispered, shifted in their seats, or left the hall while others listened, hearing sounds that they would not normally notice. Cage’s title for this work, *4’33”*, describes its duration: four minutes thirty-three seconds. He wrote out a score that the pianist followed using a stopwatch. At the end of each of the work’s first two movements, the pianist closed and then reopened the keyboard cover; he closed it finally at the end of the third, then stood and bowed.

The members of the audience who did not take Cage seriously were dawdling. You can’t dawdle if you are aware of duration. You can’t dawdle if you are paying attention. As a famous Yogi Berra saying puts it, “You have to be careful if you don’t know where you’re going, because you might not get there.”

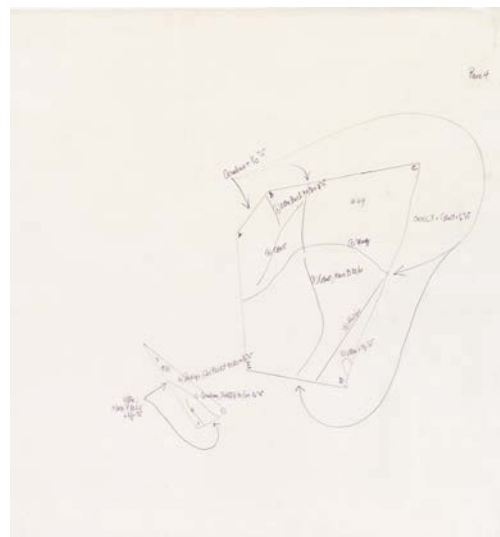
I think Cage would have said it is fine not to know where you are going as long as you pay attention on the way. But, because of his scores, he did know where he was going, at least in general, unless the performers dawdled, misunderstanding him. Zen-influenced, he tried to give up judgments, but he complained to his friends when performers performed inattentively and was unstinting in his praise of skillful execution.

The score for *4’33”* is fairly simple and parallels Cage’s scores for his work with fire in his visual art. At the other extreme in music are *The Freeman Etudes* that he composed for the violinist Paul Zukowsky at around the time (the late 1970s) that he was working on *Changes and Disappearances* with us. Cage described *The Freeman Etudes* as “the possibility of doing the impossible.” He told us that Zukowsky, in a frustrated moment, had said, “I cannot go on. Look at my wrists!” But nevertheless he did perform the piece, “beautifully,” Cage said, nodding with pleasure.

I believe that Cage used the same general approach both in

music and in art. In making the complex scores, he would start by asking as many questions as he could think of about the circumstances of the work. Then he would do a number of tests to see what the answers would look like and, if appropriate, he would improve the skill level. After finding out what tools for making lines we had available, for example, he would use the tools to make test lines, and then he would practice with each tool until he could use it fluidly.

Here are some of the questions Cage asked in making *Changes and Disappearances*: “How many colors are available? How many mixtures is it practical to make? How many different tools are there? How many types of lines: straight, curved, etc.? Are there ways to make lines besides drawing them?” In answer to the last question, he cut plates so their edges made lines, and he dropped string on plates and traced over it for a different line character. He also added thick lines copied photographically from drawings done by Henry David Thoreau in his journals. Cage leaned toward com-



John Cage, map for *Changes and Disappearances* #16 (one of six), 1979-82.





John Cage, *Changes and Disappearances* #31, 1979-82.

plexity; his colors, for example, were always mixtures—he said he wanted them “to look like they went to graduate school.”

Once he had settled on his questions, he used what he called “chance operations” in order to make his score. In the years I knew him, his normal vehicle for doing that was a computer printout based on tables in the Chinese Book of Changes, the *I Ching*. Cage told Robin White, who interviewed him for our Crown Point publication, *View*, “Most people don’t realize I use chance as a discipline. They think I use it—I don’t know—as a way of making choices. But my choices consist in choosing which questions to ask.”

The scores for *Changes and Disappearances* are more complicated than the prints themselves and, from our point of view, following them was difficult and required undivided attention. The studio was full of concentration. Cage did not like background music, and there was very little talking. An unmonitored alarm going off in the building across the street for an hour or so drove us crazy and didn’t seem to bother him. But when someone downstairs practiced the piano, playing one piece haltingly over and over, Cage was beside himself. I went down and explained the situation. “A famous composer is working upstairs. Have you heard of John Cage?” Fortunately, he had. “Would you like to meet him?” Yes, he would. “He will be leaving at the end of next week. Could you possibly hold your practicing until then?” Yes, he could.

When we would break, Cage cooked food for everybody. He laughed—we all laughed—and he told stories. One of his stories was about going door to door in Santa Monica in 1932 (he was twenty) offering lessons in art and music for twenty-five cents a lesson. We asked if he had customers, and he assured us that he did. He told us about driving a bus in early 1940 with his percussion orchestra through rainy Oregon, everyone sleeping in the leaky bus for want of money. That story came to mind because Doris Denison, who had been a member of that orchestra, visited him at the press. We felt incorporated into his life. He laughed at

the end of every story and so did we.

Some stories looked back, others were current. One was about a party hostess in New York who, given wild mushrooms by a guest, fed some to her dog before serving them at dinner. After everyone had eaten, the butler came in and whispered, “Madam, the dog is dead.” She rushed everyone out to have their stomachs pumped, and after that learned the dog had been run over by a car. Cage laughed more than the rest of us at that story.

We weren’t dawdling. Dawdling is procrastinating, delaying, frittering-away time. Almost everyone has had the experience of solving a previously intractable problem while in the shower or riding on a streetcar or doing something such, not thinking—the answer is just suddenly in your head. That kind of insight is probably related to something called the “middle way” between sustained intense focus and meditation. Cage told me that though he studied Zen philosophy he never became seriously involved in “sitting cross-legged.” His mentor, Daisetz T. Suzuki, had assured him, he said, that work was equally valuable.

In creating the *Changes and Disappearances* prints, working with Cage present and following his scores to the letter, we felt we were close to meditating. This situation was more demanding than the printing we ordinarily do, but it was not different in kind. After you reach a certain level of competency, many activities—including cooking, playing music, and gardening—are meditative. The activity refreshes the mind. Cage’s work is about doing something, seeing something, or hearing something in full measure, relaxed yet attentive, temporarily putting aside everything else.

Edward Rothstein, a critic, wrote in the *New York Times* a few days after Cage died in 1992 that “Cage didn’t want liberation from law: he was actually always seeking to submit himself to it. The only requirement seemed to be that the law be meaningless.” Cage often said that he wanted to “imitate nature in her manner of operation,” and since nature operates in a meaningless way



John Cage, *10 Stones*, 1989. Color spit bite and sugar lift aquatints on smoked paper. 8-x-14½-inch image on 18¼-x-23-inch sheet. Edition 20.

Rothstein's comment is correct. However, I believe it is also correct to say that Cage ended up with something meaningful.

On the same day that Rothstein's article appeared, the *New York Times* also printed a more friendly one by Bernard Holland. "Cage announces the failure of the philosophy of the Enlightenment," Holland said. Most of our great thinkers of the past four hundred years, including the founding fathers of our country, have been guided by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the "Age of Reason." If you don't mind oversimplifying, you could encapsulate that philosophy in Rene Descartes's phrase, "I think, therefore I am." A taxi driver, back in the days when taxi drivers had no earpieces and overheard conversations, broke into one of mine with this: "Rene Descartes walked into a bar. 'Would you like a drink?' the bartender asked. 'I think not,' Descartes replied, and disappeared."

In 2010, an article in *Artforum* magazine by Ina Blom, a Norwegian art history professor, stirred up my thoughts about Cage and Descartes. Blom wrote that Cage "made it possible for artists...to start seeing artworks in terms of codes, diagrams, and the productivity of forces rather than the play of forms."

A "productivity of forces" might require something different from what we think of as thinking, a middle way, not precisely rational but at the same time not abandoning intellect. When you look at Cage's art, you cannot talk about "push-pull" or "developing forms in space" or "figure-ground." And pure feeling, the opposite approach, doesn't fit—Cage said that he found self-expression in art and music "trivial and lacking in urgency."

"Left to itself, art would have to be something very simple," Cage said. "It would be sufficient for it to be beautiful. But when it's useful it should spill out of just being beautiful and move over

to other aspects of life so that when we're not with the art it has nevertheless influenced our actions or our responses to the environment." In this way, you may find Cage's work thought provoking, especially if you have had training or experience in any field that requires observation. Cage's urgent pursuit was to hear sounds as sounds, see lines as lines and "wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent." Life *is* excellent, and often beautiful. But not always. And from a thought-provoking point of view, the door that Cage cracked open is now flapping at its hinge.

John Cage began using notation to create art that calls attention to embodied forces at least as early as the 1950s. Now, in our time, the world is full of notation with concrete meanings available only to initiates. We have had, in 2008, a horrendous financial



Kathan Brown and John Cage in the Crown Point studio, 1982. Photo by Colin C. McRae.

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collapse caused by codes that even many of the professionals using them didn't fully understand. We are swimming—maybe close to drowning—in a “productivity of forces” that leaves traditional productivity (the employment of people) behind, and is so strong that ordinary reason (at least in politics) is hard to hold onto. This is life, not art, but the best artists encapsulate life in ways we hardly can recognize when we are in the thick of it.

Could the philosophy of the Enlightenment disappear? If so, could it be replaced by something beneficial to society? Or are we already backtracking toward the Middle Ages, a time of extreme differences between rich and poor, a time when religion, games, superstition, and hearsay held sway over reason and allowed a few lords in their castles to dominate those who worked hard, danced in the streets on feast days, and condoned burning malcontents at the stake. In the summer of 2011, with our country on the interminable edge of recession, I heard a congressman say on television that he aimed to “vilify” the President of the United States “so he will be a one-term President.” He used the word “vilify” twice in the interview.

“How to improve the world,” Cage wrote. “You will only make matters worse.” I asked him if he voted, and he said, “I wouldn't dream of it.” But, speaking for myself, I would ask: If we don't try to improve the world, at least by voting for someone who will work cooperatively, how can we survive?

Here's something else I heard on television, just today, on a panel including Jennifer Granholm, former governor of Michigan. The group was talking about a debate among Presidential candidates. “It's a lot of fun,” Granholm said. “We get out the popcorn, and I'm Tweeting, you're Tweeting.” I visualized it. Short comments zinging through the air at the moment something is hap-

pening among people separately watching an event and engaging in a conversation about it.

“I think it's time for us to turn everything into art,” Cage said in the interview Crown Point published in *View*. “In other words, to take care of it and to change it from being just a mess into being something that facilitates our living. I would want art to slip out of us into the world in which we live.”

Could world-improvement be accomplished through individual acts of paying attention, through choosing the right questions to ask? Could whole populations become resistant to dawdling? Could our culture's newfound fascination with codes, forces, and diagrams work to the advantage of everyone? “Oh my!” John Cage would say, and laugh.

## In the Crown Point Gallery

**John Cage**

*February 3 - March 31, 2012*



**To inaugurate the 50th anniversary year of Crown Point Press**  
*you are invited to a concert by*

**Thomas Schultz**

**The Piano Music of John Cage**

*Prelude for Meditation. Music for Marcel Duchamp. Solo for Piano from the Concert for Piano and Orchestra. 4'33". One<sup>5</sup>. Dream.*

*Thursday, February 9, 2012, 6 p.m.*

*At 7 p.m. Thomas Schultz will join Kathan Brown in a discussion. RSVP for the concert: 415-974-6273 or sasha@crownpoint.com*

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