

Douglas C. Wadle

## **Playing on the Murky Level: A Philosophical Foundation for the Study of Meaning in and through Experimental Music/Performance**

---

*A version of this paper was originally presented at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology in Tucson, Arizona, November 2004 under the title "Anything Goes Only if Nothing is the Basis: The Study of Meaning in the New Avant Garde through the Integration of Culture, Performance, and Music Theories." It was (radically) revised to its present form in 2005.*

This paper will present a philosophical foundation for the study of meaning in and through experimental music (primarily) and interdisciplinary works of art that take their impetus from the ideas of the composer John Cage. The proposed theory stems from studies of German Idealism, particularly the work of Immanuel Kant; Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology, semiotics, and current trends in aesthetics and the philosophy of mind. Beginning with a brief historical overview of the rise of the theatrical impulse in experimental music (beginning with John Cage) by which I justify this interest in the totality of the performance environment, I will outline a philosophical understanding of the nature of inter-subjective discourse within an idealist framework that allows for a meaningful engagement with (such experimental) works of art on the part of an audience as well as providing prescriptions for artistic production within the (experimental) arts.

### **I. A Very Brief Historical Overview (John Cage and Happenings to Get the Ball Rolling)**

"Once in Amsterdam, a Dutch musician said to me, 'It must be very difficult for you in America to write music, for you are so far away from the centers of tradition.' I had to say, 'It must be difficult for you in Europe to write music, for you are so close to the centers of tradition'" (Cage: 73).

This quote from John Cage is indicative of the break in the avant-garde that appeared with Cage – the break from modernism into a form of hyper-modernism

(Boulez's total serialism) and experimentalism. Cage effected this break, under the inspiration of Zen Buddhism, as an attempt to free himself from the workings of tradition, and, more importantly, to free himself from his own ego, leading to the introduction of the aleatoric principles we associate with him – primarily, the use of the *I Ching* oracles for compositional decision making. Or, more properly, Cage introduced a system mediating between initial compositional decisions and their eventual outcomes. The system is one of such complexity (including hierarchical levels of aleatorically defined relations), outside of the boundaries of traditional practice, that the perceptual experience was one of randomly associated elements with no *perceivable* inherent logic.

By seeking to remove the directives of his own ego from the piece (as performed event) and overloading the perceptual mechanism, through the aforementioned complexity, so that it is unable to construct meaningful relationships between the components, Cage forged the path for experimentalists who would follow: to think of their craft as the exploration of the sensory perceptions of the performative event rather than an exploration of a pre-existing musical style.

Before his encounters with Zen, Cage had been artistically involved, as a composer of percussion music, with several choreographers, ultimately leading to his position as music director of Merce Cunningham's dance company. Cage has cited this involvement with his subsequent interest in theatrical pieces and his own self-definition as a theatrical composer. Combining his interests in chance operations and a working style that overloaded the perceptual capacities of the audience, Cage crafted *The Untitled Event* at Black Mountain College (1952) – a cornucopia of simultaneities including a lecture by Cage, a dance performance choreographed by Cunningham, a hanging canopy of Robert Rauschenberg paintings, poetry reading, slide shows, film projections, and a ritual involving a coffee cup. This is the event that inspired the Happenings of the late 1950s and the 1960s, a movement

spearheaded by several of Cage's students at the New School for Social Research and the group Fluxus, who were, along with Cage, influenced by the writings of Antonin Artaud, who outlined the main objective of his "theater of cruelty" in his seminal work, *The Theater and Its Double*:

"I maintain the stage is a tangible, physical place that needs to be filled and it ought to be allowed to speak its own concrete language.

"I maintain that this physical language, aimed at the senses and independent of speech, must first satisfy the senses. There must be poetry for the senses just as there is for speech, but this physical, tangible language I am referring to is really only theatrical insofar as the thoughts it expresses escape spoken language" (Artaud: 25).

That Happenings continue to have an effect in the form of total attention to the performance environment can be seen clearly in the current, widespread interest in inter-disciplinary, multi-media performance, site-specific performance, interactive media environments, and experimental chamber opera. It is significant that the theories of Artaud gained currency at a time when, not only were these Happenings forging new artistic ground, but advances in musical technology and audio production were capturing the imagination of composers throughout the world, leading to the creation of experimental music laboratories such as IRCAM. These advances would allow both the manipulation of sounds prior to performance with previously unthinkable juxtapositions, transmutations, and synthesis of sounds – as well as an ever-increasing specificity of spatialized audio playback leading to today's multi-channel equipped theaters. It was also the beginning of phenomenological analysis of music and an increasing interest in musical perception and cognition (studies of which were made possible by the very same technology being used by composers). The result was, and remains, a broadened focus attuned to the entire performance space coupled with an increased ability to manipulate and distribute sounds meticulously throughout that space, and an increased attention to the mechanisms of perceiving the stimuli so distributed. The technology first developed within the realm of music quickly found applications relevant and adapted forms

suited to other idioms. The availability of interactive technology, powerful laptop computers, and highly advanced projection devices now augment the battery of tools available to artists in the performing (and non-performing) arts as they seek to structure increasingly complex perceptual environments in their works.

## **II. A Philosophy of Meaning in the Arts**

The generation of a theory of meaning in the complexly structured performance environments created by these artists – understanding the workings of a “concrete language of theater” as it played out through Cage’s influence – requires a firm grasp of the tools and nature of understanding of a thinking subject and between such subjects, particularly in respect to the operation of the perceptual mechanisms of the senses by which we experience these works. The first step in this direction will be a philosophy of mind that embraces the idea of a public as the receptors of the performance. To wit:

Accepting art as being intended for public display, the artist is in a relational position to that public, and the artist’s view as to the characteristics of that public will inform his or her approach to that relationship. The options are (1) the audience, as object or collection of objects, does not possess the quality, reality, but is, rather, a projection of the mind of the artist and, as such, anything goes; (2) the audience has no *veridical* reality, as object or collection of objects, though it may in fact be real beyond our epistemic boundaries – in which case, anything goes if we assume that there is no point to predicting the properties (such as consciousness) of a thing beyond the realm of our understanding, and, therefore, any discussion of an audience’s subjective reception of a work is misguided; (3) the audience is granted existence as object or collection of objects in an external world, but the determination of the potential subjectivity of those objects remains beyond our epistemic bounds – this is really a variation on proposition 2, the results being the

same; or (4) the audience or, more properly, each audience member, once the possibility of their external existence is allowed, is endowed with a consciousness separate from the artist's own, in which case the relationship of these consciousnesses must be defined (as they will be below). Since propositions 1 - 3 result in a case of art being free from a need for reception by external consciousnesses (since there can, on these positions, be no proof of said consciousnesses) we are left with the artist as subject unbelieving in the possibility of formulating any connection with the object or collection of objects that comprise the concept, "audience. If we are ever introduced to the work of such an artist, it would probably remain incomprehensible. Furthermore, an artist creating from this solipsistic standpoint has no need to share, or even to make corporeal, the products of his/her artistic intuition. That leaves us with proposition 4 for further consideration in reference to the question of meaning (necessarily inter-subjective) in the arts.

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* will get us started on our elucidation of these inter-subjective relations: "The capacity of receiving representations (receptivity) through the mode in which we are affected by objects, is called *sensibility*. By means of sensibility, therefore, objects are given to us, and it alone furnishes us with intuitions..." (Kant 1991: 21). He continues, "From this investigation it will be found that there are two pure forms of sensuous intuition, as principles of knowledge *a priori*, namely, space and time" (22-23). I differ with Kant in the assumption that "objects are given to us," which already implies an external world. Rather, I am willing only to say that we perceive objects, leaving the implicit belief that those objects exist beyond that perception out of the formulation. I will agree, however, that the means by which a subject situates itself within space, the means by which it perceives (apparently) external stimuli, are the senses. The mind orders these external stimuli according to some principle, leading to the appearance of unity in

the external world. In our case we have senses that place us in three-dimensional space ordered in linear time (giving us the principle of forward causation). Other forms of time and space are conceivable - string theory has postulated upwards of 13 dimensions - though we lack the sensory organs to perceive them. When we have a situation in which a conscious entity is not only aware of, through the senses, but also situated within the space-time construct that governs its engagement with what appears as the external, we have a situation of embodied consciousness.

What is the nature of this embodiment? It appears that I am proposing an idealist theory, in which the physical arises in some mysterious manner from the mental, of the sort that is not found to be generally appealing to contemporary philosophers. As Jaegwon Kim succinctly put it: “A purely Cartesian world seems like a pretty lonely place, inhabited by immaterial souls each of which is a island unto itself, totally isolated from other souls” (Kim 2003: 73) – the situation of our artist from propositions 1-3. In posing this problem, Kim has, perhaps inadvertently, shed some light on our question about embodiment. First, we must ask what is implicitly present in this statement. We see that Kim imagines such souls as somehow separated, in this case, perhaps, by an epistemic gap of the sort that arose in our propositions 2 & 3 about the impossibility of proving the consciousness of individual audience members. But out of what is this epistemic gap made? It is not a gap that arises from the logic of a given space-time construct, as we shall see below. Indeed, it is necessary that this construct be shared in order to bridge the epistemic gulf. It is rather, a gulf created by the individuation of the subject in reference to the objects of the (apparent) external world. As an embodied consciousness, however, the subject is also given to itself as an object of the world, and so an embodied consciousness’s loneliness is already mitigated by its being aware of itself as a member of the class of objects as well as being a singular entity by which it identifies itself – the sort of object that is aware of itself as a member of the class of objects,

which does not preclude the possibility of other such objects (hence, subjects). Furthermore, it is not at all clear to me that this sort of individuation would arise in a case of un-embodied consciousness as there would be no mechanism placing the conscious, non-extended, being in relation to the allegedly external – not even a singular fixed vantage point (as that would already require some sort of extension). Given this, the predicament of the “lonely soul” seems less damning than it does at first glance. The completely isolated case, of the non-extended conscious being, seems to preclude the possibility of self-awareness and, therefore, loneliness, while the embodied consciousness is already a part of something, some of which may in fact be the sort of being that it, itself, is (*Da-sein* in Heidegger’s terminology).

What remains, yet, is the move from embodiment to inter-subjectivity. Establishing this link will be necessary if we are to articulate a basis for the arts from this idealist metaphysical/ontological construct. What still seems beyond the limits of our possible knowledge is whether those objects comprising an audience are, in fact, subjects external to one’s self. Taking this as a necessary article of faith, we can construct the requirements for inter-subjective relations that will make a discussion of artistic production and reception possible. In order to be perceived as a subject by some subject, an object must exhibit, to that perceiving subject, behaviors in time and space that are most easily explained, in terms of causation, as being the operations of an entity motivated by a consciousness analogous to that of the perceiver. An object believed to possess subjectivity, then, will be an external object evidencing, through its interaction with the external, an ability to reason, to react, to strategize, to learn. This will be evidenced through an apparent understanding of the causal operations of time and space and an ability to act as an agent in that time and space, which are the fundamental components of embodiment. As individual subjects, we articulate the world through the exertions of our minds, which form the basis of our actions, themselves leaving some perceptual trace, within the space-time

construct on which our causal reasoning is based, of our activities (effects) to be interpreted (as causes) by our co-inhabitants. This external world, then, is the network of interactions of these consciousnesses – a collaboratively structured world open to constant revision through the processes of those interactions. The senses provide the means of distinguishing objects of this external world as perceptually discrete entities. They do not dictate the form or nature of those objects. They are products of the mind, created for the purposes that arise in the mind’s articulation of an external world, and this external becomes a structure that brings subjects (possessing congruent space-time constructs) into relation with one another. The physical reality so created would be understandably murky, not giving us much opportunity to interact with other consciousnesses as consciousnesses rather than as free-roaming empirical causes. Enter language.

Language operates as a meta-web of empirical interactions – itself an empirical entity, it also is used to refine the cross-consciousness empirical interactions detailed above. With the introduction of this meta-web, interactions can go beyond recognition of patterns and causal relations. Conceptions are given empirical signifiers and are subjected to the rules of empirical objects, but are designed to lay bare, if ever they could, a component of being (consciousness) that does not reside in the byproduct of self-differentiation (i.e. that which remains in the realm of “I am”). This allows language to act as a mediator between internal perception of an empirical object and another subject observing the same empirical object. Words describe, adding additional empirical signifiers to the object of sensory perception, thereby refining the internal perception of the object on the part of the listener/reader. In short, this is learning taking place as the refinement of a *perception* based upon the receipt of additional empirical signifiers of an external *conception* (belonging to another consciousness) of the object. Language, therefore, operates as a feedback mechanism refining perceptions by adding additional

empirical information to the object. The murkiness of the external world begins to clear (provided we don't open the Pandora's Box of the perceptual nature of the symbols comprising a language, which we must eventually, but not in the context of this paper).

As a play of logical orderings of sensory phenomenon, the arts mirror this very process by which we create our world on the pre-linguistic, murky level. We have existing modes of communication through the senses - artistic traditions<sup>1</sup>, language, symbols - all with their means of (more or less) accurate interpretation. In the terms of semiotics, they have a code. To address an audience in a strategically acceptable manner, then, is to communicate in a code familiar to the audience.

Approaches situated within a "tradition" accept the tenets of what has come before, expanding them through small scale exertions of individual creativity that leave the historically constructed system in tact. To escape tradition, as Cage intended, requires at least the presentation of works in which the work's elements are not easily integrated into the logic of some pre-existing tradition (or code). Cage's intention was to break with tradition in such a way that, not only were his (sonic) aesthetic preferences removed from the work in performance, but also the aesthetic presuppositions of the listeners were thwarted because of their lack of familiarity with (or, more properly, given Cage's highly complex chain of events between initial decision making and final performance product, impossibility of grasping) the logic of the sequence of events. The result, he hoped, would allow each sound to be experienced for itself, outside of its relation to the other sounds of the piece. This was a necessary step in focusing the attention of musicians and listeners alike onto the sound occurring, opening a door to listening by abandoning judgments based upon what is already known. It does not, however, operate as a model for

---

<sup>1</sup> Which necessarily rely on discourse to define themselves as such, whether this occurs in the form of cultural transmission, art criticism and scholarship, or artists' manifestos.

inter-subjective (social) interaction. It is a focusing inward, a meditation<sup>2</sup>. To build upon our model of meaning requires that we ask the question: how could we discuss the pure content of “the sound, itself?” This is the murky stuff of perception that requires clarification through inter-subjective discourse if it is to carry meaning as the concretization of the external. Even to designate which sound one is thinking of requires us to place it in its temporal sequence among the other sounds or to designate one or another of its qualities in relation to other sounds. A music that will shed light on inter-subjectivity requires the introduction of a new formal logic that is in some way discernable to the audience. In such work, the experimental derives its meaning, not from tradition (primarily), but from the clarity of its own construction. In semiotics this is an example of what Umberto Eco has termed *ratio difficilis* – an instance of some symbolic structure (understood as intended for interpretation) that cannot be interpreted by means of some culturally or historically shared code (as in a musical style) (Eco: 183). The arrangement of sensory phenomena in an artistic setting hits upon the most fundamental element of inter-subjective communication across consciousnesses: space and time interpreted by the senses in a cause and effect relationship. Experimentalism in the arts, then, redirects our attention to the relations by which we explore and expand our existence with other consciousnesses, in dialogue, through the ordering of sensory stimuli that are not easily integrated into meaningful units by some already-existent code, within a pre-linguistic logical system. The intersection of cognitive psychology, epistemology, linguistics, and the experimental branches of the arts is to be found here. Of course, to make the private interpretations of sensory perceptions experienced in the pre-linguistic arts sensible to another consciousnesses will require recourse to a meta-web of communication such as language. Therefore, the structures for private contemplation provided by these arts also operate as objects of sensory perception to

---

<sup>2</sup> This should not be taken as a criticism of Cage, for this, too, is beautiful and simply supposes a different purpose for art than I am charting herein.

which additional empirical signifiers may be attached, allowing these experiences entry into a public discourse.

The construction of sensory perceptual logic models, the very stuff of Artaud's theatrical language, is as close as we can come to circumventing the need for a meta-web. While the meta-web must be relied upon to verify private sensory impressions in the public discourse, an individual may observe the outward manifestations of these impressions (the individual reactions to and interaction with the artistic event) while simultaneously observing the audience's collective construction of the piece through language. Ultimately, this may shed light on the manner in which these physical traces are left in the collectively constructed external as they (the artistic ones) appear outside of a cause-and-effect relation to the external world – by which I mean that the physical manifestation of the piece as an individual entity has no causal relation to the daily operations of the external. That is its strength. We can never pare down the external to pure sensations from which meaning is made. There is too much history; it has been too large a collaboration to get a handle on the variables. One composer, however, can control (to a large degree) the variables of a performance of pure sensory input and then observe the manner in which meta-web interactions concretize the experience across consciousnesses while also gathering impressions of individuals experiencing the work prior to public discourse.

A phenomenological analysis of an artistic event will properly include observations of individuals experiencing the event, an account of the writer's own experience of the event, individual audience member accounts in which they describe their experiences through language, and an analysis of the creation of the public conception of the work, itself, through language<sup>3</sup>. It is intriguing to look at

---

<sup>3</sup> Composer/theorist, James Tenney's *Meta/Hodos + Meta-Meta/Hodos* provides valuable information for the practical application of phenomenological theory, combined with studies in psychoacoustics, to the study of the reception of sensory phenomena.

audience accounts of Cage's *Untitled Event*, largely because no one seems to have had the idea that this was a work would be remembered – no one presupposed the influence that accounts of the event would have on other artists. The actual audience was small. The result is that, despite the fact that accounts were generated, there was not a formalized discourse around the piece. Reading narrations of the event generated, by participants and attendees, years after the event had occurred gives an extremely varied impression of what went on and even how long it went on, making a unified reconciliation of these versions of the piece in public discourse impossible. What is said about the piece is clearly integral to our public construction of a knowable identity of the piece.

### **III. Conclusion & Implications**

Once we have established that the arts are, fundamentally, a play upon the limits and powers of sensory perception and that the experimental branches of the arts, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, became consciously aware of this fact, thereby moving beyond a traditional aesthetic approach to artistic creation into the realm of perceptual manipulation and exploration, we can position the arts in a philosophical program; namely, the structuring of logical models of sensory stimuli as a means of understanding the manner in which the components of our world are experienced and constructed through inter-subjective discourse around the artistic event. The task of the artist is (1) to select components of the model to be constructed and (2) to define in as much detail as possible, in the construction of the work, the relations between component parts. These, taken together, will both constitute the work and provide the code for the interpretation of the resulting inter-subjective dialogue around the work.

If the underlying structural logic of the piece is skillfully embedded within the work, leaving hints of its presence, the audience is enticed to make sense of the relations of the constituent parts of the artistically structured environment. The audience, in experiencing the work, is incited to philosophy – the extrapolation of logical order based upon the relations perceived in an external world. Whereas classical philosophy encourages the reader to follow the thought processes of the philosopher, this artistic program makes a philosopher of the spectator, performer, and critic, as well as the artist (in whatever medium/media).

---

## Works Cited

- Artaud, Antonin. [1938] 1999. *The Theatre and Its Double* in *Antonin Artaud: Collected Works Volume 4*. Translated by Victor Corti. London: John Calder Publishers Ltd.
- Cage, John. 1966. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Eco, Umberto. 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Kant, Immanuel. [1781] 1990. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Kim, Jaegwon. 2003. "Lonely Souls" in *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary Readings*. Edited by Timothy O'Connor and David Robb New York: Routledge.
- 

## Reading List

- Adorno, Theodor W. 2003. *Can One Live After Auschwitz?* Translated by Rodney Livingstone. Stanford UP.
- Artaud, Antonin. [1938] 1999. *The Theatre and Its Double* in *Antonin Artaud: Collected Works Volume 4*. Translated by Victor Corti. London: John Calder Publishers Ltd.
- Cage, John. 1966. *Silence: Lectures and Writings*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Dainton, Barry. 2001. *Time and Space*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP.
- Danto, Arthur C. 1999. *Philosophizing Art: Selected Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *The Work of Art: Criticism, Philosophy, and the Ends of Taste*. Amsterdam: G & B Arts International.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1978. "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation" in *Writing and Difference*. Translated by Alan Bass. University of Chicago Press.
- Dretske, Fred. 2003. "Representational Systems" in *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary Readings*. Edited by Timothy O'Connor and David Robb New York: Routledge.
- Eco, Umberto. 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- Fetterman, William. 1996. *John Cage's Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Fodor, Jerry A. 1993. "Déjà vu All Over Again: How Danto's Aesthetics Recapitulates the Philosophy of Mind." In *Danto and His Critics*. Edited by Mark Rollins. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1986. "The Relevance of the Beautiful" in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*. Translated by Nicholas Walker. Cambridge UP.
- Heidegger, Martin. [1927] 1996. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh. State University of New York Press.

- \_\_\_\_\_. [1978] 1984. *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*. Translated by Michael Heim. Bloomington: Indiana UP.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1975. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Perennial Classics.
- Horowitz, Daniel. 1992. "Danto on Postmodernism." In *Danto and His Critics*. Edited by Mark Rollins. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kant, Immanuel. [1781] 1990. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- Kim, Jaegwon. 2003. "Lonely Souls" in *Philosophy of Mind: Contemporary Readings*. Edited by Timothy O'Connor and David Robb New York: Routledge.
- Kostelanetz, Richard, ed. 2003. *Conversing with Cage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: Routledge.
- Lucie-Smith, Edward. 2001. *Movements in Art Since 1945*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Nattiez, Jean Jacques. 1990. *Music in Discourse: Towards a Semiology of Music*. Translated by Carolyn Abbate. Princeton UP.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Translated by B. Jowett. New York: Random House.
- Reynolds, Roger. 1975. *Mind Models: New Forms of Musical Experience*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Rosenboom, David. 1990. *Extended Musical Interface with the Human Nervous System: Assessment and Prospectus*. Berkeley, CA: International Society For the Arts, Science and Technology.
- Tenney, James. 1988. *Meta+Hodos : a Phenomenology of 20th-Century Musical Materials and an Approach to the Study of Form ; and, META Meta+Hodos*. Oakland, CA : Frog Peak Music.