

URBAN FORM: Seminar 12/10/54

Interviews with John Cage, composer, James T. Ferrell,
writer, and Andreas Feininger, photographer

JOHN CAGE: Modern painting helps to make people aware of the city environment, even the most banal parts. Interest in sounds has the same effect, it introduces people to their environment. Interest in sounds has brought about a development in music; that of magnetic tape which can record any sound produced. One can also work directly with the machine, recording synthetic sounds and also the sounds of the city. Sounds alter in character when recorded from different places, i.e., rather than having musicians at one spot, one can have a situation in which sounds come from various directions or go continuously from low to high with respect to all their characteristics. This is a field situation rather than a series of discrete steps. Harmony in music did not arise from the physics of sound as was always assumed, but from convention. In the field situation one must take care not to set up discrete choices again. There are possibly six categories for sound: 1- city sounds; 2- country sounds; 3- synthetic sounds; 4- manually produced sounds; 5- vocal or wind sounds; 6- sounds so quiet they have to be magnified to be in concert with others.

Kepes: The density of overlapping sounds in a city brings particular new problems similar to transparency superimposition in visual experience. One can never isolate sound. Could city sounds be utilized for music with their overlappings?

CAGE: Standing in the middle of the anechoic chamber at Harvard where no echo is possible, I heard two sounds. Later I learned that they were the sounds of my own body processes and I concluded that so long as there is life, there is sound: the type of sounds I experienced there merely being drowned out by other external sounds in daily life. I have never heard a sound too loud. I know of a man versed in the traditional approach to sounds and music and as he became more and more attentive to the finesses of frequency it became impossible for him to live in the city. I feel, on the other hand, that one should take in all the sounds available, rather than choosing only the tenable ones. All sounds thus make for rich experience. I want to be in accord with my environment.

Kepes: If you could articulate the existing city sound patterns, what would you do, what would be your needs to be satisfied? With purposeful organization of city sounds, we could enrich the experience of the city.

CAGE: My feeling is that this is already the case.

Kepes: Ordered pattern, not a fixed, fully controlled or rigid one, but one partially defined, such as the 12 o'clock bell, in contrast to the chaotic flow of the random sounds, could help to structure our responses.

CAGE: Regularized events, such as the 12 o'clock bell, form a rhythmic situation, for the bells never completely coincide.

If they were really controlled, they would not do what they actually do, that is to produce and overlapping situation. With magnetic tape, many have considered the possibilities of controlling sounds completely. The results have proved to the contrary. In Cologne they have created synthetic sounds to produce harmonious controlled sound, but the material resists control. Now they are using the card method, on the plan of a Cybernetics machine. I think it would be better to give up the idea of control and merely enjoy the absence of control.

Lynch: You believe, then, that the person should be trained to enjoy what is there, rather than attempt to control the environment.

CAGE: What would be the intention of an imposed order?

Kepes: Because the average sound environment is a random situation, small islands of ordered pattern within that randomness could help to catalyse an overall ordered pattern, e.g. a theme, such as Christmas, would provide a symbollic focus by means of which random patterns would be related. It is possible to conceive of such sound focuses of cityscapes to enrich the whole environment.

CAGE: Could you instead awaken people to the possibilities of the random situation?

Kepes: Our idea is just perhaps to change the sound-creating experiences.

CAGE: There are three spectacular sound experiences in New York city that I have met: one is at East 12th on 5th Avenue by Longchamps kitchen where the sounds are comparable to a Balinese orchestra. Another is at East 14th Street near the river where I have heard a throbbing of sounds. The third is in Brooklyn on the roofs overlooking the Battery, where base sounds are muted, and the dominant sounds are clearly separated, like stars. In Amsterdam they believe they have achieved a special acoustic environment by means of Carillon bells on the hour and carts of music continually played in the streets, characterizing the city. For a visitor it was a delightful experience, but it was in the nature of a curiosity. If one lives there all year round, I suppose one is proud of it.

Kepes: The sound of rain has a special meaning for the Japanese. It is a rhythm untouched by man; it suggests a background desired by men, as a fire place is more alive than controlled heat. In the city these small meaningful sound-motif's are suppressed, as the small visual experiences are. It would be valuable to have such oases as a small waterfall to provide contrasts to the overpowering noise background.

CAGE: If sound is decentralized, you are taking sounds apart.

Lynch: The examples you have cited illustrate a suppressed background allowing one to separate out the sound elements. Complete randomness may destroy contrast.

CAGE: I have not found that. Each composite has its own character.

My point of view can lead to another direction: if we could have situations in which such phenomena as sound of rain are audible it would be completely delightful.

Kepes: The perception of a city is primarily a rhythmical experience. For example, the variety of tempos- walking fast in the early morning and walking more slowly later in the day. Perhaps sound-wise each street has a characteristic experience: would it be possible to scaffold this experience into a rhythmic unity?

CAGE: But rhythm is a changing concept now, too. With magnetic tape we see that the situation is logarithmic rather than arithmetic. It is a field here too rather than a series of discrete steps. This is true even of tempo, each event going on at its own pace. Thus from the most empty one moves to the greatest density in time, and from this to fragmentation, i.e., things grouping in time, until finally you merely get a dust.

Kepes: So you feel continuity and not discontinuity should be emphasized? But can you visualize rhythm without discontinuity-- don't you need a break or pause to bring the shift or polarity basic to rhythm.

CAGE: I now consider written music an activity of producing sounds, followed by space in which music is silent but other sounds enter in. One must speak of continuity in the infinite sense; the theatre embodies this type of creation. The city as a theater helps show people this potentiality. Others I know working in this realm are Philip Gustard and Bob Rauchenberg.

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(Condensed Version)

FARRELL: Paris is the most beautiful city in the world. It is a city to be looked at; it has wide streets and trees. American cities just happened and because they lacked tradition people didn't care about how they build on to them. The Loop in Chicago is no longer really the center of that city; neighborhoods throughout have all the things they need for daily living except the bad plays you must go downtown to see. I have seen community effort at work in Chicago, where my brother lives. The whole neighborhood became involved in starting a "little league", cleaning up the area, joining together to do something. The problem is to create public awareness. Educate the people, make them see how they can make their city beautiful. There is a brochure called "This Is Detroit" which has emphasized this aspect. Union leaders are conscious of this problem; they would probably be very helpful in a program of increasing public awareness. They are interested in what is happening to the average man and are usually men of great energy.

Kepes: Your comment about making people aware of their surroundings and how they can make it more pleasant for themselves reminds me of the time when my wife and I were working at Hull House in Chicago. Next door there was a vacant and littered lot which we cleared with the aid of the young boys and then let them plant green things all over it. It gave them a great deal of pleasure in the doing and resulting visual experience.

FARRELL: Union men, men involved in the civic affairs of a city, and men in politics should be contacted, should be given a prospectus of what you propose to do, how the city can be made a pleasant place in which to live for the average man, emphasizing the individual and human values over the property values. Men to get in touch with would be Brendan Sexton, Education Director, UAW - CIO, 8000 E. Jefferson Street, Detroit; and Lewis Carliner of the same outfit. Frank Zeidler, the mayor of Milwaukee, perhaps the most outstanding mayor in the country, would certainly be interested in what you are doing. Sol Alinsky of the Industrial Area Foundation, 8 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, is working with the back of the stockyards project and would certainly be a man to contact. Of course, you must also write to Robert Merriam on the City Council in Chicago. He may be the mayor of that city someday and be in a position to carry out such plans; and if not, at least his campaigning may bring the issue out as an important one. And a man who knows infinitely more than I, a really brilliant guy, is Meyer Shapiro. You also might be benefitted by reading Holbrook Jackson's book, "The Eighteen Nineties". Of course, one of my favorite hypotheses is that some American men love their cars more than their wives.

Kepes: The car is a safety valve, you mean.

FARRELL: And, you know, when I was being shown around Vienna by a woman socialist and listened to her tell of the wonderful conveniences of the new Marxist apartment building that had been built for the workers, I got the impression that there was really a "feudal" approach in the paternal, protective care of the worker of which they are so proud. It is a "do for the people" approach.

Kepes: On the problem of public awareness, perhaps we could sponsor a city week or a city month to publicize the possibilities of making the city more pleasant for the people in it.

FERRALL: By all means sit down as soon as you can and really think out a prospectus with your ideas on this subject and send me about eight copies and I will forward them to Stevenson, to Lehmann, to Harriman, to Merriam; these people would certainly be interested and may be in a position to help in some substantial fashion. I think you have a great project and it is good to know that such things are in the forefront of study today. I would like to be of as much help as I can.

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FEININGER: To me the city is a machine, with particular functions, but it does not function any more. The traffic problem illustrates that. My own suggestion in this city (New York) is to utilize street levels for truck storage or parking. But you can never attack the problem from an aesthetic point of view; you have to make a practical impact, i.e., functionalism equals beauty.

Kepes: There is a function at the aesthetic level.

FEININGER: But aesthetics are not primary. There is a symbolic quality to buildings. I do not think the current U.N. building is a good building symbolically functional. The old League of Nations building was in a classic style of architecture and certainly in no way represented a new way of approaching problems. Yet, I am not sure if this symbolic quality on the city level.

Kepes: Then the city should be made efficient and functional and beauty will be a by-product.

FEININGER: Yes.

Kepes: Assume the functional problems were solved, however, what would bother you then? There are always a number of minor choices within the major choices in the city and they are also important.

FEININGER: You can not force ideas on people; you have to educate them. If you start with the functional aspect, people will accept that kind of concept to begin with. Aesthetics involves so many different opinions. It is true there are such things as trees which give aesthetic and no functional enjoyment. I know that the people who live near a tree which has grown out of a crevice in the sidewalk cherish that bit of green, but this is still a secondary matter when you look at the problems of the city as a whole.

Lynch: Aesthetics has been an important motive in accompanying major planning schemes. I agree with you that directly functional aspects of the city must be solved, but we do disagree on whether there are values in the city beyond this or whether beauty rises automatically from functional fulfillment.

FEININGER: I do have many photographs of New York City which do not appear in "The Face of New York" and are stored in my home in Connecticut; and if you would like to look through them and use them (at cost rates, but not for publication) you may do so.

Lynch: We will take you up on that, and write you concerning it.

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