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John Cage's Living Theatre

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Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them.

--John Cage, "Experimental Music" (1957)¹

When asked by David Shapiro whether he considered himself "as antitheatrical the way Jasper Johns is sometimes called antitheatrical," John Cage responded emphatically:

No. I love the theater. In fact, I used to think when we were so close together—

Earle Brown, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, David Tudor, myself [in the early and mid-1950s]—I used to think that the thing that distinguished my work from theirs was that mine was theatrical. I didn't think of Morty's work as being theatrical. It seemed to me to be more, oh, you might say, lyrical. . . .And Christian's work seemed to me more musical. . . . whereas I seemed to be involved in theater. What could be more theatrical than the silent pieces—somebody comes on the stage and does absolutely nothing.²

Yet the same Cage repeatedly insisted that, when it came to the real theater, he could "count on one hand the plays I have seen that have truly interested me or involved me" (*Conversing* 105). As he explained it to Richard Kostelanetz:

. . . when I bought a ticket, walked in, and saw this marvelous curtain go up with the possibility of something happening behind it, and then nothing happening . . . the theater was a great disappointment to anybody interested in the arts. I can count on one hand the performances that struck me as being interesting in my life. They were *Much Ado About Nothing*, when I was in college; it was done by the Stratford-upon-Avon players. Nazimova in *Ghosts* by Ibsen, Laurette Taylor in *Glass Menagerie*. The Habima Theater's *Oedipus Rex* in 1950 or thereabouts [Pause]. I run out. ³

These theatre epiphanies are obviously responses to individual memorable performances rather than reasoned appraisals of dramaturgy or dramatic theory. It is the mimetic contract of most Western drama that seems to bother Cage. Even theater in the round, so seemingly innovative, irritates him: “[it] never seemed to me to be any real change from the proscenium, because it again focused people’s attention and the only thing that changed was that some people were seeing one side of the thing and the other people the other side. . . . More pertinent to our daily experience is a theater in which we ourselves are in the round” (*Conversing* 103).

But in that case, what does Cage mean by his appraisal of his own work as inherently “theatrical”? Among his incredibly varied productions—productions in many media and genres—there is only one work that can be strictly called a “play” in the usual sense, and even here the voice of the narrator all but overwhelms the “speaking” characters. The work in question is *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet*, which was first produced as a *Hörspiel* in July 1982 in Cologne on the WDR (*Westdeutscher Rundfunk*) program *Studio Akustische Kunst*. *An Alphabet* had its stage premiere in February 1987, again in Cologne: the actors included Dick Higgins, Gerhard Rühm, and Cage himself playing Joyce. The performers sat on the stage in a semicircle before their music stands and read their texts. Klaus Schöning reports that “The light of the stage would cause the event to be imagined as if in a dream, which went well with the origin of this ‘spirit’ play, which Cage had written in a state between sleep

and wakefulness. The play began in the dark; it grew gradually brighter up to the middle and then faded slowly back into darkness—**NightCageDay**.⁴ In 1990, the play was performed at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, as part of the 2nd *Acustica International* festival. In this performance, which has been recorded by Wergo (see note 4 above), Klaus Reichert plays the narrator, Alvin Curran, Satie, Charles Dodge, Duchamp, and Cage himself again Joyce. There are cameo appearance from Jackson MacLow as Brigham Young, Jerome Rothenberg as Robert Rauschenberg, and Dick Higgins as Buckminster Fuller, and Mimi Johnson as Rose Sélavy. And more recently (2001-02) the “play” has toured the U.S. and Europe, as part of the repertoire of the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, with Cunningham himself playing the part of Satie.

But what does “playing a part” mean in *An Alphabet*, given the work’s total absence of characterization in the usual sense? In his Introduction, which is reprinted along with the text itself in *X: Writings ’79-82*, Cage refers to the play as a “lecture” or “fantasy.” “Alphabet,” he admits, is a misnomer since the names of his three protagonists —James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie—as well as the play’s minor characters generate the text’s structure, not alphabetically, but as follows:

To outline the entire text by means of chance operations was not difficult. There were twenty-six different possibilities: the three ghosts alone, each in combination with one to four different beings, the ghosts in pairs with one to three different being, all three with one or two. I used the twenty-six letters of the alphabet and chance operations to locate facing pages of an unabridged dictionary upon which I found the nonsentient beings, which are the stage properties of the various scenes (I through XXXVII) that follow. For the sentient beings, the other actors, I also used the alphabet, but only rarely as a means of finding a person I didn’t know in an encyclopaedia. Mostly the other actors are people with whose work I’ve also become involved, sometimes as deeply as with Joyce, Duchamp, and Satie.⁵

This, like many of Cage’s “factual” accounts of his modes of operation is more pataphysical than logical: one thinks of Duchamp’s arithmetic in the

Large Glass and *Satie's Furniture Music*. The fact is that there is no neat succession of ghosts alone, in combination with one to four others or in pairs, and the "nonsentient" beings –curtains, radio, Vichy water, gas, and so on—seem to be chosen quite arbitrarily, as are the cited individuals, who range from Brigham Young to Buckminster Fuller to Heidegger.

The structuring principle is the familiar Cagean mesostic, a term the artist has frequently defined as a vertical acrostic—an acrostic, that is, in which the capitalized letters of a given name, run down the center of the text. In a 100% mesostic on the name JAMES JOYCE, for example, neither the **J** nor the **A** can appear in the "wing" words and phrases between the **J** and the **A**, and so on. In a 50% mesostic, which is what we have here, only the second letter, in this case **A**, cannot appear between the two. For example (p. 56):

Jump
alternately fOrth and back and forth
verY slowly
in time with the Curtain's
phrasEology

Here the **O** but not the **Y** of the name "JOYCE", is allowed to appear between **O** and **Y** of lines 2-3: witness "forth."

The three names generate sets of five-line (J-A-M-E-S J-O-Y-C-E), four-line (E-R-I-K S-A-T-I-E) and six/seven line (M-A-R-C-E-L D-U-C-H-A-M-P) stanzas, with a few couplets (for two of the first or last names) used for variation. But ingenious as the resulting patterns are, mesostics are, of course, designed for the eye rather than the ear: when the piece is spoken, whether by one reader or by a set of actors, one doesn't hear the mesostic string although there may be an unusually high incidence of prominent **J** and **K** sounds. Then, too, *An Alphabet* differs from most of Cage's mesostic

texts in that it isn't a "writing through," as in the case of the earlier "writings through" *Finnegans Wake*, where chance operations generate mesostics like the following:⁶

i rimimirim Jute
one eyegonblAck
ghinees hies good for you Mutt
how woodEn i not know
old grilSy

Just
hOw
bY a riverpool
Clompturf
rEx

The brilliant onomatopoeia ("rimimirim," "Clompturf"), phonetic spelling ("ghinees is" = "Guinness is"), grammatical scrambling, compounding, and fragmentation that results when Cage relies on a source text like *Finnegans Wake* is obviously unavailable to the creator of *An Alphabet*, where the typical mesostic on, say, "E-R-I-K S-A-T-I-E" is formed from a set of normal sentences, as in:

wE
heaR
over a radlo
a conversation sticKing

o two WordS
fifty-five And
fifTy-four

It is
An argumEnt (X 58)

When these stanzas are heard, the mesostic string is all but inaudible. Indeed, from the point of view of performance, the strength of *An Alphabet* comes less from the mesostics themselves than from the contrast between their flat language and the inserted citations (ten in all) from Satie (5), Duchamp (3), and Joyce (2). These are spoken, or rather read and recited, by the “characters” themselves. Consider the following mesostic, with its slightly forced, slightly cute, conjunction of ghosts:

Now and then niJinsky's ghost
Appears
Bringing a telegraM
To joycE
From marShall mcluhan (57)

This “J-A-M-E-S” stanza is juxtaposed to a passage from Book 1, chapter 6 of *Finnegans Wake*, in which Anna Livia-Iseult-Stella speaks seductive sweet nothings to her lover:

Do you like that, *silenzioso*? Are you enjoying, this same little me, my life, my love? What do you like my whispering? Is it not divinely deluscious? But in't it bafforyou? *Misi, misi!* Tell me till my thrillme comes! I will not break the seal. I am enjoying it still, I swear I am! Why do you preer its in these dark nets, if why may ask, my sweetykings? Sh sh! Longears is flying. No, sweetissest, why would that annoy me? But don't! You want to be slap well slapped for that. Your delighted lips, love, be careful! Mind my duvetyne dress above all! It's golden silvy, the newest sextons with princess effect.⁷

On the Wergo CD, Cage, acting the part of Joyce, reads these lines, with their elaborate punning, compounding, and phonemic play, to thrilling effect. It is an excitement, we must recognize, that has less to do with Joyce impersonation as such than with the layering that occurs when one brilliantly

modulated and trained voice performs the words of a kindred artist, the combination producing "theatre" in the purest sense. But it is only in these passages that Cage's Joyce comes alive; for the most part, the narrator's account produces gently droll effects like the following:

Joyce
is At work
in a roMan bank
mErce Cunningham
comeS in to cash a traveler's check

Just sign
Giambattista vicO's name
instead of Your own
and I'll give you Control
of a rEvolving fund (X 67)

Here the linkage between Cunningham and Joyce via Vico, whose cyclical philosophy governs the *Wake*, provides the joke on "rEvolving fund." And similar transitions are made between Duchamp's pataphysical writing in *Salt Seller* and the narrator's account of Marcel, or again between Satie's writings on furniture music and Cage's stories about the composer's visit to Nancarrow in Mexico City. The three "ghosts," their words sometimes in union or dialogue with other ghosts like that of Rauschenberg, also speak within the mesostics themselves. Then, too, their words are heard against the backdrop of scraps of sound fluttering around the auditorium.

As such, Cage's *Alphabet* can hardly be called theatrical. When the play was performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 2001, the *Guardian*

reviewer, Elisabeth Mahoney, remarked: " Cage's fantastical alphabet of artists who have changed the way we think and see is stylish, assured and beautifully simple, for all the lofty ideas it contains. The play's limitations are those of all ground-breaking modernism—without narrative, conventional characters, any sense of conclusion, it is hard to feel any emotional engagement."⁸ And the Berkeley performance of 2002 evoked similar response. In *Critical Dance*, Mary Ellen Hunt complained of the piece's "static and at times confusing direction," with its "bewildering barrage of stimuli for the ears and hardly anything for the eye." And, having praised the role of the narrator, she continued shrewdly,

Had this been an interactive installation in which one could wander in and out along with the Narrator and hear various monologues as you passed by, it might have been more successful, but with the proscenium separating us and them, and with everybody sitting practically immobile, there was an uneasy feeling of stagnation. With all the discussion of Buckminster Fuller's work, the configuration began to look rather like an unstable carbon-12 atom with twelve staid protons and neutrons and one crazed electron.⁹

The proscenium separating us and them: Cage himself was quite aware of the problem he had created. Having conceived of *Alphabet* as a *play*, with the speech-making and dialogue a drama entails, he resorted to techniques he had long ago rejected because they did not allow for what he considered the necessary "unimpededness and interpenetration." "Unimpededness," as he put it in "Composition as Process" (1958), "is seeing that in all of space each thing and each human being is at the center and furthermore that each one being penetrated by every other one no matter what the time or what the space" (*Silence* 46). And in the *Musicircus* he first organized in 1970, "Interpenetration," so Cage told Daniel Charles, "must appear *through* non-obstruction," through "flexibility of relationships."¹⁰

Given this trust in art as modeled on "Nature in her manner of operation,"¹¹ Cage soon came to see that *Alphabet* had a problem. "All those scenes," he told Richard Kostelanetz referring to the thirty-seven

sections of the play “have beginnings and ends. That’s what annoys me.”¹² What Cage means here, I think, is that his conversations between individual artist-ghosts, embedded as they are in narrative, fall too easily into separate closural units. At the same time, the characters blur, all of them subsumed in the person of the narrator, whose voice is the only one to have presence and palpability. But then “theatre,” as Cage usually understood it, could not be “drama” in the traditional sense; rather, it demanded what he had called, with reference to the *Roaratorio*, written just a few years before the *Alphabet*, a “circus situation,” a “plurality of centers.”¹³

“A fugue,” Cage explains to Klaus Schöning with reference to the *Roaratorio*, “is a . . . complicated genre; but it can be broken up by a single sound, say from a fire engine. Paraphrase: *Roaratorio* is a more complicated genre; it cannot be broken up by a single sound, say from a fire engine” (Schöning, *Roaratorio* 19). Cage’s creation of a mesostic sound field, which I have described in *Radical Artifice*,¹⁴ is a complex orchestration of music (Irish jig, folk song), the human voice (laughing, crying, singing, shouting, or whispering), the sounds of nature (waterfall, thunderclap, frog croaking, cow mooing), and occasional manmade sound (church bell, gong, shotgun). Individual place names and sound references cited in *Finnegans Wake* were chosen and recorded on multitrack tapes by a complex set of mathematical rules, and then superimposed on one another to create this Irish “circus.”

The resulting soundscape is, as William Brooks has noted, “pastoral, unsullied, spacious.” Technological and mechanical sources were few and there is no electronically processed sound. “It is a soundscape for Thoreau, for Joyce, for Charles Ives: unreal, dearly loved, joyfully affirmed, but illuminated by the certainty of loss, the recognition that this place cannot be, never was, before us.”¹⁵ The paradox, in other words, that a piece so formally generated, what with the precise transfer of a 626-page grid (the text of *Finnegans Wake*) onto a 60-minute tape segment--a piece written

entirely in mesostics on the name **JAMES JOYCE**, could come out sounding like the Irish culture with which it deals, a largely rural culture, whose “tumbles a’buckets [come] clattering down,” to the tune of “fargobawlers” and “megaphoggs.” Here is a sample:

black mass of Jigs and jimjams haunted by
 innOcence
 194 Yield our spiritus to the wind
 pole the spaniel paCk
 and thEir quarry

ijypt
 sAw i
 198 lord saloMon
 hEr
 bulls they were ruhring surfed with spree

in a period gōwn of changeable Jade
 200 that wOuld robe the wood
 off her nose vuggYbarney
 hello duCky
 plEase don't die

taping a flank and tipping a Jutty
 202 pAlling in and pietaring out
 when Maids
 wEre in arc
 or when three Stood hosting

and me to do the greasy Jub
 204 vetOnica's wipers
 theY've moist
 Crampton lawn
 baptistE me father for she has sinned

or Jude's hotel
 205 from nAnnywater
 to the lootin quarter you found his ikoM
 tipsidE down
 cornerboyS cammocking his guy

the peihos piped und ubanJees twanged
 206 with Oddfellow's triple tiara
 she swore on croststYx nyne wyndabouts she's be
 quiCk and
 maguE

Figure 1, *Roaratorio*, p. 46

Note that here no two line-lengths are the same: they range from three letters ("hEr) to forty-seven: "she swore on croststYx nyne wyndabouts she's be." The "stanzas" are thus enormously variable, as is the design made by the punctuation, which Joyce has moved from its place in the text itself to the page that surrounds it. Note, for example, the inverted question mark preceding "when Maids" from p. 202 of the *Wake*. Then, too, sound and word repetition are highly prominent, the *Wake* providing countless possibilities for wordplay and phonetic spelling. Thus the **J's** of **JAMES JOYCE** include *Jigs, jimjams, ijypt* [Egypt], *Jade, Jutty, Jub, Jude's, ubanJees*.

At the same time—and this is *Roaratorio's* distinction—the sounds so carefully chosen and layered never coalesce; they retain their individual identities. And it is the spoken/written words themselves that are the actors in this new Cagean theatre. "Theatre," as Cage defined it for Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner in 1965, "is something that engages both the eye and the ear. The two public senses are seeing and hearing; the senses of taste, touch, and odor are more proper to intimate, nonpublic situations. The reason I want to make my definition of theater that simple is so one could view everyday life as theater." And again, "If you're in a room and a record is playing and the window is open and there's some breeze and a curtain blowing, that's sufficient, it seems to me, to produce a theatrical experience. When you're lying down and listening, you're having an intimate, interiorly realized theater which I would—if I were going to exclude anything—exclude from my definition of theatre as a public occasion" (*Conversing* 101).

Something to see, something to hear, and a public occasion: by Aristotelian standards, this may be a pretty lame definition of theater: *opsis* (spectacle) is elevated above *mythos*, *ethos*, and *dianoia*, *melopoeia* over *logos* and *lexis* (style). And yet the notion of theater as a public seeing and hearing ("an occasion involving any number of people, but not just

one"—*Conversing 101*), makes good sense if our touchstone is Eastern rather than Western theatre. The clash of voices, languages, and sound registers, juxtaposed to the text's visual performance, which foregrounds lines like "hello duCky," where the capital **C** separates the two syllables of the words, producing a buried *du* (you) and a **ky** that both puns on "key" and connotes place name endings like "Kentucky."

Perhaps the *Roaratorio* is, as Cage suggests, most usefully understood as theatre. Certainly, it is not lyric: the narrator's voice refuses any personal disclosure, reciting, as he does, someone else's words. Again, the piece is not opera for there is not the slightest plot, not Oratorio, for it is neither linear nor closural. *Roaratorio* subordinates the temporal to the spatial, the lateral movement of Joyce's mesostics creating a field of action that avoids one-directional movement. As in Zen discourse, it is the reader who takes up alternate positions toward what is happening. Indeed, in such related works as *Lecture on the Weather* (1976), the audience *becomes* the protagonist, in this case, huddling together, when a thunderstorm takes place on the sound track, or drifting apart into a set of monads in the concert hall when birdsong introduces a new dawn, even as the "real" actors are reading from Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience*.¹⁶

But perhaps Cage's most successful theatrical mode is not, strictly speaking, a performance at all, but a genre he more or less invented—namely, the "italic" or semi-found text. I am referring to the many public lectures and articles Cage devoted to his various artist friends over the years. *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet* is a variant on this form, but Cage's more usual mode is a lecture in which the poet holds a covert dialogue with his artist-subject by putting that subject's cited words in italics and pasting them into what looks like a seamless third-person account of his work. A brilliant example is "Mosaic" (1966), in which Cage takes on his mentor Arnold Schoenberg, shrewdly evaluating the

Viennese composer's brilliance and tenacity along with his prejudices and pet peeves.¹⁷ But perhaps the most poignant italic text Cage wrote is the 1964 lecture "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas," published with a headnote in *A Year from Monday*.¹⁸

In the headnote, Cage admits that he had a hard time inventing a text that "would relate somehow to the canvases and personality of the painter. The absence of unpainted space in most of his work and, what seemed to me, an enigmatic aura of the personality produced a problem, one which I was determined to solve and which for five months occupied and fascinated me" (73). This time, accordingly, Cage did not use "chance operations with respect to type faces, size of type, superimpositions of type, collage of texts previously written about Johns by other critics," because these would have violated Johns's notion that, in Gertrude Stein's words, "each thing is as important as every other thing." Rather, as Cage explains in his headnote to "Rhythm Etc.," he used the technique that generated *Cartridge Music*: a pencil is placed on an overlay of transparent sheets on ordinary sheets bearing biomorphic forms, the outlines providing directions for the position of specific sentences on a given page (*A Year from Monday* 120). And to thicken the plot, quotations from Johns's own writings, placed in italics, are kuxtaped to snatches of remembered comments, made in conversation with Cage. These appear in regular type. Further: paragraph signs evidently result from chance operations, but the sign doesn't necessarily produce a new paragraph and hence remains mysterious and equivocal.

We thus have four perspectives: (1) "normal" third-person narrative produced by Cage, (2) third-person narrative that represents Johns's own narrative, i.e., *oratio obliqua*, (3) Johns's own words, rendered directly, and (4) fragments from Johns's writings. Sometimes these four angles are represented separately:

- (1) It does not enter his mind that he lives alone in the world. There are in fact all the others. I have seen him entering a room, head aloft, striding with

determination, an extraordinary presence inappropriate to the circumstance: an ordinary dinner engagement in an upstairs restaurant. There were chairs and tables, not much room, and though he seemed to be somewhere else in a space utterly free of obstructions he bumped into nothing. (76)

- (2) His earliest memories concern living with his grandparents in Allendale, South Carolina. Later, in the same town, he lived with an aunt and uncle who had twins, a brother and sister. Then he went back to live with his grandparents. After the third grade in school he went to Columbia, which seemed like a big city, to live with his mother and stepfather. A year later, school finished, he went to a community on a lake called The Corner to stay with his Aunt Gladys. He thought it was for the summer but he stayed there for six years studying with his aunt who taught all the grades in one room, a school called Climax. (78)
- (3) Why, he asks, was she won over? Why does the information that someone has done something affect the judgment of another? Why cannot someone who is looking at something do his own work of looking? Why is language necessary when art so to speak already has it in it? "Any fool can tell that's a broom." (75)
- (4) Whenever the telephone rings, asleep or awake, he never hesitates to answer. *An object that tells of the loss, destruction, disappearance of objects. Does not speak of itself. Tells of others. Will it include them? Deluge.* (75)

In the third case above, the discourse modulates from straight narrative (1) to Johns's actual words even though only the final sentence is a direct quotation. The difference is perhaps between habitual statement and a particular, memorable one. And in the fourth example, the third-person account frames the quoted words, which are extracted from a comment Johns made in an art interview. But the situation is complicated when the text moves back and forth, without warning, between all four of the above points of view:

Does he live in the same terror and confusion that we do? *The air must move in as well as out—no sadness, just disaster.* I remember the deadline they had: to put up a display, not in windows on a street but upstairs in a building for a company that

was involved in sales and promotion. Needing some printing done they gave me the job to do it. Struggling with pens and India ink, arriving at nothing but failure, I gradually became hysterical. Johns rose to the occasion. Though he already had too much to do, he went to a store, found some mechanical device for facilitating lettering, used it successfully, did all the other necessary things connected with the work and in addition returned to me my personal dignity. Where had I put it? Where did he find it? That his work is beautiful is only one of its aspects. It is, as it were, not interior to it that it is seductive. We catch ourselves looking in another direction for fear of becoming jealous, closing our eyes for fear our walls will seem to be empty. Skulduggery. (80)

The first sentence above is Cage's own question. The "answer" comes indirectly in Johns's own remark about a painting, evidently one of the dark paintings of the *Watchman* period. "*The air must move in as well as out--no sadness, just disaster*" has a Buddhist ring that must have appealed to Cage: one accepts the "disaster" of one's situation without sentimentalizing it ("no sadness"). But the next sentence, "I remember the deadline. . . ," doesn't continue Cage's train of thought; rather, it shifts to Johns's own discourse, his memory of a particularly unpleasant commission in his days as window-display artist. But the embedding of this passage, culminating in Johns's memory that "I gradually became hysterical" into the larger narrative, creates a curiously surrealist effect. It is, after all, Cage who speaks these words in the performance of "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas," without giving a clear indication that the words are not his own. We thus hear a calm, modulated voice telling us "I gradually became hysterical," and then shift quickly to the third person, "Johns rose to the occasion."

But now an even odder shift occurs. In another example of *oratio obliqua*, the narrator records Johns's trip to the store to buy supplies to make the lettering. In the middle of the sentence, the pronoun shifts from "He" to "me": "and in addition returned to me my personal dignity." The question "Where had I put it?" is thus indeterminate. Is this part of Johns's

narrative or Cage's response? What is the "it"? The passage ends, in any case, with Cage's response to the visceral appeal of Johns's work, and his generalization, "We catch ourselves looking in another direction for fear of becoming jealous." It is all a form of "Skulduggery," as the italicized aesthetic statement: "*Focus. Include one's looking. . . .*" confirms. In context, "*do what I do, do what I say,*" brings Cage and Johns together in an epiphany as to the nature of aesthetic experience.

And in a larger sense, this is what the Jasper Johns piece accomplishes. What seems at first glance a casual set of comments prompted by Cage's study of Johns' art is a curiously dramatic composition in which the two artists gradually become one. The stage directions of the opening, "On the porch at Edisto. Henry's records filling the air with rock 'n' Roll" (73)—a moment where Cage and Johns are still two distinct persons ("I said I couldn't understand what the singer was saying. Johns [laughing]: That's because you don't listen")—gradually gives way to the witty and moving conclusion:

Even though in those Edisto woods you think you didn't get a tick or ticks, you probably did. The best thing to do is back at the house to take off your clothes, shaking them carefully over the bathtub. Then make a conscientious self-examination with a mirror of necessary. It would be silly too to stay out of the woods simply because the ticks are in them. Think of the mushrooms (Caesar's among them!) that would have been missed. Ticks removed, fresh clothes put on, something to drink, something to eat, you revive. There's scrabble and now chess to play and the chance to look at TV. *A Dead Man. Take a skull. Cover it with paint. Rub it against canvas. Skull against canvas.* (84).

It is Johns who knows the Edisto, South Carolina woods where his house is located and can dispense advice about getting rid of ticks. But Cage is the one who would have hated "to stay out of the woods simply because the ticks are in them. Think of the mushrooms . . . that would have been missed." Both men, in any case, take a pragmatic position to the day's

activities, looking forward to “something to drink, something to eat . . . scrabble and now chess to play and the chance to look at TV.” It all seems very *gemütlich*. But then Cage concludes with a passage from Johns’s notebook, next to a sketch for the painting *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O’Hara*, Johns’s elegy for the marvelous poet-friend who died in 1966 at the age of forty. And so the text ends on a death note, “skull against canvas,” suggesting, that the acceptance of death is what makes the wonderfully various life described throughout the piece meaningful.

It is a moment of high theatre. Unlike *Alphabet*, where the “ghosts” of Duchamp and Satie remain inert *dramatis personae*, their conversations never quite creating a dramatic conflict situation, in the more modest italic lecture “Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas,” the separate voices of Cage and Johns are carefully orchestrated so that, by the end of the piece, the audience witnesses a particular poignant moment in art-making: the double recognition, by “Cage” and “Johns” of art’s “rubbing” a skull against canvas, of art’s inseparability, in other words, from death and hence life.

Something to see, something to hear and a public occasion: Cage’s definition of the *theatrical* is curiously postmodern in that, in a text like “Jasper Johns,” as in *Roaratorio*, speaking and hearing don’t coincide. When hearing Cage read the piece, the italic sections don’t stand out as separate. Indeed, unless one has more or less memorized Johns’s sketchbooks and interviews, one cannot be sure that the sentences and phrases in question *are* citations. When the work is read on the page, on the other hand, the shift in voices, which Cage can accomplish orally, is not marked. The prescription should thus be: “Something to hear *or* something to see.” The public occasion, moreover, can just as well be private, in keeping with Jasper Johns’s adage (or is it Cage’s?), “The situation must be Yes-and-No not either-or. *Avoid a polar situation*” (79).

What, then, about the knotty “character” issue? The disjunction between speaking and hearing not only undercuts the audience’s ability to distinguish between the senses but also its notion of what a person, as seen on stage, really is. For Cage—and for him this is a comic, not at all a tragic, fact of postmodern existence—individuals—say, the characters in an Ibsen or Chekhov play—are no longer at center stage. Rather, in works like *Roaratorio* and *Jasper Johns*, identity quite literally merges as if to carry to its logical extreme Samuel Beckett’s question in *The Unnamable* “What matter who’s speaking?” As Cage liked to put it, citing *Finnegans Wake*, “Here Comes Everybody.”

Footnotes

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¹ John Cage, *Silence* (1961; Middletown, CT, 1973), p. 12.

² David Shapiro, "On Collaboration in Art," *Res* 10 (1985); rpt. in Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight, 1988), p. 105. Subsequently cited as *Conversing*.

³ Richard Kostelanetz, "Conversation with John Cage" (1970), in Kostelanetz (ed.), *John Cage: An Anthology* (New York: Da Capo, 1991), 24.

⁴ Klaus Schöning, liner notes, *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet*, John Cage Trust, New York, Wergo 6310 (Mainz: Schott Music & Media, 2003), 26-27.

⁵ Cage, "James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet," in Cage, *X: Writings '79-82* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 53-101. Subsequently cited in the text as *Alphabet*.

⁶ Cage, "Writing for the Fourth Time Through Finnegans Wake," *X*, 4.

⁷ *X* 57. See James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (1939; New York: Viking Press, 1976), 147-48.

⁸ Elisabeth Mahoney, review of "An Alphabet," Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, 1 September 2001, p.

⁹ Mary Ellen Hunt, "James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet," *Critical Dance.com* 5 Feb. 2002.

¹⁰ Cage, *For the Birds: in conversation with Daniel Charles* (Boston and London: Marion Boyars, 1981), 52.

¹¹ *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writings* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 31.

¹² Cited by Richard Kostelanetz, in "John Cage as a Hörspielmacher" (1989), Kostelanetz (ed.), *Writings about John Cage* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993), 213-21: see 218.

¹³ John Cage, *Roaratorio, An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake*, ed. Klaus Schöning (Munich: Athenäum, 1985), 107.

¹⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 149-61.

¹⁵ William Brooks, "Roaratorio Appraised" (1983), in Kostelanetz, *Writings about John Cage*, 223-24.

¹⁶ I discuss this piece at length in *Radical Artifice*, 21-28.

¹⁷ See my "The Portrait of the Artist as Collage-Text: Pound's *Gaudier-Brzeska* and the "Italic" Texts of John Cage," in Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect* (1985; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), pp. 33-73.

¹⁸ John Cage, "Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas," *A Year from Monday*, 73-84.

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