Five Men and a Bride
The Birth of Art "Post-Modern"

Kay Larson

I

Perhaps all the arts are "dances" of interconnection, but the word seems especially apt when applied to the world-altering exchange between the five artists in *Dancing around the Bride: Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*. The Philadelphia Museum of Art organized this unusually beautiful and memorable exhibition, which opened in Cage's centenary year (October 30, 2012–January 21, 2013); the next stop is the Barbican Art Gallery, London. The joy of watching these five creative geniuses trading insights is reward enough in itself, but in addition, this elegant grouping of carefully curated work, afloat with great conversation, has a momentous subtext, packed with questions (and some answers) as to who originated the world of the arts "post-Modern." I think it was John Cage, for reasons I will explore here.

But first a pause for clarification. I mean the term "post-Modern" to be strictly chronological. It signifies "after the Modern," that is, after the visual art (and the discourse around it) that arose in a Western cultural context circa 1850–1950. After 1950 "Modern" began to lose its power position, a diminishment fully in effect by the mid-1960s. Since then, the term "postmodern" has been enveloped in philosophical, textual, structuralist, and other intellectual and interpretive strategies. When I refer to the "postmodern" I mean to invoke all the baggage that goes along with it. The "post-Modern" phrase is useful in a different way. It describes a factual watershed between past and present: between European and American art pre-1950, and a post-1950s internationalism that includes performance art, Fluxus, Pop Art, installation art, and a host of exotic forms unimaginable in the 1940s. If this "post-Modern" timeline is closely examined, it reveals an uncanny time-based synchronicity with John Cage's revolution in life and art circa 1951–1958 (and beyond).

Dancing around the Bride naturally originates in the desire of the curators, Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle, to remind us of the Philadelphia Museum's unparalleled Duchamp collection and its role in energizing the shared sensibilities of the other four participants. We learn — from an eminently useful chronology prepared for the exhibition catalogue by scholar Paul B. Franklin — that Jasper Johns brought

doi:10.1162/PAJJ_a_00142

Robert Rauschenberg to the Philadelphia Museum of Art at some point circa 1958. Robert Rosenblum, in reviewing Johns's *Flag* (1954–1955), had drawn parallels to Duchamp's readymades.[1] Later in 1957, Johns—who most likely wanted to see what Rosenblum was talking about—picked up *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951); the essays aroused his interest in the early-twentieth-century movement. Johns felt he needed to see Duchamp's work, and Rauschenberg agreed, so the two artists made the journey to Philadelphia.

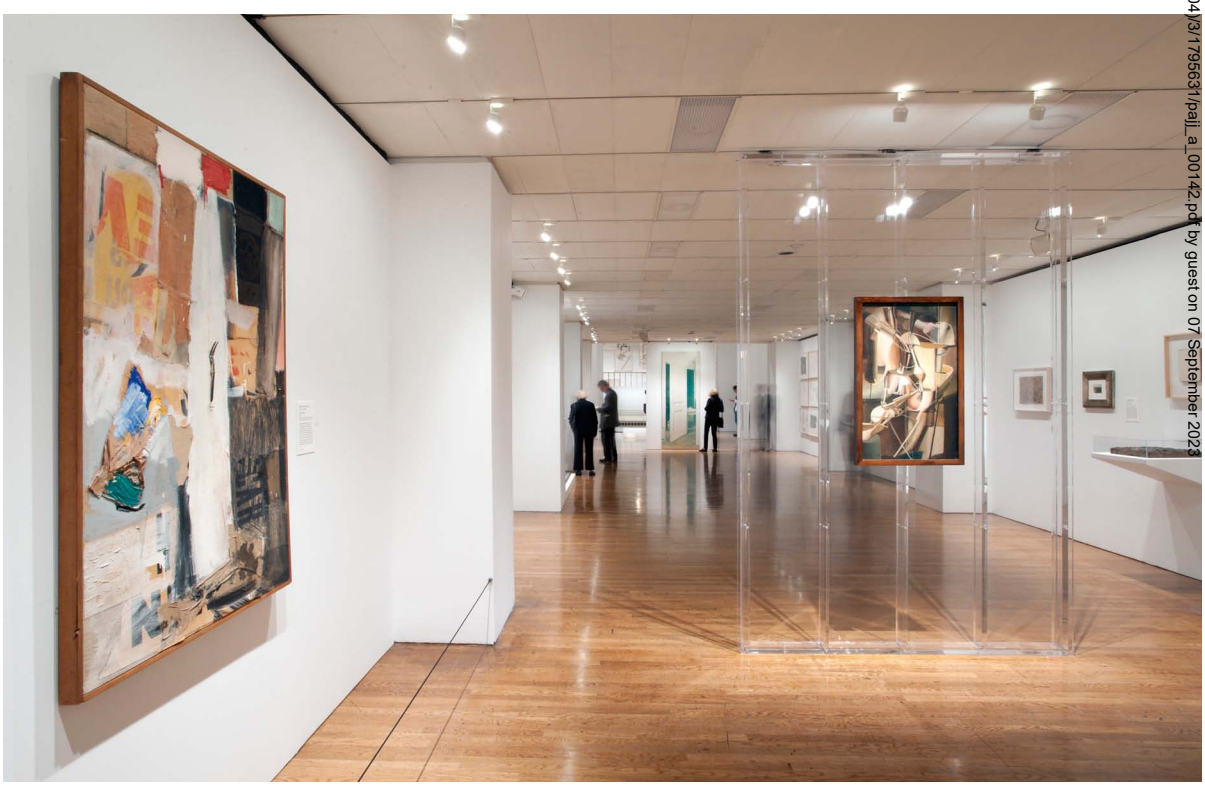
This story should oblige us to re-examine the conventional mythos that enshrines Duchamp and endows him with a godlike persona that virtually dictated the early work of Johns and Rauschenberg. Franklin, like most art historians, likes to draw explicit parallels between the younger artists' early explorations in the 1950s and alleged precedents by Duchamp. But Rauschenberg has said that he knew too little about Duchamp to have been influenced by the older artist at first.[2] Franklin's timeline appears to be in agreement. Duchamp was a fleeting exhibitor in New York in the 1950s. Rauschenberg saw Duchamp's re-created *Bicycle Wheel* readymade in a 1951 show at Sidney Janis Gallery; in 1953, at the same gallery, he visited the exhibition *Dada: 1916–1923*, which included Duchamp's *Tu'um*, a 1950 replica of *Fountain*, *Fresh Widow*, and reproductions from the *Boîte-en-valise*. Duchamp himself stopped by Rauschenberg's show at the Stable Gallery in the same year.[3] Aside from these brief encounters, Rauschenberg seems not to have seen much of Duchamp's art, which at the time was scarcely shown or reproduced. Johns was discharged from the U.S. Army on May 5, 1953, so he couldn't have visited Duchamp's gallery shows. Then how do we account for the Duchampian echoes in the early work of Rauschenberg and Johns? Breaking all the rules, we look at the early interests of John Cage, who told an interviewer about his own encounter with Modernism circa 1930–1931, when he dropped out of college after his second year and began touring through Europe, visiting art galleries and taking music classes:

> And my reaction to both of those [modern painting and modern music, discovered in a foray to Paris] was that if that's how things were, I could do it too. So I began without further ado to write music and paint pictures. And it was only somewhat later when—it was the Depression—when I left Europe and came back to California, I did a number of things, but it led [to] my meeting the Arensbergs and Galka Scheyer, do you know her name? She brought the Blue Four from Germany.[4]

II

Most of the Duchamps now housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art came to the museum from Walter and Louise Arensberg, who served as Duchamp's patrons, collectors, and collaborators in New York from 1915 onward. Their closeness to Duchamp allowed the Arensbergs to acquire early readymades, along with *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* and *(No. 3)*; they paid Duchamp's rent while he worked on *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* [*The Large Glass*]. Brilliant and adventurous collectors, they also bought Picasso and Cezanne, Arp and Miró, and more.

Top Left: *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–23. Marcel Duchamp. Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, 109¼ x 70 x 3⅜ inches. © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris/ Succession Marcel Duchamp. Bottom: *Dancing Around the Bride* installation. Photo: Constance Mensh. Center of photo: *Bride*, 1912. Marcel Duchamp. Oil on canvas, 35¼ x 21⅞ inches. Left of photo: *Bride's Folly*, 1959. Robert Rauschenberg. Oil, fabric, paper, printed paper collage, and metal on canvas; 57½ x 39¾ inches.



Then, tired of New York Dada, they escaped to Los Angeles, built a house high up in Hollywood Hills, and hung their art salon-style on the walls.

John Cage first visited the Arensbergs in January or February 1935, when he was twenty-two years old and trying to decide whether he was truly a visual artist or a composer. He was urged to knock on the Arensbergs' door by his new friend, European art dealer Galka Scheyer, their neighbor in Hollywood Hills. Cage met Scheyer in the first days of 1935, when he showed up at her elegant aerie, a painting tucked under his arm. The painting, by Alexej von Jawlensky, had dazzled Cage when he saw it hanging in the house of his music teacher, composer Richard Bühlig, a piano master who excelled at performing Schoenberg. Cage asked to return the painting to its owner, so he could see more like it.

Cage's passion for Jawlensky is the more remarkable when contrasted with the steadfast refusal of Los Angeles collectors to let Scheyer convince them of the genius of "her" artists: Kandinsky, Klee, Feininger, and Jawlensky, the "Blue Four." An incessant proselytizer for the avant-garde she believed in, Scheyer set out to educate her young protégé in the brilliance of the Modernists. Cage needed little urging. Entirely on his own, Cage decided that Jawlensky was his "teacher," as he wrote in a dazzled and euphoric letter to the artist. This is the pattern that would persist all his days. Not only did Cage fall madly in love with an artist's work; he also enlisted it as a teaching. Though Cage studied with composers and learned the complexities of music composition, in general he derived some of his most radical ideas about music from his "teachers," the artists—and the revelations began in his year of miracles, 1935.

Scheyer was a friend of Pauline Schindler, who lived in the concrete-and-redwood house built by her husband Rudolph in nearby West Hollywood. Pauline, who regularly traversed Southern California giving public lectures on modern art, was in the midst of an affair with Cage in the early 1930s. Cage's first serious music was most likely an outcome of his encounter with Scheyer, Schindler, and the Arensbergs. He had asked them whether he should pursue art or music; they urged him toward music. In 1935, Cage composed his first percussion piece, *Quartet*, which celebrates the "voices" of found objects like brake drums, pipes, hardwood blocks—the "music" of ordinary life. He had discovered *The Art of Noise*, by the Futurist Luigi Russolo, a book that Cage later listed as one of the ten most important to him. Russolo, who championed ordinary sounds as the art of advanced civilization, proclaimed: "Every manifestation of our life is accompanied by noise. Noise, therefore, is familiar to our ear, and has the power to pull us into life itself."

To be "pulled into life itself" by the power of ordinary sounds was, for Cage, not only a manifesto for music but also a principle with a deep moral basis. Russolo—a conservatory-trained musician and also a painter/printmaker who had signed two of Marinetti's Futurist manifestos—realized that sounds could be just as "futurist" as objects. All that was required was a decision to accept all sounds as good, by ridding oneself of mental prejudices that elevated some sounds into "music" and derided others as "noise." Cage, whose own sensitivities lay in this very direction—nothing

rejected; nothing set aside as being "better or worse," including himself—saw his own future in the proposition that there is no schism between "art" and "life."

In this pre-Cageian moment, in which he was asking himself how he wanted to live, Cage was surely voicing some of the insights he learned from Scheyer, Pauline Schindler, and the Arensbergs. He would have heard them discussing Duchamp's readymades as ordinary objects that became "art" simply by being noticed as such. What's the difference between a bicycle wheel on the street and Duchamp's bicycle wheel? Duchamp refused to reject the bicycle wheel on the street, and welcomed it just as Russolo welcomed the "mutter of motors, breathing and pulsing like animals, the throbbing of values, the thudding of pistons," the trains passing by on the street. Sounds can be readymades also, if the mind changes to receive them.

Crediting Cage with the originality to see Duchamp's readymades as a touchstone of his own future is only improbable if you refuse to believe that a composer can learn from and influence artists. Most composers can't, but then, most composers did not achieve Cage's phenomenal importance for visual artists. Cage would soon study with Schoenberg himself, who, exiled from Vienna, had settled in Los Angeles in September 1934 and started teaching at the University of Southern California in 1935. But *Quartet*, of 1935, is not Schoenbergian; it's pure Russolo. Cage had found his future in "noise," the readymade sounds of life, but he would need a few years to openly recognize what he had already done.

At first the Arensbergs sought to give their collection to a Los Angeles Museum, but nothing came of it. The Philadelphia Museum of Art saw an unparalleled opportunity and leaped into action; its new Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection opened on October 16, 1954. *Dancing Around the Bride* is thus in the satisfying position of being able to exhibit the very same Duchamp art works that impressed the young John Cage in 1935, nearly eight decades earlier. This story has a lovely circularity that in itself justifies the show and explains at least some of its charm.

But there is also a conundrum of cause and effect that runs through *Dancing around the Bride*. Who inspired whom? And how? The well-scoured-out groove of art world thinking was epitomized by Calvin Tomkins in the film *I Have Nothing to Say and I Am Saying It* when he said: "One of Cage's main influences has been as a conduit for the ideas of Duchamp." So Cage is important, in this line of reasoning, because of his proximity to Duchamp, the master; otherwise neither Cage himself, nor his music, nor his ideas could have proved worthy of acclaim within the art sphere. Unexamined prejudice will regard Cage as an acolyte—a humble sorcerer's apprentice—at the heel of the master wizard, Duchamp. One academic critic has even called Cage a "sign painter" who took instruction from Rauschenberg.[5] It's a sobering corrective to come across interviews in the Archives of American Art in which Leo Castelli, in conversation with Paul Cummings, speaks of Cage as an "art critic" of equal stature with Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg. "He has immense authority," Castelli said of Cage. "He is after all a guru. And just that fact that he was there, with his fantastic assurance, was important to us all, you know?"

Later in his life, Johns identified the historian's dilemma: "Early on, my work was under a variety of influences. Duchamp's work piqued my curiosity. Then I met him. . . . I was seduced by the man. His ideas, his creations arose an intense curiosity in me. I was (and I continue to be) totally aware of his work, of its influence on me, and of my efforts not to do what he already has done."This statement seems to directly acknowledge that Johns's early work arose before he knew Duchamp well enough to be "seduced"by him. Johns seems intent on distancing himself from too-close comparisons that evoke a direct pipeline from the older to the younger artist. Johns once told a Japanese interviewer, "If you say Duchamp is my forerunner, I can't entirely agree with you. Duchamp . . . is no one else but Duchamp."[6]

So the first step in correcting the record obliges us to consider whether Duchamp was "no one else but Duchamp" in relation to Cage, too. Cage explicitly said that he loved Duchamp in the manner of a Zen teacher whose life is example enough; Cage felt no obligation to decode and replicate Duchamp's thinking:

> [M]any people approach Marcel's work as though it was a puzzle to be solved, and reasons to be found for doing what he did. This attitude has never appealed to me. What appealed to me far more were the correspondences that I saw, which I've written about, between him and what I learned from Oriental philosophy. . . . But what interested me more than anything was just being with him and noticing, insofar as I could pay attention, how he lived.[7]

III

The celebrations that marked Cage's 100th birthday around the globe in 2012 seemed to have missed a great opportunity to define the nature of his influence. Music festivals honored the elegance, inventiveness, and intellectual challenges bequeathed to us by Cage's composing. Museum exhibitions of his artwork rightly praised him as a visual artist with surprising and satisfying gifts. Within music and art orthodoxies, though, Cage is somewhat of a sidelined figure—an interloper, even. The "conventional avant-garde," as we might call it, treats Cage's importance as one of those inconvenient facts that would be better off ignored.

His true world-altering activity lies in the realm "between." Cage identified a new world he set out to explore—an antipodean realm set apart from the two poles of classical music and classical art—and he populated it with huge numbers of innovators who were as indifferent as he was to the rules that separate disciplines. These "post-Moderns"—visual and performance artists, musicians and composers, poets and writers, dancers and choreographers, architects and installation artists, multimedia crossover performers and experimentalists of all kinds—sought creative refuge in the permission he gave to "be yourself."Whether they knew Cage personally or just by his writings and news reports, these pro-Cageians maintain a network of interconnection whose common link is the example set by Cage's own life. The network is so enormous and intertwined, now, and so much a part of our mental furniture, that it's almost impossible to trace—or even to see. One can forget that it was not always here; that this "dance" began somewhere.

The network was born in the early 1950s. Before that, Cage was mainly a composer of experimental but classical-sounding percussion music whose audiences mostly consisted of Abstract Expressionist artists. That began to change in 1951, when the thirty-eight-year-old Cage met the twenty-six-year-old Rauschenberg; then at the beginning of 1954, he met the twenty-four-year-old Johns. Neither of the younger artists had done significant work at the time they began a highly charged, personal and aesthetic meeting-of-the-minds with Cage and Cunningham. At this point in the lives of both young artists, intense conversations with Cage and Cunningham were informing them in ways large and small. "Bob was outgoing and ebullient, whereas Jasper was quiet and reflective," Cage later recalled. "Each seemed to pick up where the other left off. The four way exchanges were quite marvelous. It was the *climate* of being together that would suggest work to be done for each of us. Each had absolute confidence in our work, each had agreement with the other."[8]

In two interviews with this author, Johns described Cage's leadership role within the foursome: "He was older, worldly, experienced, he knew lots of people who were to me only names. He sorted things out, was able to give a value to things in relation to his own principles. I hadn't known anyone like that. This fed into the work that the four of us were doing, even though the experience and the levels of accomplishment were very different. . . . If you went to a bar with John, somehow the form of the gathering would involve ideas. I believe that was John's doing. I don't know how a person gets to be that way. I connect it to preaching."[9]

In New York in early 1951—just before Cage met Rauschenberg in May—gestural, emotive, expressionist, abstract and/or figurative paintings and sculpture ruled the day. Dada was a little-known, mostly irrelevant whimsy off the main line of European Modernism. Duchamp and his kindred European Dadaists remained in semi-obscurity until *The Dada Painters and Poets*, edited by Robert Motherwell, appeared in December 1951; the book kindled renewed interest, and (as we know from the story in the exhibition catalogue chronology) it caught the attention of Johns in 1957.

Enthusiasm for Dada had advanced considerably by 1963, when Walter Hopps organized the first major survey of Duchamp's career, *By or of Marcel Duchamp or Rrose Sélavy: A Retrospective Exhibition*, at the Pasadena Art Museum, successfully drawing parallels to the interests of artists in the early sixties. Five years before he died in 1968, Duchamp was on a path to deification. So were Cage's young friends. *Newsweek* proclaimed that "Jasper Johns at 32 is probably the most influential younger painter in the world."The following year, 1964, Rauschenberg was awarded the Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale; curator Alan Solomon wrote: "The precedent for Rauschenberg's combines is to be found not in Dada, but in the *objets trouvés* of Duchamp and Picasso's constructions of 1912–1914."[10] No mention was made of John Cage.

By 1963, Cage, Cunningham, Johns and Rauschenberg had been celebrating their own revolution for a decade or so—via their work, which was rapidly leaving a boisterous new worldwide avant-garde in its wake. In the early sixties, the postmodern mainstream as we know it today—multimedia events, performances, installations,

Top: The Main Stage, *Dancing around the Bride* installation. Photo: Constance Mensh. Bottom: *Dancing around the Bride* installation. Photo: Constance Mensh. Center of photo: Set for *Walkaround Time*, 1968. Jasper Johns. Plastic, paint; Each (Bride): 103 x 41 x 25½ inches; Each (Occult Witness): 41 x 35 x 25½ inches; Each (9 Malic Molds): 54 x 80¾ x 25½ inches; Each (Sieves/Parasols): 38½ x 49½ x 25½ inches; Each (Milky way with Nets): 37 x 108 x 25½ inches; Each (Chocolate Grinder): 85¼ x 95¾ x 25½ inches; Each (Watermill): 90 x 54½ x 25½ inches. Left of photo: Set for *Tantric Geography*, 1977. Robert Rauschenberg. Row of wood chairs mounted on dollies separated by bicycle wheels, and fabric. Eight dollies: wood boxes with four casters, painted white, each marked with numbers 1–8 and arrows; dollies link in a train with joining hardware. Five stainless steel bicycle wheels. Four pipes, aluminum and cast iron; 2 wood base plates with speed-rail joint painted black; Each (single dolly): 8½ x 23½ x 23½ inches; Each (pipe): 16 inches; Each (wood base plate): 15 x 8½ x 1 inches; Each (folding chair): 34 x 11 x 1½ inches; Each (wood stool): 18½ x 12½ x 10 inches.

Dada-like interventions, fusions of music and art, movement and theatre—was under construction. Expressionism (Abstract and otherwise) was in eclipse—Cage had first rejected the pathetic fallacy in art and music in the early 1940s—and an unruly and vibrant vision of the future was unfolding its long legs in daylight. A bright idea was beginning to spread through the collective cultural mind. Artists who had abandoned the formalities of High Modernist painting and sculpture had discovered that ordinary life ran riot around them on all sides, with an abundance and richness, a vibrancy and intelligence, that were positively breathtaking.

We know *what happened*, but do we know *why it happened*? I suggest that it's impossible to fully account for this wholesale reinvention of the precepts of art unless we see what was going on in Cage's mind in 1951 and throughout the fifties. Without a view into Cage's mind, the revolution appears to have arisen spontaneously, like the explosion of life-forms in the Cambrian seas. But when we do peer into Cage's thinking, we see a set of ideas that are spiritual in their essence, that question the philosophical ground of Western beliefs about realism and materialism, and that revise post-Renaissance assumptions about the purpose and function of the art object. The Cageian revolution emerged from a mind altered by new ideas about how to live one's life. As quick proof, let me cite a mesostic poem that I found in a Plexiglas case within *Dancing around the Bride*. Cage wrote mesostics by creating a phrase that he put in vertical capital letters; then, using the "spine" as his base, he would write horizontal phrases that served a poetic function. The vertical "spine" in this case is THE FIRST MEETING OF THE SATIE SOCIETY. This mesostic occurs in a set of artist books Cage made near the end of his life (they were published posthumously in 1994), suggesting the long survival of these themes. I was walking through the exhibition with friends who practice Zen. We all exclaimed at this poem, which is saturated with Cageian sensibility.

meeTing
witH
satiE is
the beginning oF the change
a changed att I tude
towaR d life toward art toward work
toward muS ic
T he
reM oval
of boundariE s
wh E rever
T hey
ex I st
N ever
endinG
the cO ming together
o F

opposiT es
sHow
mE
S omething new
A nd
i'll sT art
all over agaI n
living with intE rior immobility
enjoyment in the midS t
O f
C ountlessness
accompl I shing nothing
as though nothing had happE ned
as T hough tourist
living as though tourist alwaY s

IV

The light of a new worldview permeates the spaces of *Dancing around the Bride.* Illumination is theme, metaphor, and installation tactic. The curators made the risky but transformative decision to enlist artist Philippe Parreno as "orchestrator" of the *mise-en-scène*. Parreno has created several artworks (or, more precisely, stagings) under his own name. The first, which hangs over the doorway to the exhibition (which you enter from the museum's Great Stair Hall), is a marquee fashioned out of white Plexiglas bristling with 456 light bulbs, twenty-seven neon tubes, and three halogen lamps. The bulbs spread a klieg-light halo over the entrance: a reminder of the theatrical, performative element in all the work within. The bath of cool white light is a prelude to the airy lightness, cool joy, and calm experimentation in the galleries. Clear Plexiglas exhibit cases are another Parenno innovation. (It seems no expense was spared.) In the large main room, Parreno installed a floor-hugging white performance stage, mostly used for live dance events; at other times you might see no dancers but will occasionally hear broadcast recordings of their footsteps. The Merce Cunningham Dance Company disbanded two years after Merce's death; Daniel Squire, curator of the dance program, and the dancers all trained in the company. When dancers do show up on the white stage, they begin moving "like tireless atomic particles," as the curators cheerfully note.

On a Plexiglas platform nearby, a glistening black piano occasionally sounds off with Cage's *Chess Pieces* (1944)—crystalline, meditative notes spreading like oxygen into the air and out to the corridors. And the sound! It's brilliant! Professional sound engineers supervised the sound-projection, which rivals or surpasses the clarity of many concert halls I've experienced. Piano works by Cage and musical compositions by relevant friends (including one by Duchamp) loop through the speakers. Whenever one piece or another begins playing, the respective label lights up. At the far end of the exhibition, three windows sit unobtrusively in the museum's exterior wall. You notice them only when their white shades slowly winch up, letting light from

outdoors mingle with the noises of traffic, trains, and people. The sounds are pre-recorded, a fact I found slightly off-kilter until I realized this is yet another Parenno intervention, titled *The Three Sisters*. After four minutes and thirty-three seconds, the shades close again, having subtly altered your sense of space and containment. Access to the outside changes everything.

Within the entry door, Johns's set of ink drawings on plastic film (1986) borrow some of the iconography of Duchamp's *Bride* (1912), which hangs a few feet away on one of those Plexiglas frames. Next to *Bride* is Rauschenberg's painting *Bride's Folly* (1959), begun after Rauschenberg and Johns made that visit to the Philadelphia Museum of Art to see the Duchamp collection. This first alcove is immediately followed by a room devoted to various forms of chance composition, anchored by Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages* (1913–1914): three strips of wood cut in the shapes assumed by a one-meter string that Duchamp dropped, arbitrarily, three times. Across from this chance-induced piece are two pages of battered notepaper on which Cage has inscribed columns of numbers written in his precise notation. He was using the *I Ching* to instruct him how to write *Music of Changes* (1951); these disintegrating fragments, to me, have some of the aura and magnetism of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

More chance-based works are nearby: The score for *Music of Changes*, dedicated to David Tudor. Cunningham's chorography for *Suite for Five* (1956), which he wrote by using imperfections in a sheet of paper to create a network of points that guided dancers across the dance floor—a technique he borrowed directly from Cage, who had just written *Music for Piano* by the same method. Also two sets of prints by Rauschenberg and Cage, who dropped inked handkerchiefs and strings, respectively, onto litho paper run through a press, creating chance-based beauty that directly references *3 Standard Stoppages*. And there are extrapolations of chance: Rauschenberg's *Dirt Painting (for John Cage)* (ca. 1953), a framed, blue-and-white crust of indeterminate but handsome mold that Rauschenberg grew on brown dirt by watering it every day—perhaps an observation about the relationship between the two men.

Standard Stoppages is directly across the room from Cage's *Music of Changes*. One's eye creates a logic of cause and effect. It seems indisputable that Duchamp devised chance operations in 1913 and Cage followed his lead four decades later—right? Duchamp came first; we have the objects to prove it. Cage's objects came later; therefore Cage borrowed themes of chance from Duchamp—right? Rauschenberg's White Paintings came first (1951–1952); Cage's silent piece, *4′33″* came later (August 29, 1952), therefore Cage must have borrowed the idea from Rauschenberg—right? Cunningham clearly borrowed chance operations from Cage, but Duchamp's work antedates both men's. And so on. You could be forgiven for assuming that Cage was Duchamp's acolyte. You would be wrong, though.

Duchamp is an artist, so it doesn't require a great feat of imagination to demonstrate his effect on other artists. Whereas Cage is a composer, and an oddball one at that. Yet both seem to be using the same handbooks. "[Cage] doesn't control with his mind, that's what he wants. Chance is the only way to avoid the control of the

rational. . . . What Cage would do by chance isn't like what the next man would do. But chance in a way is the basis of the readymade," Duchamp told Calvin Tomkins in 1965. In this quote, I notice echoes of Cageian language that fascinate me and leave me wondering. Duchamp said in 1956 (in a filmed interview) that he now thought that his readymades were probably his most important works, the ones that had most influenced the future.[11] But what if Duchamp had absorbed his own reflection from the mirror that John Cage created? What if Cage's understanding of chance as the "basis of the readymade" is what instructed artists—and perhaps Duchamp himself—in how to understand Duchamp? What if art-world self-aggrandizing has systematically discredited Cage and made it impossible to hear what he might have contributed to the conversation of artists, Duchamp among them?

Cage explicitly said that his interest in the *I Ching* and his development of chance operations arose in 1950–1951 because he heard Zen teachings by the important Japanese scholar of Buddhism, D. T. Suzuki, the man who convinced the West of the power of Zen. Suzuki traveled the world, taught, and published some 100-odd books and articles, from the first years of the twentieth century until he retired to Japan in 1958. He was eighty years old when he moved to New York City in September 1950. In his lectures around Manhattan, Suzuki told Cage (and the rest of his audience) that the human ego—the "control of the rational," in Duchamp's phrase—stifled the free flow of the mind. The solution, Suzuki said, was "the removal of boundaries wherever they exist"—and nearly four decades later, Cage re-penned this phrase in the mesostic above. After listening to Suzuki, Cage picked up a new translation of the *I Ching*, which his young friend Christian Wolff had given him. Christian's father, Kurt Wolff, had published Kafka, Rilke, and Walter Benjamin in Europe, and had founded Pantheon Press when he and his wife Helen moved to New York; the new, full translation of the *I Ching* was one important result. The *I Ching* was published on May 25. By the end of the year, Cage had begun using it to write music.

Cage spent most of 1951 throwing coins and consulting the *I Ching* in order to write *Music of Changes*, the first of his compositions to be completely determined by chance operations. Suzuki taught in New York from September 1950 to 1958. From the late winter of 1950, through the rest of the fifties, Cage put his own work through a tremendous transformation of form and magnitude—an intellectual and spiritual revolution empowered by Suzuki's Zen teachings. Cage's great outburst of Zen enthusiasm, beginning in 1951, coincided with the moment when he met Robert Rauschenberg.

It's the nature of an art museum that it encourages connoisseurship and close examination of objects. Inevitably, associating Duchamp's *3 Standard Stoppages* with the score of *Music of Changes* seems to generate a *cause* followed by an *effect*—a sequence of conceptual conclusions derived from the evidence of two material facts in juxtaposition. This action happens inside the mind of the observer, therefore it's not an inevitability. The curators of *Dancing around the Bride* have wisely made no claims (of this or any other kind) about the exchange between the five men. Instead they have created their own "dance," embodying the beauty and peace—"openness

and grace," in the curators' apt phrase—that we re-experience when we walk into the middle of this historic interaction. Other curators and commentators in the art realms have not been so generous to Cage, whose reputation has been demeaned in comparison to the artists he influenced. But what could an art museum do? Only certain kinds of evidence are admissible on its walls. Could the Philadelphia Museum have mounted Suzuki's Zen books next to *Music of Changes*? And even if so, could anyone have seen a connection?

Cage has defined some of the parameters of the Cageian revolution in the mesostic, which honors Erik Satie, a figure almost as transformative as D. T. Suzuki was. Cage discovered Satie's scores in Paris in 1949, and he met Suzuki in 1950, so Satie is "the beginning of the change—a changed attitude toward life toward art toward work toward music," after which came Zen. Suzuki's words propelled the "changed attitude" into new dimensions, by pointing to Buddhist mind-training practices such as "living with interior immobility," a meditative concentration that reduces one's mental clinging and grasping by learning how to tame the violent emotions. The outcome is bliss, or as Cage says, "enjoyment in the midst of countlessness," in parallel with "accomplishing nothing, as though nothing had happened." When "nothing happens," the human mind is freed from self-obsession and able to be present for the parade of *being* that passes by and through us at all moments. Cage himself recognized that he is on a journey through "countlessness" and he trained himself to live "as though tourist always." But these are spiritual conclusions, existing in an uneasy accord with the materiality of connoisseurship.

V

Without diminishing Duchamp, how do we see Cage in a true light? Compared to three of the other four people in this exhibition, Cage had no gallery to obsessively record his every event and his every remark. (Fortunately he wrote and spoke constantly, so some of his words, at least, are well known and easily available.) Cunningham's dance company, a group effort, has inspired important chroniclers, among them David Vaughan, an archivist of proven stature. The nature of the Cage record, by contrast, is spotty and contradictory, confusing and very hard to track down; Cage himself seemed adept at laying false trails.

Zen is so opaque and strange, if approached by a mind conditioned by the Judeo-Christian worldview, that until recently Cage's passion for Zen was disturbing and/or mystifying to his commentators. The art world has maintained studied ignorance. Even though Cage explicitly said, for instance, that Suzuki's Zen teachings led him to create *Theater Piece No. 1*, the first Happening, at Black Mountain College in August 1952, I have seen art historians delete Suzuki's name from the interviews in which Cage talks about it. And what happens when Cage's work is put in an art museum? Or a concert hall? The boundaries between arts are constructed out of assumptions that are almost impossible to destroy.

In *Dancing Around the Bride*, Duchamp is the odd man out. Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns indisputably moved through one another's creative space,

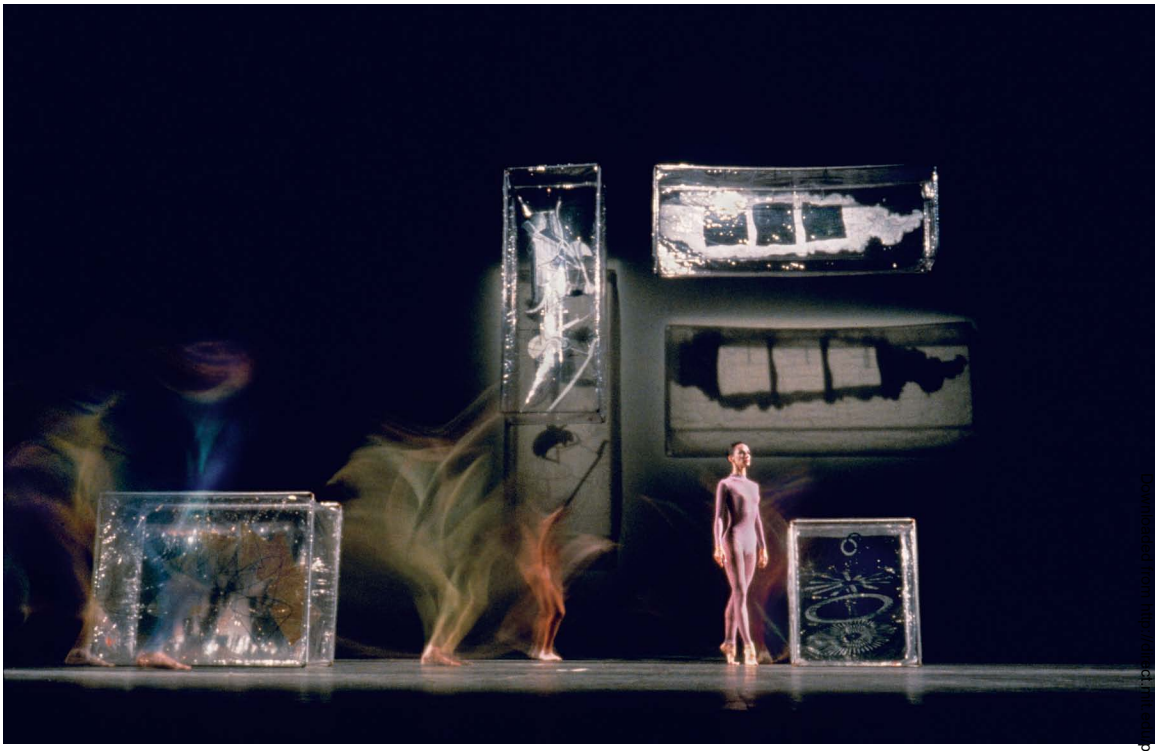
and all of them admired and borrowed from Duchamp's work. But Duchamp never "danced" with the other four; that is, he never adapted his own work to acknowledge them. In chemical terms, he was the non-reactant. In emotional terms, he was the absent parent, the one who withdrew into his studio to work in absolute isolation, pursuing arcane rationales of his own, while Cage, Cunningham, Rauschenberg, and—to a lesser extent—Johns traveled the world, spreading the message. (Johns achieved transmission by exhibiting his work around the world.)

This separation is physically evident at the PMA, out of necessity. *The Large Glass* is permanently bolted into the floor of the Duchamp galleries and can't be moved lest its glass shards fly apart, so a smaller second exhibition has been organized around it, down a long hallway from the main galleries. It's necessarily a catch-all area, containing a batch of Cage's mesostic poems, one of Rauschenberg's 1951 White Paintings, a reconstructed version of Duchamp's bicycle-wheel readymade, Rauschenberg's triple version made of three wheels instead of one, and so on.

Cage admired and loved Duchamp for the elder's curiosity and questioning mind; skill at living without "sticking" anywhere; rejection of the "professional artist" mindset; refusal to be sucked in by value judgments and emotions; inscrutability and grace. But if you hold up the moral and spiritual—as well as aesthetic—stratagems of the works each man created, the tactics that actually influenced the artists who began to change the world in the 1950s derived mostly from Cage. The revolt by which the "post-Moderns" shook off the Modernism that had prevailed for a hundred years is only Duchampian in limited respects.

There is a long list of other qualities that have dominated art since 1950: Chance operations—used as a way to set aside one's ego-choices and engage with the world-as-it-is—have become a universally acceptable tactic within all the avant-gardes: music and poetry and performance, as well as visual art. A recognition that ordinary life is the container of fascinating mysteries and boundless imagery has fueled Pop Art and Happenings and installation art and performance art. Fluxus owes its birth to the artists who emerged willy-nilly from Cage's freely experimental classes at the New School for Social Research—plus their friends and associates, who instantly took up the cause. George Maciunas was explicit: "Wherever John Cage went he left a little John Cage group, which some admit, some not admit [sic] his influence. But the fact is there, that those groups formed after his visits." The same could not be said of Duchamp.

Bare attention, in which the mind observes the world without judgment—awareness uninterrupted by the narratives we humans create to make ourselves feel better—is the construct that informs the postmodern gaze. Actions are now art irrespective of interpretation. Electronic and other mediums are mixed willy-nilly. Performative interventions are universal in all kinds of aesthetic experiences. A deliberate *gesamt-kunst* sensibility has made it commonplace, now, to regard every component of a staging—movement, sets, costumes, music, and so on—as of equal importance, and none more important than any other, as Cage repeatedly said. Indeterminacy—a



Top: Dancer Carolyn Brown in *Walkaround Time*, 1968. Choreography by Merce Cunningham. Stage set and costumes by Jasper Johns, American, born 1930. Photo: © James Klosty, 1972. Bottom: *Trophy II (for Teeny and Marcel Duchamp)*, 1961. Robert Rauschenberg. Combine painting: oil, charcoal, paper, fabric, printed paper, printed reproductions, sheet metal, and metal spring on seven canvases, with chain, spoon, and water-filled plastic drinking glass on wood; 90 x 108 x 5 inches. © Estate of Robert Rauschenberg/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

fundamental principle of Buddhism—is both a Cageian factor in art-creation and a trope for recognizing the non-duality of art and life. Rauschenberg notably said that he worked in the "gap" between art and life. Cage's response: What gap? (Cage thought Rauschenberg was being a little dualistic; a little "Roman Catholic.") None of these new modes of inspiration originated with Duchamp. The sole exception—chance—is a minor aspect in Duchamp's work, but a major one in Cage's.

Almost in spite of Duchamp, Cage became a leader not just through his vision of a fusion of art and music without narrative—a method he taught to Cunningham in 1942–1944. And not just for his innovations in multimedia performance modes such as the staged events he and his friends created all over the world. He is a leader now because of his inspirational way of seeing the larger picture, the cosmic frame that encompasses our lives, and living within it "as though tourist always." Cage's memorable Zen of Words—"I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it," for instance—has permeated our collective mindstream. Gerhard Richter, in a recent interview in *Time*, cited that phrase as an inspiration, as a perfect description of his own art, and as a reason why he thinks constantly about Cage as he paints in the studio.

Cage changed his life; Duchamp took up chess. Cage exported his performative vision around the world; Duchamp closed the door to his secret studio. Cage sang the praises of chance operations—of "going nowhere" and "accomplishing nothing, as though nothing had happened." Meanwhile, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, near *The Large Glass*, there is Duchamp's last work, *Étant donnés*, which can only be partially viewed through a tiny hole in a massive door, and which reveals scenery that oddly recalls the *Shrek* films. This hermetic, obsessive, symbolist vision of the bride splayed out on a bed of thorny twigs is Duchamp at his most mysterious. I know of no artist who claims it as inspiration.

Cage, on the other hand, lived his life in the open, surrounded by collaborators of all kinds. For five decades, he preached his doctrine of total acceptance non-stop. The exhibition curators, Basualdo and Battle, recall Cage's reaction to *Étant donnés* in their catalogue introduction. Professing as much puzzlement about this work as everyone else does, the curators remind us that Cage, in a gesture of open heart and open mind, decided to give *Étant donnés* the most gracious possible interpretation. Cage suggested that *Étant donnés* constructs an absolute opposition between "art" and "life" in order to challenge us to see those two terms as fictions of mind, lacking any substantial reality. "Blurring the distinction [between art or life], neither one is true, . . . " Cage said in a 1971 interview. "The only true answer will serve to let us have both of these. . . . We need both. And we can have both."[12] In other words, Cage suggests, our perspectives are illusory, therefore we can shift them at will. We can choose to see art as set apart from life, and we can see art/life as one inseparable ongoing reality. Setting aside our habitual judgments of *Étant donnés*—and our judgmental habits altogether—Cage has cut through the language of extremes, of "right" and "wrong," "good" and "bad," and has found a Middle Way.

Perhaps in this instance we can begin to glimpse this "other realm" in which Cage's reading of Duchamp has subtly shaped our collective conversation while we weren't looking. It's the power of Cage's spiritual principles—generosity, openhandedness, gratitude, clarity, wisdom—that have informed not only our understanding of Duchamp, but also his own practice of living and making art that still resonates with countless creative people around the world.

NOTES

1. Paul B. Franklin, "Between Art and Life, Art as Life: A Chronology of the Lives and Work of Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg," in *Dancing around the Bride, Cage, Cunningham, Johns, Rauschenberg, and Duchamp*, exhibition catalogue, edited by Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2012), 318. Rosenblum reviewed the Johns painting *Flag* in *Arts* 31, no. 8 (May 1957): 53.

2. Robert Rauschenberg, interviewed in Barbaralee Diamonstein, *Inside New York's Art World* (New York: Rizzoli, 1979), 307.

3. Franklin, "Chronology," in *Dancing around the Bride*, 310–13.

4. "An Interview with John Cage," Dallas Public Library Cable Access Studio, Dallas, TX, 1987. Accessed at http://www.mailartist.com/johnheldjr/CageInterview.html.

5. Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2003), 91.

6. First quote: Demosthène Davvetas, "Jasper Johns et sa famille d'objets," *Art Press* 80 (April 1984): 11; re-quoted in Franklin, "Chronology," 358. Second quote: Jasper Johns, *Jasper Johns: Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews*, Kirk Varnedoe, ed., compiled by Christel Hollevoet (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 100–101; re-quoted in Franklin, "Chronology," 337.

7. John Cage, interviewed by Paul Cummings, "Oral History Interview with John Cage, 1974 May 2," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution: 33–34.

8. Quoted in Mary Lynn Kotz, *Rauschenberg: Art and Life* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 46.

9. Jasper Johns, interviewed by the author, 1996 and 2001.

10. *Newsweek* 61, no. 7 (February 18, 1963): 65; and Alan R. Solomon, "The New American Art: Four Germinal Painters," *XXXII International Biennial Exhibition of Art, Venice 1964, United States of America* (Venice, 1964), n.p. Quoted in Franklin, "Chronology," 333 and 337.

11. Calvin Tomkins, typescript of interview with Marcel Duchamp, March 23, 1964, 11–12, Calvin Tomkins Papers, series IV, subseries D, folder 29, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York; quoted in Franklin, "Chronology," 2012: 339. The film: "A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp—From NBC's Wisdom Series," interview with James Johnson Sweeney, NBC Archives, 1956.

12. Quoted in "Openness and Grace," Carlos Basualdo and Erica F. Battle, exhibition catalogue, *Dancing around the Bride* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2012), 34.

KAY LARSON, an art critic, is the author of *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists.*