

John Cage

*In your diary I read, "WHEN WILL YOU UNDESS YOURSELF OF YOUR IDEAS?"*

Oh, that's a quotation from SATIE. I think you'll find it on the cover of RELACHE, the ballet. And there's a man without any clothes on, I think, with a fig leaf perhaps. And in the actual performance it was MARCEL DUCHAMPS. And ah, whether the remark "When will you undress yourself of your ideas?" is a remark of SATIE or of DUCHAMPS or a copy of I don't know. But it's in the spirit, wouldn't you say?

*Ya. In the context of your diary I read it as.... I felt that one of the abilities you have is to get undressed of your personal ideas.*

Ha, ha yes, yes.

*So I'm really curious how you realize this in your work.*

Well, besides the use of the chance operation and the....(microphone noises).... performance of certain freedoms rather than prescribing exactly what they should do, ah, I have more and more and more in recent work introduced the, what we call the "Principle of Circus".... of, when you have the intention of one person, you still have that person dressed up in his ideas. But if you have two people dressed up in their ideas, and you hear both at the same time, rather than one.... In other words, when the attention is not focused, the fact that they have ideas modifies the ideas themselves.

So the idea of speech becomes less clear simply because the two are together. And when this is extended to a larger number, to a multiplicity, then you have a situation very much like that of nature, in which to quote from the New Testament, you can say um "It passes understanding." Ah, they speak in the New Testament of the Peace, isn't it, that passes understanding.. Well, this would be if you have many ideas, eh you have so to speak no ideas. Hm, so that everyone could keep his ideas on.

Ya.

But in a truly democratic situation, there would be NO ideas. Hm. Don't you think?

*Ya, that the multiplicity of the individualistic ideas... like, um....*

modify, they modify one another. So that what you see is from another distance. It's what I call in another chapter of the text "Rhythm Etcetera". (microphone noises) It's a question of focal point, or focus. When you're taking a picture, ah the picture changes according to your distance from the subject. And if the subject is multiplicity, and you are very far away, the whole thing is quite different from.... (microphone noises, again)

For instance, people think of organization. And they can show that it exists in a plant or in an animal or in a wheel or something like that.

[Exchange of the microphone.]

(Taking a DEEP breath) : *I relate this remark of your diary to pieces then like ah CHEAP IMITATION or ETUDES AUSTRALES, where you have material of SATIE or certain ah*

stars.

*stars, and I just am curious how this composition technique works. It's like an exercise for me in "self-forgetfulness". That's how I see that.*

mm, it it it can certainly be seen that way. It can also be seen as changing the responsibility of the composer. in making choices to asking questions. And then the questions come by means of oh one thing or another that is beyond the control of the person asking ah the question.

*Ya. So ah in CHEAP IMITATION you use SATIE'S music.*

I start with SATIE, and I list the questions. Have you seen them? Have you seen the score of the questions I ask?

No.

Just a moment. (CAGE gets the score.)

Ah, the first question I ask with regard to the original, to SATIE'S original is if we use only the white notes of the piano, and we distinguish then seven modes, ah my first question is, which of those seven modes am I to use in order to imitate the melody of that in the SOCRATE?

Ya.

And then the second question is on which transposition of the twelve chromatic possibilities?

Then, having found seven notes, I ask which of those seven notes I am to use. And always, the I-Ching responds. And the I-Ching works with the number sixty-four. So to ask these questions, I've related the number sixty-four to the number seven and to the number twelve.

Ya.

Here are the tables that relate all numbers lower than sixty-four to sixty-four. And I've published these in the SONG BOOKS, where they're also used by the performer in order to ask any questions that come up in connection with his performance.

*Ya. I understand. So, in ETUDES AUSTRALES it's similar.*

Except that there I have also the star maps of ATLAS AUSTRALIS. And whenever a question arises, ah, that the stars don't answer in that piece, then I ask it by means of this I-Ching business. So what I've had to do is to decide what questions to ask.

Once I've decided that, I become as it were ah simply a means by which other things can happen that are um outside of me, in which I don't myself change. um..... I hope in that way I become open to possibilities and events that were not in my mind to begin with. So it relates to this remark of SATIE about being "naked" with respect to ideas.

*Because the process of walking this way surprises you with a lot of new possibilities.*

And I HOPE, you see, that this will be the situation for a listener, first for a performer and then for a listener. Those circumstances of course are entirely different from the circumstances sitting here at home, ah preparing

the music.

Ya, ya....So um it's really devotion to all these ah different materials. And I see here THOREAU'S JOURNALS.

Ha, yeah.

And ah I'm assuming that you're working on this project which started with MUREAU, and now

And now I'm working another way with the drawings of THOREAU. Did I show you the other day?

Yes.

These are the drawings. Well, now I make the next piece using the drawings. And just before you came I finished the first step in the piece. The title isn't given yet.

I want also to make a circus of music that one might have heard in 1776 in this country. But I'm already running into the al.... conservative feelings of the society with respect to such an intention. Because music, of all the arts, has been the one which has tried to focus the attention of people on a particular thing. And so much of that music in 1776 was ah what we call "sacred". It was church music. And the people think that I'm being sacrilegious to want to have two or three at once, you see.

Ya.

And so they they refuse to cooperate. It may be that I'll not be able to do it.

It would be a real honest contribution to the BICENTENNIAL, being independent of it.

But our....This is the trouble with our country, that the feelings which brought our country into existence....ha ha ....no longer invigorate it.... except in a few individuals. And those individuals don't.... can't act against the um ah strong institutions.

Ya. Do you think um that anarchism in New York, is this a "should" for a better society? Or is it the only way to survive?

Eh what, what are you saying? What anarchism?

Eh, anarchism, just what. I've seen the last days.

You find it anarchic?

I find a kind of creative spirit of anarchism.

You do? Ha ha. I don't know really, ah because I don't see the situation with your eyes. I find I am by nature kind of optimist. Hm, and I am through present circumstances in the United States less optimistic. So, I probably.... and since I like to think of myself as an anarchist, I ah don't see enough of it around.

Ya, can't be enough.

But if you see it, there's something....

But I ask me if it's a positive anarchism, or is it just the helplessness of the underprivileged? I am not sure yet. Possibly because of this social pressure here. I see so many creative things going on. You can just go around the corner here, and you see some

other person demonstrating how he's surviving.

Hm hm.

And then just, you know, using this pressure to put out as much from his own as possible. That I see as a kind of a positive anarchism.

I don't think that I can say at the moment anything useful about this. I.... it's perhaps because my attention is going to these Bicentennial pieces. And so I'm thinking not so much about the people as I am about the institutions. And the institutions strike me as characterized by lack of intelligence, and um lack of conscience.

Ya, that they just use the ornamental function of Bicentennial.

And I don't think I see enough conscience in the people. At the festival of the avant-garde the other day I think there was rather than intelligence and conscience, there was a kind of um, oh, general SWEETNESS. Hm hm.

Yes, it was disappointing. So ah, I see actually the avant-garde circus of the Barnet fields in New York on the streets.

One of the difficulties with that festival was that it was difficult to plug in with any electrical equipment. And a great deal of the work that's being done now is electronic. MAX MATTHEWS for instance was there from Bell Telephone Laboratories.

(RING, RING of the telephone)

And I don't know whether he succeeded in hooking in or not.

(CAGE takes the call, and returns.)

That little book beside you, if I could have that.

So, I wonder how you integrate loving THOREAU and living in New York.

Well, it's a situation like oh....ah, making noise when you're devoted to silence. It's the same thing. Ah, you know the poetry of Wordsworth, who went in the nineteenth century to the lake district of England. In other words, there was a tendency on the part of people who became interested in tranquillity... He was interested in tranquillity..... to go to tranquil places. But see in Zen Buddhism you will find that what is necessary about tranquillity is to be tranquil in a situation which is not tranquil.

Ya, like SHUNRYU SUZUKI says, "In the midst of noise your mind will be quiet and stable."

Yes, the same thing about THOREAU and ZEN and so forth in the city. I mean, if we thought otherwise, we would be thinking as our governments do. They think for instance that um we must just go on using oil until the cows come home. Ha ha ha.  
Ya.

ha ha ha ha ha ha.....  
hahahahahahahahahahahahahah

the cows in New York

hahahahaha

*I mean ah, it would bring the need for nature back, actually.*

*hahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahahaahahahahahah  
aha ooh hu ha haha*

*ha haha hahaaha haahahahaa ha ha*

*It's very beautiful. The Westside Highway, which isn't used now, the part up above, is turning into a horticultural garden. Have you noticed?*

*No.*

*And the people bicycle there. And the plants are growing up. It's becoming a charming place.*

*Yea, that was one of the first feelings I really liked here, to see SO much GREEN in such a city.*

*ha ha ha, yes. yes.*

*Like in every street there are three or four shops selling plants.*

*Well, actually when you come here, when you come here from Germany, it must be as though you're coming to the old world from the NEW world, hahaha. Don't you think?*

*Perhaps.*

*It was GERTRUDE STEIN that said that the United States is the oldest country of the twentieth century. But we're also the first to fall apart, you see, hhhhh*

*Hm.... the thing about nature. What I see in your pieces too, um your recent works, that you are going to use more of the nature aspect and the organic aspect of music producing. Is this true?*

*Yeah, yeah, I hope so.*

*I hope so too.*

*hm hhhahahahahahahaah oooooh .....  
It really, ah..*

*Is this then exclusive to computer  
electronical media, or could that be  
integrated?*

*The business of asking questions..... is like computer music. Hm hm.....and what was the other one you wanted to ask?*

*No, I see that you're going more towards using organic aspects of music producing, and NATURE, etc. I mean THOREAU, writing a piece about the WEATHER, etc.*

*Yes, but don't you think it.... Yes, but it's actually electronic music, and the tape recorder and everything that gave us the opportunity to record natural events, and which focuses our attention back, away from theories of music to actual experience of hearing wherever we happen to be. And when I was asked, I forget now when it was, but in the early, in the late sixties or early seventies, to write a column on electronic music, I, it was then that I wrote MUREAU. I subjected THOREAU to chance operations, because I noticed that THOREAU LISTENED the way electronic composers now listen. The electronics have brought our attention back to nature.... With electronics you can't stay with twelve tones, unless you're PIERRE SCHAEFFER.*

*Then of course you make a machine that makes the trains and the thunder and so forth correspond to the twelve tones of the musical octave. Otherwise, you go, as I think most people do, with tape recorders into the whole world of sound rather than the theoretical musical world of sound.*

*And using actually this material, with the ears like THOREAU used his....*

*Right, right, right.*

*Ah ha, so bringing nature aspects into technology.*

*yes. yes. There's no real opposition then we can say, as FULLER would say, between technology and nature....However, we see many oppositions between technology and nature, but not, there needn't be those oppositions.*

*Doesn't art here in New York replace nature in a certain way?*

*Oh....*

*Gives this a certain feeling, a kind of religious feeling, cathartic feeling or whatever?*

*It, there may be something in what you say. um.....ah, when we are in a natural situation, in a situation in woods or ah sky etcetera, we we um.....the aspects of the human character that have to do with vision and intuition and so forth are stimulated. And they are not so stimulated when we are at an intersection in the city and have to stop because there is a red light. Ah, when we're in the presence of law, I think vision tends to be diminished. And so, in those city situations, it is through art that we are among other things, that the imagination again has a stimulus.*

*Ya.*

*The artist CLAUD OLDENBURG, you know his work, thinks of himself as the THOREAU of the cities.*

*.....hm*

*He looks for instance at cigarette butts. hm hhhahahaha hahahaah..... and beer cans and so forth. All those things, and typewriters. They interest him in the same way that birds interested THOREAU.... And THOREAU would have understood that I think. There are several passages in the JOURNAL where he goes to visit factories. And he himself was the inventor of the pencil as we know it. Hm hm. So it's not ah, loving THOREAU here in New York is not a kind of a longing towards nature. It's more ah seeing within the city with the eyes of a person who lived in a kind of innocent environment, making the city to nature, not in bringing the cows in, but in ah seeing nature in what the city is. Do you think it will transform the suffering here of people and open the eyes of some others?*

*Now, there we come again to the situation where I, where I am not as optimistic as I was. I used to think that when we make our music and do work, that it can have a usefulness in the society. Hm.... But I more and more think it is only useful to those people who have prepared themselves to be open to it. And I*

think people, for instance stupid people, hm.... can go to a concert and come out just as stupid as they went in. They can ignore their experience.

*They are closed up.*

And it's precisely this ah inability of art to impose itself on people that makes us love art. That's one of the things we love about it. MAO TSE TUNG on the other hand diminishes the kind of art that can be ah used in China, restricting it to propaganda for the political situation as it exists. I don't think that that attitude toward art can long survive.

*But ah...*

And it's beginning to decay, in Russia for instance.

*I see, like in China, it has just a function.*

To help support the government.

*Yeah, but China actually is, to compare it with America, is a country of ninety percent agriculture. So there's no alienation um, so that the people still feel grounded and realize themselves as as basic and natural. So there won't be that much need for art.*

*I see here in America, like New York, possibly five percent real nature or green compared with everything of steel that's around it. So this pressure gives eh a NEED for art, like to strengthen it, and just stimulates the people to WORK and to make it better and all that. You know what I mean. Function of art is not this important in China, because China is full of things....*

Things, they do that.

*And it's very alienated here.. So we need art because of that, to let out our.... But I see that you quote MAO in your last writings. And on the other hand you quote FULLER, who is a real kind of opposite in his whole thinking. How do you relate these different understandings? Are they just examples of the variety of your thinking? Or are they really in your mind interconnected?*

I think of them as, even though they're obviously different as you say, ah I think of them as ah the same in that they both have ah.....suggested changes that would be ah... oh that would be liberating for large numbers of people. And in the case of MAO the changes have been effected. In FULLER they remain not entirely, but they remain largely theoretical rather than realized.

*Ya.*

But I think that FULLER'S vision is not so to speak distinct from MAO'S. It's actually greater than MAO'S....because it is for one thing, not dependent upon power militarism. And then secondly it has to do with the whole earth rather than with just one nation.

*But, then it has to function.*

Ah, it, it could function. And FULLER is never tired of explaining, again theoretically, that it could function independent of politics.

*Ya.*

Ah, we'll see, if we live long enough. And you clearly will live longer than I. We'll see whether these changes happen. The nature of FULLER'S change is the network of utilities that is shared by all the people on the earth, so that everyone has what he needs to live.

*So far as I know it needs a big environmental change, so that the people can live freely with their individuality as they want. So I think, is it right, that FULLER, in contradiction to MAO, emphasizes more environmental change, and MAO emphasizes bringing the people towards the right understanding.*

Yes. In his new book, SYNERGETICS, FULLER indicates concern with the way people think. He would certainly never advise the use of power. I think it would be ah....marvelous if we could bring about a change through the use of intelligence and conscience, and not with recourse to forcing the people. But then I have to at the same time say I'm less optimistic than formerly.

*Ya, because of the actual situation. It's like ah I read in the VILLAGE VOICE one week ago, "Innocence is lost." Ten years ago we didn't know what's going on with General Motors. Now we know.*

Hm. Hm.

*How do you think that SYNERGETICS, the new book which is kind of a complete and from the very, very smallest units to the whole structured, very complete vision of whole systems.... Ah, have you thought about how it would influence music?*

In the um time that I've known BUCKY FULLER, since the late forties, he has a vision of how it could influence music. And he has several times explained it to me. And I have as many times not understood. And the reason I don't understand is because I'm so busy doing the work that I am doing. So that when I hear about another way of working, I'm not as open to it as I would be if I didn't have this way to work that I do. Which in itself is changing. But the thing that puts me off is the presence of um mathematics, which has to do with specific relationships.

On the other hand, I've been so devoted to FULLER'S work that I was alarmed at the time A YEAR FROM MONDAY was being published. I was alarmed whether or not he thought of my work as antithetic to his own work. In other words, ah, the use of chance operations, did he think they were opposed to his views? He didn't. He found them perfectly compatible. And it may be that I could um.... I think though that it should be the work of someone else rather than my own work to bring the vision and ideas of FULLER into music.

*I feel that there is a certain ah....going along, because your work has this unpredictable flow. You never know what's coming out next of JOHN CAGE. It's like the independent function of the parts, which will form a whole.*

Well, ah, that's how FULLER would see it, I think. But I, but I want to insist that he saw ah another kind of music, that would be specifically related to his mathematics of cubes, I mean of ah not cubes, of tetrahedrons rather than cubes. Um, three's and third powers

and so forth. And he would see, I think, western music as having, conventional western music, as basically having to do with squares. Don't you think?

*golden squares!*

Whereas, he you know, his involvement with the triangle and tetrahedrons . . . . It MIGHT be that one could discover a relationship between the music of JOSEPH MATTHIAS HAUER. Do you know his work?

No.

And ah BUCKMINSTER FULLER. Because HAUER also spoke of spheres. And he discovered the twelve-tone system at the same time when SCHOENBERG did in Vienna.

*Ooh, HAUER, ya ya of course, I know.*

And it may be that there's a relationship between HAUER'S use of the twelve tones and BUCKIE'S um ah dimaxion hhh hhhh domes! ahahahahaah

*It would be funny to get in this marriage.*

*Okay... But I'm really interested in the piece you're writing now about the weather.*

It's ah responds to a commission by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in relationship to the Bicentennial of the United States. And the man wrote to me in the first place... Since he came from Canada, I accepted immediately. And he wrote a letter suggesting that I work with the writings of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN. But after reading a little bit of FRANKLIN'S work, I felt that I couldn't do that, that I was still, as I have been for many years, devoted to THOREAU.

I tried to take myself for this occasion away from THOREAU. And I bought several books ah that are anthologies of American writing. But I found that I can't take myself away from THOREAU. I'm still too fascinated. ahahaha

The piece is for twelve speaker vocalists. And they read excerpts of WALDEN, THE JOURNAL, and ESSAY ON CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE, that were obtained through I-CHING chance operations. And then they also vocalize. And in the JOURNAL of THOREAU there are illustrations, which are used oh to make the piece I showed you last week called SCORE. And now, instead of those pictures being in the parts for the Canadian piece, ah I write... I make a notation in the midst of this text for vocalization. It's just a suggestion. In other words, the drawings have entered into the THOREAU text.

*hm hm*

And that way the musician, he will make a sound, a vocal sound, suggested by the drawing that I've made. And I ask in the preface that he use his breath completely, whether or not his breath was deep or shallow. In other words that in vocalizing that he exhaust himself. Why I ask that, I don't know. I ah intuit the the um, I have an intuition that for us to have the experience of twelve people becoming exhausted . . . . . when they vocalize, will be meaningful in relation to ah... the present intellectual climate. HMMHMMHMMH

which is the weather. which is the weather.

*which is your contribution to the Bicentennial, ya, which is the weather.*

There are other things to say about it, but um... And it will begin with breeze and go to rain and end in thunder. And it is thunder that brings about change and revolution. And what we are recalling, I hope in this piece, is the fact that this country began with revolution. And what is so unfortunate about it at the present time is that our revolutionary spirit that existed say ten years ago haha is now somewhat decayed, or nonexistent, certainly among the young students.

Ya.

So that it takes an OLD FOGEY like MYSELF hahaahah to suggest again, as THOREAU did all of his life, ah revolution.

*I think you're still the youngest.*

WHAT ?????? hahaah