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That Entertainment Called a Discussion: The Critical Arts Pedagogy of John Cage

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That Entertainment Called a Discussion: The Critical Arts Pedagogy of John Cage

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Abstract

*Just as John Cage used chance techniques to relinquish control in his practice as a composer, he used pedagogical techniques that facilitated shared learning and experimentation. The tenets of Critical Pedagogy, as laid out by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, offer insights into the structures and strategies implicit in John Cage's work as an educator. A survey of accounts by former students of Cage, as well as Cage's writings on education show that Cage's approach to both classroom and individualized teaching was characterized by the principles of co-intentional dialogue, praxis, holistic engagement, and an awareness of education as a moral and political act. Critical pedagogy, which clearly articulates and generalizes these principles, therefore offers an analysis that makes it possible to separate John Cage's innovations in music pedagogy from his personality and aesthetics, rendering them available for further development and application.*

Keywords: *John Cage, Paulo Freire, Critical Pedagogy, Experimental Music*

Arriving at the Emma Lake Music Workshop in August of 1965, John Cage wrote:
The role of a composer is other than it was. Teaching, too, is no longer transmission of a body of useful information, but's conversation, alone, together, whether in a place appointed or not in that place . . . We talk, moving from one idea to another, like hunters. (Cage 1967, 21)

As he goes on to record the week's activities, Cage outlines an approach to teaching that is marked by dialogue, interdisciplinarity, and shared experience, that rejects the notion of an authoritative lecturer providing knowledge to the uninformed. A year later, when

he was asked “How would you educate people to live in this new world we’re talking about?” he makes this rejection explicit, echoing Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan’s claim that “the least important aspect in education is the teacher” (Kostelanetz 1970, 22–3).

There is a clear parallel between Cage’s impulse to relinquish control within his compositions and his willingness to open his classroom into an arena of experimentation and discussion. Cage’s rejection of professorial authority and knowledge transfer as the basis of education, however, also belongs to a larger trend and discourse within pedagogical theory and practice.

Throughout the 20th century, many theorists have advocated for a shift away from the traditional image of a teacher as one who “transmits a body of useful information,” who instructs, and disciplines, and toward a conception of the teacher as one who facilitates a student’s engagement with learning. In 1890, John Dewey drew the attention of the press in Michigan by designing a philosophy course around class discussion instead of lecture, developing the position that a teacher’s role is one of guidance and mediation (Nebeker 2002). Maria Montessori conceived of the “directress” as a valet, humbly serving the spirit of the child, as a custodian of a learning environment and a facilitator of activities within it, and as an observant scientist and researcher, carefully monitoring the development of each learner (O’Donnell 2013). During the political upheavals of the 60s and 70s, theorists like Hartmut von Hentig emphasized the teacher’s responsibility to practice what they preach, “to put up resistance to the forces that impinge upon their lives and to try to change society where it’s wrong—to examine how his own life stands in relation to his teaching,” in order to “[help] people learn to make decisions in the face of other people’s power—or their own non-power—on the basis of incomplete information and under pressure of time” (Carr 1972). More recently, John Hattie has culled hundreds of meta-analyses on the outcomes of different educational strategies to argue for a synthesis of “teacher-centered teaching and student-centered learning” wherein “teachers become learners of their own teaching, and when students become their own teachers” (Hattie 2008, 22). He differentiates this from mere facilitation of student-centered learning, however, arguing

that good teachers employ deliberate and visible strategies, that “they intervene in calculated and meaningful ways to alter the direction of learning to attain various shared, specific, and challenging goals” (22).

Cage’s work as an educator can be read in relationship to the pedagogical theories that emerged throughout the 1960s, when consideration of the role of institutionalized education in repressive power structures led to radical developments and reinterpretations of the principles of John Dewey’s progressive education. Efforts to make education a location of liberatory social change culminated in various realizations, ranging from the Sudbury School’s experiments in democratic education (1968) and Evalyn Bates’ low-residency adult degree program (1963), to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1969) and Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* (1971) to the student strikes of 1970. Some of Cage’s educational experience precedes this historical moment,¹ nevertheless these theoretical perspectives can be effectively employed to analyze the choices that Cage made as a teacher throughout his career, and to identify patterns within his approach that could be further developed today.

While Ivan Illich’s work, which Cage refers to in a later interview with Richard Kostelanetz (2002), offers a framework for understanding Cage broadly as an “educator-at-large” within an “educational web” (Illich 1973, 33) that extends beyond any of the institutions that employed him, critical pedagogy, the educational approach that Freire outlines in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, provides specific insights into Cage’s mode of engagement with students. Freire’s model, which actively rejects the teacher-student hierarchy and grounds itself in real-world experience, effects real social and political change and offers a unique interpretive lens for understanding Cage’s teaching as a reproducible methodology serving liberatory ends.

As pioneers and personalities, Freire and Cage have a number of similarities. Both are influential, “inaugural” (Nyman 1999; McLaren 2000) figures in their respective spheres of critical pedagogy and experimental music. Music critic, John Rockwell has written that Cage’s “influence is cited without question even by his opponents” (Rockwell 1983, 47). Similarly Joe Kincheloe has written that “Freire became the most well-known educator in the world by the 1970s . . . indeed, all work in

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critical pedagogy after him has to reference his work” (Kincheloe 2004, 70). Their writing blends spirituality and social theory—Catholicism and Lukács in the case of Freire, Zen and McLuhan in the case of Cage—and offers a vision of hope in change (Kincheloe 2004). At the same time, their efficacy as educators is visible in Freire’s successful rural literacy program in Brazil, and in the roster of groundbreaking artists who cite Cage’s teaching as a primary catalyst. Rockwell, in fact, goes on to argue that Cage’s “influence . . . is primarily through his writings and personality” (Dickinson 2006, 163) as well as his “encouragement of younger composers” (Rockwell 1983, 50), rather than his own musical output as a composer.

Moreover, the renegade fields of experimental music and critical pedagogy have overlapping origins that relate back to the Frankfurt School and Arnold Schoenberg. Schoenberg, with whom Cage studied from 1933 to 1935 had also taught composition to philosopher Theodor Adorno, who went on to extol his revolutionary “change in the function of musical expression” (Adorno 2007, 27). Susan Buck-Morss (1979) even goes so far as to say that “Schoenberg’s revolution in music provided the inspiration for Adorno’s own efforts in philosophy,” (5) relating Schoenberg’s rejection of the background principle of tonal function to Adorno’s critique of Hegelian idealism. While Cage and Adorno took different insights from Schoenberg’s teaching, similarities can be seen, for example, in their interest in the systematic exploration of materials and their critiques of popular music (Dworkin 2009).²

The basic premise of critical pedagogy, namely the understanding of academic disciplines as “manifestations of the discourses and power relations of the social and historical contexts that produced them” (Kincheloe 2004, 48), is rooted in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School which included Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse among others. In particular, Freire was influenced by Marcuse, whose critiques of reification or the “dehumanization of thought and conduct that is necessarily encountered wherever theory or practice appear in society to be structured objectively or organized around ‘things,’ and consequently as improperly separated from subjective human activity” (Reitz 2004, 57), resonate in Freire’s claim that, “in order to achieve humanization, which presupposes the elimination of dehumanizing oppression,

it is absolutely necessary to surmount the limit-situations in which people are reduced to things” (quoted in Reitz 2004, 57). In his essay, *Liberating the Critical in Critical Theory: Marcuse, Marx, and a Pedagogy of the Oppressed: Alienation, Art, and the Humanities*, Charles Reitz (2004) tracks the relationship between Marcuse and Freire arguing that for both, “disalienation through conscientization (Freire) or the aesthetic dimension (Marcuse) is held to be situated logically and chronologically prior to social and political emancipation” (57). This parallels Adorno’s understanding of the avant-garde, typified by Schoenberg’s atonality, as an active resistance to a culture industry and the commodification of experience.

Much more could be written, of course, about the extent to which the themes and theories of Adorno and Marcuse are carried forward in the work of Cage and Freire. This brief overview simply provides a genealogical basis for the connection that this paper draws between Freire and Cage, and for the suggestion that the student whom Schoenberg described as “not a composer but an inventor of genius” (Cage 1962, *About the Author*), might contribute to the field of critical pedagogy.

In order to understand Cage’s teaching style as an effective pedagogical approach that can be developed and employed by others, however, it must be understood as a set of strategies rather than the incidental by-product of genius or eccentricity. This paper therefore examines John Cage’s work as an educator through the lens of Freirean critical pedagogy in order to understand Cage’s approach to teaching, not as the extension of an idiosyncratic artistic and philosophical vision, but as a methodology, an educational template that positions art as a tool for what Freire would term *conscientização*, critical inquiry into the nature of our social situation and our world. This comparison reveals the broader educational importance of experimentalism, indeterminacy, and interdisciplinarity, and in doing so makes it possible to separate the sociopolitical *potential* of Cage’s teaching from the limitations of his own aesthetics and politics.

The impulse behind such a study lies in the conviction that Cage’s critical pedagogy has a relevance and instrumentality that extends to communities beyond the immediate reach of experimental music, and that, even in the work of Cage, enough distinction can be made between delivery method and content that his innovative

teaching methods might be successfully applied in contexts and communities wherein the specific content of his teaching (for example, in its relationship to Western classical music, to Zen philosophy, to a specific moment in an avant-garde) is less relevant.

Accordingly, it is an analytic project that can be broken down into the following steps:

1. A discussion of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, that highlights the specific structures, ends, and approaches that are essential to critical pedagogy.
2. An effort to ascertain the key aspects of Cage's teaching through the analysis of three different teaching scenarios.
3. A discussion of Cage's methodology in reference to Freire's principles, identifying a set of teaching practices that serve the ends of critical pedagogy.

Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy

Paulo Freire's pedagogical theory is grounded in his experience teaching basic literacy in impoverished rural communities in Brazil. After studying law, philosophy and the psychology of language, Freire taught Portuguese in a secondary school and in 1961 went on to establish and direct the Cultural Extension Service of the University of Recife, a program that focused on adult literacy (Gadotti 1994). In this role, he developed an approach to adult literacy in which the educator first engaged in dialogue with the community, creating a catalogue of words that were particularly salient within that community, and then based literacy education around the meanings that these words and concepts held for the community, offering the act of writing as a means of articulating and defining reality. Freire's method was so successful that he was invited by the President and Education Minister to set up a nation-wide literacy program in 1963, and was forced into exile the following year when a coup brought a right-wing military regime into power. In exile, Freire developed his philosophy of education into the seminal text *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Fundamental to Freire's theory is a critique of what he terms "the 'banking' concept of education, in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing and storing the deposits" (Freire 1970, 2). In a 'banking'

structure, the teacher acts as a source of knowledge and authority, presenting “reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” (71). This type of educational delivery mirrors structures of oppression in the world, and does not develop the agency of the student.

One essential goal of critical pedagogy therefore is to replace a ‘banking’ model of education with a genuine dialogue between teacher and students. For this to have integrity, the teacher must be engaged in new learning alongside and in partnership with the student. Freire cites the importance of “co-intentional education,” wherein “teachers and students . . . co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge” (69).

Dialogue exists not only in the relationship between teacher and student, but as the mechanism through which the world is named and transformed. Freire defines dialogue as the “encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world” (88) and points out that it is in naming the world that we transform it and that we affirm our own humanity and significance.

The specific role of the educator within this dialogic context is to present problems and questions that stimulate discussion and inquiry, that are alive for the teacher as well as the student. Freire emphasizes that these problems should not be abstract, but rooted in the world. Consequently, they do not simply demand theoretical solutions but solutions that are put into action. The learning occurs in the dialogue between teachers and students, but also as experiential discovery when theory is actualized, a combination which Freire terms “praxis.” Freire writes:

Apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (72)

Freire’s writing emphasizes the fact that traditional, ‘banking’ methods of education are complicit in larger structures of marginalization. The changes he advocates are therefore politically instrumental. He writes that, “to exchange the role of depositor,

prescriber, domesticator, for the role of student among students would be to undermine the power of oppression” (75).

It is important to understand that empowering students to become creators of knowledge actually transforms the nature of the knowledge itself. Rather than presenting a static worldview that consists of accepted abstractions and rote facts, produced by absent experts in isolated disciplines (Florence 1998), critical pedagogy works inductively from the complex experiences of those engaged in the dialogue.

Freire (1970) writes:

When people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know that reality. To truly know it they would have to reverse their starting point: they would need to have a total vision of the context in order subsequently to separate and isolate its constituent elements and by means of this analysis achieve a clearer perception of the whole. (104)

This sort of holistic engagement with experience reveals “that reality is really a process, undergoing constant transformation” (75) and it requires interdisciplinary perspectives to be apprehended as such. By reframing education as knowledge creation, as opposed to knowledge transmission, and developing pedagogical approaches to include students in this process, Freire’s critical pedagogy aims to transform the very structure of knowledge. Henry Giroux (2006) writes:

Critical pedagogy makes clear that schools and other educational spheres cannot be viewed merely as instructional sites, but must be seen as places where culture, power, and knowledge come together to produce particular identities, narratives, and social practices. (4)

For the analysis of John Cage’s teaching, this cursory introduction to Freire’s critical pedagogy is sufficient to outline four central principles:

1. *Co-intentional education*, rooted in dialogue.
2. *Problem-posing education*, rooted in praxis.
3. A holistic engagement with “an individual’s contextual reality,” (Freire 1970, 104) rather than a fragmented worldview based in the distinct tenets of academic disciplines.

4. Education as “a moral and political practice that... calls us to venture beyond ourselves and create the possibilities for social transformation” (Giroux 2006, 64).

John Cage as a Teacher

To discuss these principles in relationship to Cage’s teaching, it is necessary to identify the patterns and methods that characterize his pedagogical approach. Cage’s career as an educator spans fifty years and at least as many institutions and modalities. This study will focus on those educational engagements where Cage had the opportunity to work with students over an extended period of time, rather than the numerous single-day seminars and lectures through which he introduced his own work and the work of colleagues. The most prominent of these extended teaching engagements are his mentorship of the composer Christian Wolff, beginning in 1950, and his course in “Experimental Composition” at the New School for Social Research, which Cage offered many times between 1956 to 1961. A third example of Cage’s teaching can be drawn from his diary of the Emma Lake Music Workshop in 1965, cited at the beginning of this paper. While this event is less significant in the corpus of Cage’s teaching, it offers a well-documented account of Cage’s work within the context of a weeklong residency, a recurrent format in Cage’s later work as a teacher, as well as providing a third point in the chronology of Cage’s developing pedagogical practice.

Though these three examples are not comprehensive, these three vignettes: Christian Wolff’s description of private lessons with Cage, Allan Kaprow’s account of Cage’s Experimental Composition course at the New School for Social research, and Cage’s own diary of the Emma Lake Music Workshop, are sufficient to outline some essential methods and approaches that Cage employed.

Private Lessons, 1950

Christian Wolff was one of the few private students that Cage took on throughout his career (Wolff and Patterson 1994). They, of course, went on to become colleagues and key figures in the New York School, along with Morton Feldman, David Tudor, and

Earle Brown. In an interview with David Patterson, Wolff described his experience as a 16 year-old composition student.

Cage looked over Wolff's music and took him on as a student at no cost (a generosity that Schoenberg had extended to Cage when he was a student), assigning him three projects: 16th century species counterpoint exercises, the completion of an analysis of Webern's Symphony that Cage had already begun, and composition exercises in the use of Cage's "rhythmic structure" technique (60). One composition problem, for example, was to write a monophonic melody that outlined a specific formal structure and used only five notes. Wolff reports that they soon gave up the counterpoint exercises. He had been developing a variety of controlled systems in his compositions and he claims that,

After five or six weeks of bringing in these compositions, [Cage] said, "Well, the main point about doing things like counterpoint exercises is to teach you about the notion of discipline and organization; not to use the counterpoint necessarily, but just the principle of logical organization. You seem to be working that out for yourself in different ways, so why don't you just do that?" (60)

After giving up the counterpoint exercises and completing the Webern analysis, they met regularly and talk about Wolff's compositions. Wolff describes it as an informal engagement: "It was basically just an exchange; he would tell me about what he was doing, and we'd exchange information and be together" (60).

Wolff goes on to discuss the relationships that he, Cage, Feldman, and Brown maintained throughout their careers, describing the "New York School" as a "a mutual support group" and "interactive situation" (71) for negotiating the anxiety inherent in creating work that is unlike anything that already existed. In this context, Cage acted as both a colleague and a facilitator, organizing the concerts through which these composers gained their initial exposure.

Throughout the interview, Wolff exhibits some ambivalence about the influence that Cage's teaching had upon him. On the one hand, he claims that, "Cage is [a] composer who in some sense has no influence whatsoever in the strict sense of people writing music that is like John Cage's music. It just doesn't happen" (Wolff and

Patterson 1994, 73). At the same time, however, he points to two specific ways in which Cage's instruction shaped his own music, saying: "In my own development, the idea of exploring comes from Cage," (62) and, "one of the important things I really learned from him is this notion that he never regarded a piece as finished until it was performed" (71).

Christian Wolff articulated this ambivalence more pointedly at a symposium at Mills College on Cage's influence. He identified Cage's impact in terms of "negative influence" and facilitation, through which Cage allowed those in his orbit to be more fully themselves: i.e. to experiment, explore, and go beyond his own aesthetic endeavors, "opening . . . space for other people to do their own work and do it in the best possible way" (Bernstein and Hatch 2000, 177).

New School for Social Research, 1956

At this same symposium, Allan Kaprow gave an account of his experience as a student in Cage's Experimental Composition class at the New School for Social Research in New York City. He recounts that in a typical class, "student works were immediately performed by everyone, including Cage" (Bernstein and Hatch 2000, 169). In his own account, Cage (1970) confirms that "after the first two classes, generally, the sessions were given over to the performance and discussion of student works" (119).

Kaprow goes on to characterize Cage's teaching in terms of his earnest interest in new ideas and experiences, and his eagerness to suggest projects that might elicit unforeseen results. He notes:

On the pedagogical level Cage was very helpful . . . He introduced me to a kind of permissive teaching that I had not expected from a specialist in some kind of art. . . . To the best of my memory, Cage never assigned anything; . . . but he also suggested possible homework projects such as "prepare a two minute piece for barely audible sounds." It was like a playground. It was really marvelous; someone came up with some kind of plan and we all carried it out. (Bernstein and Hatch 2000, 171)

Just as Wolff had observed that the compositional exercises that Cage suggested were related to Cage's own compositional projects of the time, Kaprow notes that many of the pieces that the class worked on at that time were involved with Cage's interest in

apparent silence and the listener's sensitization to sound. In retrospect, it is also likely that Cage's shift toward theater³ in the late 50s and early 60s reflects, in part, his engagement with this class, with the regular amateur performances of brief concept pieces written and performed by students who would go on to form Fluxus.⁴

On the topic of Cage's influence Kaprow states: "I think the profoundest influence on me and, I suspect, on many, many others who have been touched by John Cage is that it doesn't matter if you make music, or art, of any kind. . . . John Cage the artist made it possible to give up art" (Bernstein and Hatch 2000, 173).

Emma Lake Music Workshop, 1965

In the article "Diary: Emma Lake Music Workshop 1965," cited at the beginning of this paper, Cage provides a daily account of his activities at a residency in Saskatchewan. He describes his curriculum as follows:

Plan: To meet as a group every day at four in the afternoon for discussion of my current concern: music without measurements, sound passing through circumstance. . . . *Each person is free to bring me his work, to discuss it with me privately. What else happens happens freely: going to get a pail of water at the pump, I pass by the lab; two of them are in there talking about Vivaldi.* (Cage 1967, 22)

In his first group session, he presented his own work, *Variations V* for which he had not yet created a score, but had a concept involving photoelectric devices that allow dance movements to trigger recorded sound. This topic reappeared in a lecture he presented on Young, Brown, and Kagel, and in the private instruction he offered a student interested in computer music:

(The geologist leaves tomorrow. Our talks involved him in computer music. He had written symphonic music which no orchestra ever played. Now he sees music as programming.) It seems a wild goose chase: examining the fact of musical composition in the light of *Variations V*, seeing composition as activity of a sound system, whether made up of electronic components or comparable components . . . in the mind of man. (Cage 1967, 22)

As the week continued, though, Cage's focus increasingly reflected ongoing discussions at the workshop. For example, in considering a student's work with canon and

permutation, Cage referred to Lawrence Alloway's lecture on systematic art from the previous night. In response to this students' interest in canon a later classroom discussion was about fugue, which Cage tied back to his interest in "sound passing through circumstance," by observing the lack of transition between sections.

Cage explored the environment, presented an educational display on mushrooms, organized a performance of student work and wrote about how this community has become "a family," arriving at a claim about education, art, and society:

What we learn isn't what we're taught nor what we study. We don't know we're learning. Something about society? If what happens here (Emma Lake) happened there (New York City), such things as rights and riots, unexplained oriental wars wouldn't arise. Something about art? That it's experience shared? (Cage 1967, 24)

Cage's Teaching as Critical Pedagogy

These three vignettes of Cage's teaching reveal a pattern:

First, Cage enters the engagement with a set of concerns that are relevant to his own work as a composer and solicits information regarding the artistic interests of his students. Both Allan Kaprow and Al Hansen, mention that Cage grilled them about *why* they had joined his Experimental Composition class (Hansen and Higgins 1970). And Cage reports that at the first class at Emma Lake: "We leave our music on tables there (each in the group has access to whom, as musicians, the others are.)" (Cage 1967, 22). These practices parallel the initial exploratory phase of Freire's literacy work.

From this point, Cage presents examples and ideas that are relevant to these concerns, both his own and the students', and suggests exercises to stimulate artistic experimentation around these concerns. Cage writes of the Experimental Composition class that, "The catalogue had promised a survey of contemporary music, but this was given only incidentally and in reference to the work of the students themselves or to my own work" (Cage 1970, 119). At Emma Lake, Cage devoted lecture and discussion to the issues that he was facing in the composition of *Variation V* and to the questions around fugue that were brought up by a student.

Wolff's experience is revealing in this regard. While Cage began with a set of fixed exercises that were not endogenic to Wolff's work,⁵ Cage quickly scrapped these assignments in order to support the innate rigor within Wolff's creative output. The type of rote assignment he initially assigned does not reappear in Cage's teaching in either of the later examples, but is replaced by the presentation of more open-ended questions and exercises.

Finally, these exercises and suggestions resulted in performed pieces, which stimulated further discussion and motivate additional concerns and experiments. It is worth noting that these exercises were open and that Cage would take them on alongside his students, presenting his own approaches as examples, but not authoritative solutions. Dick Higgins, another student in the Experimental Composition class at the New School writes: "Cage also showed how he had solved some problems himself, but told the class he would be quite angry if they copied any of these. Then, to reassure people, he said not to worry, he wasn't very frightening when he was angry" (Hansen and Higgins 1970, 122).

By tipping his hand in this way, Cage offered a way of understanding or framing the exercise, but simultaneously provided the "negative influence" that Wolff identifies when he says: "If Cage did something, I felt I didn't have to do it" (Bernstein and Hatch 2000, 176).

When viewed through the lens of Freire's theoretical framework, Cage's pedagogical method is a clear example of co-intentional education and problem-posing education. Cage's dialogic approach, while perhaps most obvious in the blurry line that Wolff describes between teacher and colleague, is also evident in Cage's willingness to put his own concerns on the table and to learn from his students' work throughout his teaching. Cage (1970) writes:

During the years I worked at the New School, I was helped by the absence of academic rigor there. There were no standards that I had to measure up to. No one criticized or suggested the alteration of my methods. I was as free as a teacher could be. I was thus able, when opportunity offered, to learn something myself from the students. (119)

It is worth noting, however, that Cage did not utilize this freedom, this “lack of academic rigor” to absent himself entirely from the role of teacher, to abdicate any responsibility to provide new information or frame concepts. Instead, he employed the concepts that were significant in his own work, for example, training the listener’s sensitization to sound, as an organizing framework’s influencing both the examples he presented and the exercises he introduced. Similarly, in his discussion of “the geologist’s” work at the Emma Lake Music Workshop, he aligns the student’s concerns with the organizing framework of interactive sound systems. Kincheloe (2004) points out that Freire similarly identifies a more directive role for the problem-posing educator within the dialogic relationship:

Understanding the student’s being and experiences opens up the possibility for the teacher to initiate dialogues designed to synthesize his or her systemized knowing with the minimally systematized knowing of the learner. Thus Freire argues that the teacher presents the student with knowledge that may change the learner’s identity. (74)

Regarding Cage’s readiness to organize students’ musical concerns within a specific understanding of musical ontology and experimentalism, Virgil Thomson goes so far as to say that “Cage became a kind of conscience imposed on this other artist requiring a strict approach . . . if you choose the next note by nonsubjective methods, then you are following what he would call the ways of nature, invention, and novelty” (Dickinson 2006, 117). While Thomson suggests that there are authoritarian overtones in this imposed rigor, Wolff’s account suggests that Cage’s emphasis on “organization and discipline” was focused on the development of the student’s own technique. Moreover, the related emphasis on experimentation and performance as a means of arriving at new knowledge highlights the importance of praxis in Cage’s teaching. In this light, rigorous non-subjective methods can be understood as a means of overcoming dominant aesthetic norms by actualizing theoretical concepts.

Freire’s idea of holistic engagement is at the center of Cage’s approach to music, and enters into his teaching in his inclusion of radically divergent interdisciplinary perspectives. From the beginning of Cage’s teaching career at the Cornish College of the Arts and Black Mountain College, he taught in intensely interdisciplinary contexts.⁶

Later, at Emma Lake and the New School, Cage taught mycology as well as music, acting on his assertion “that much can be learned about music by devoting oneself to the mushroom” (Cage 1961, 274). His lectures on music and art frequently included sharp juxtapositions between anecdotes on mycology, Zen philosophy, and Abstract Expressionist painters among other things, and he uses this interdisciplinary form to explicitly critique an academic approach to music that separates it from its contextual surroundings. In his “Lecture on Something,” Cage writes:

At the root of the desire to appreciate a piece of music, to call it this rather than that, to hear it without the unavoidable extraneous sounds—at the root of all this is the idea that this work is a thing separate from the rest of life, which is not the case. (Cage 1961, 136)

On these points, Freire’s critical pedagogy provides a clear framework for locating Cage’s pedagogical approach within a broader discourse in education. Despite the very different contexts in which these two men worked, Cage’s methodology provides a model of co-intentional, problem-posing, and holistic education as laid out by Freire’s theory. Some friction between Cage’s teaching and Freire’s critical pedagogy emerges, however, when we consider their opinions about the political agency of education and the consequent political responsibility of the educator.

In certain ways Cage’s attitudes on the politics of education are in line with Freire’s. In 1967, for example, Cage mentions the important role that students will play in changing the world (Cage 1967, 164) and in particular, he argues that social realities that appear fixed are in fact constructed ideas open to critique, saying that “there is a tendency when one ‘thinks’ about world society to ‘think’ that things are fixed, cannot change. This non-changeability is imaginary, invented by “thought” to simplify the process of “thinking” (156).

This clearly parallels Freire’s (1970) concept of *conscientização* and his claim that the oppressed “must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (49).

On the other hand, while Cage (1967) identifies the need for revolution, he aligns himself with the theories of Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan, claiming that “the change will take place ‘spiritually,’ Marshal McLuhan tells us, without our

conscious participation: the media we use are effecting the metamorphosis of our minds and bringing us to our senses” (164). The underlying assumption of Cage’s politics is therefore a conviction that the world is improving as the result of large-scale socio-technological trends and that the role of education is to sensitize our perception such that we can observe and embrace these inevitabilities. In a 1987 essay, Kaprow writes: “In Cage’s cosmology . . . the real world was perfect, if we could only hear it, see it, understand it. If we couldn’t, that was because our senses were closed and our minds were filled with preconceptions. Thus we made our own misery” (Kaprow 2011, 28).

In his discussion of Nam June Paik’s and Charlotte Moorman’s interpretation of Cage’s cello piece *26’1.1499*”, which exploited the indeterminacy of the score to insert explicit references to sexuality and current politics, Benjamin Piekut (2011) points to Cage’s discomfort with politically instrumental applications of experimental music:

Because Moorman’s and Paik’s theatricality was not only an explicitly corporeal but also an explicitly referential display, their split from Cage deepened. This performance of *26’ 1.1499*” was very much a product of its time, and in closing the gap between art and life it highlighted a notion of what counted as “life” that was at odds with Cage’s view. (164–5)

Cage’s resistance to such an interpretation of his work speaks to a rigid distinction between art and material sociopolitical concerns, which is in direct conflict with Freire’s understanding of art as a means to give language to these concerns.⁷

Thus, while Cage acknowledges the role of education in unveiling social reality and facilitating social transformation, his ideas about the nature of this reality stand in sharp contrast to Freire’s analysis of structural oppression and his call for educational approaches that are not merely forward-looking, but engaged in the active opposition to these oppressive dynamics. Cornelius Cardew’s (1974) pointed critique of Cage’s politics highlights this difference between Cage’s political premises and Freire’s: “Cage’s music presents the surface dynamism of modern society; he ignores the underlying tensions and contradictions that produce that surface” (36).

There are inherent tensions within Cage’s political position, between his desire to accept things as they are and his claim that “our proper work now if we love mankind and the world we live in is revolution” (Cage 1967, ix). And perhaps these tensions do

not need resolution. Wolff has said that “any system of thought will have radical contradictions in the language and nature of the system, and John’s is no exception. . . . The whole dynamic of Cage’s work and life and thinking is precisely because of such contradictions” (Wolff and Patterson 1994, 82). When pressed on the topic of his political convictions, Cage responded: “No, no, let’s not be logical. We’re living in this rational-irrational situation. . . . I can invite myself to do something frivolous. I can be grand at one moment and idiotic the next. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t” (Dickinson 2006, 195).

Conclusions

The aim of this study is not to critique Cage’s political position, however, but to abstract Cage’s educational strategies *from* this position and so that they might be applied to the explicitly emancipatory ends that Freire lays out. Cage’s efforts to free sound from syntax, and his related interests in silence and Zen, belong to a particular person and a moment in a particular music-historical discourse. His combination of inquiry, experimentalism, interdisciplinarity, and the forfeiture of authority, however, can be replicated in contemporary contexts and communities wherein these musical concerns are less relevant. Cage provided a model of critical arts pedagogy even as he held the liberatory politics of the 1960s at arms reach. By focusing on these patterns within Cage’s teaching it is possible to bring Cage’s revolutionary conception of music into dialogue with the contemporary experiential music education models and to better understand his role in the development of performance art pedagogy.⁸

As a model for emancipatory education Freirean critical pedagogy is not immune to critiques pertaining to its political efficacy: a question persists as to the extent to which Freire’s innovations have actually served to redress inequality in a material way. In his essay, “Paulo Freire and the Politics of Postcolonialism,” Henry A. Giroux (1993) argues that Freire’s work does not offer a methodological solution, “a recipe for all times and places,” (182) but that it models and makes visible a dynamic engagement with postcolonial complexities and contingencies: “what makes Freire’s work important is

that it does not stand still. It is not a text for but against cultural monumentalism, one that offers itself up to different readings, audiences, and contexts” (184).

In the reading provided here, Freire’s critical pedagogy is employed as a framework in analyzing Cage’s seemingly lax approach to the educational situation and identifying the following specific strategies that empower students to create knowledge through art:

- The identification of shared interests and concerns.
- The presentation of related examples, incorporating a variety of divergent fields.
- The suggestion of related exercises that allow both teacher and students to experiment.
- The performance of these ‘solutions’ and subsequent discussion yielding a refined or expanded set of shared interests and concerns.

This is not intended to suggest Cage’s classroom antics should be replicated and institutionalized, but to offer an understanding of John Cage’s innovative approach to arts education, in relationship to Freire’s explicitly political project, that educators and culture workers today might engage with seriously and critically. Just as Cage (1961) observed that he heard more accurately as he gave up his tastes in sound, this analysis allows us to separate Cage’s pedagogical practice from his personal tastes, his personality, his political philosophy, *his music*, and to take this practice into the areas of arts education where it is needed most, in Wolff’s words: “to do our own work and do it in the best possible way” (Bernstein and Hatch 2000, 117).

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Notes

¹ Cage began teaching at Mills College in 1938, more than thirty years before Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in English.

² Craig Dworkin identifies the “latent corporate critique” in *Silent Prayer* (1949, unrealized), Cage's precursor to his famous silent piece *4'33"*: “Cage's plan was to ‘compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be three or four and a half minutes in length — those being the standard lengths of ‘canned music’” (11).

³ In *Modern Music and After: Directions Since 1945* (1995), Paul Griffiths writes that by 1960 “theatre was not just a by-product of his music but a prompting force,” 98.

⁴ Dick Higgins, Jackson Mac Low, Al Hansen, Allison Knowles, and even George Maciunas

⁵ Wolff remarks that Schoenberg had assigned Cage similar counterpoint exercises when he was a student in Wolff and Patterson, *Cage and Beyond*, 59.

⁶ In his unpublished manuscript: “Sound lessons: selected narratives from the history of John Cage's educative encounters,” 2009, Jorge Lucero highlights the importance of interdisciplinarity in the Montessori-influenced philosophy of Cornish College of the Arts and the John Dewey-based philosophy of Black Mountain College.

⁷ As exhibited for example in his collaboration with Augusto Boal in the development of *Theater of the Oppressed*.

⁸ Charles Garoian, for example, explores the intersections of performance art and critical pedagogy in *Performing Pedagogy: Toward an Art of Politics*. 1999.

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