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**Zen Buddhism and Mid-Century American Art**

A Thesis Presented

by

**Liam Smith**

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Abstract of the Thesis

**Zen Buddhism and Mid-Century American Art**

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This thesis is an explanation of the influence of the theoretical thought of Zen Buddhism on American art in the 1950s and 1960s. Zen Buddhism came to the United States through the efforts of Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, a scholar on Buddhism, whose influence on artists and intellectuals of the 1950s led to an enormous amount of interest in the religion during that time. This influence led to a “Zen boom” and to a particular strain of Zen-inspired expression that the philosopher Alan Watts labeled “beat Zen.” Composer John Cage took Zen ideas and converted them directly into a meditation on the moment: “4’33””. Abstract painters such as Mark Tobey, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Rauschenberg painted emptiness as an expression of the elimination of boundaries. In the 1960s Happenings and Fluxus emphasized the importance of direct experience and Korean-born artist Nam June Paik broke through the limits of duality by both a minimalistic and maximalistic means. In the end their importance lay in the unabashed desire to experience the world without filter and show that directness through their art. Although the art world moved into different areas by the late 1960s, away from unmediated experience of the world, their emphasis on this issue was the grounding of much of their work and was an expression of that particular time in art and culture.

## Table of Contents

Preface: Was the ‘Zen Boom’ True Zen?.....	v
Part I: John Cage’s 4’33” and the Aesthetics of Emptiness .....	1
John Cage, D.T. Suzuki, and Zen.....	3
The World of Sound.....	10
Silence, Emptiness, Indeterminacy, and Chance.....	13
Abstract Painting and Emptiness.....	20
Part II: Zen and Art of the 1960s.....	31
Happenings and Fluxus: The Wonder of the Everyday.....	33
Nam June Paik: Transcending Dualities.....	38
Epilogue.....	55
Bibliography.....	59

## Preface: Was the 'Zen Boom' True Zen?

During the 1950s and 1960s, the United States experienced what has been referred to as the “Zen boom.”<sup>1</sup> This boom was defined by a fascination with the Buddhist school of Zen that influenced literature, music, and visual arts, as well as areas of social science such as psychoanalysis. In visual art and music, Zen had a particularly fascinating impact as the philosophical effects of Zen correlated both with artistic practice and with intellectual underpinnings of the time. We can therefore get a better understanding of the changes in the American avant-garde of the middle of the twentieth century through a greater understanding of this Zen influence. At the same time it will be necessary to delineate Zen as it is understood by its practitioners in order to understand this Zen framework more clearly and identify this particularly American form of Zen expression. Through this method I hope to achieve both a thorough understanding of Zen and its consequences in the making of American art during the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1958 Alan Watts published an essay he entitled, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*. The purpose of this essay was to illustrate the various elements of the Zen boom of the 1950s in an effort to define where it had gone astray from a traditional understanding of Zen. What Watts was reacting to when he talked about what he called “beat Zen” was a whole movement of artists and writers who were interested in Zen or aspects of Zen, often in a watered down form. The Beat movement of poets and writers, including among others Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Gary Snyder, was committed both to new ways of writing and new ways of living. As such, Eastern thought and especially Zen, with its emphasis on the moment and on spontaneous action was extremely appealing to some of them. Ginsberg had met Suzuki and read much on the subject of Eastern spirituality. The poet Gary Snyder became a serious practitioner of Zen and translator of Japanese Buddhist texts. Snyder was also an important influence on Jack Kerouac, who, after reading all about Buddhism, wrote haikus with a Zen flavor and a novel called *The Dharma Bums*, which was about his experience living the life of an American Zen hermit with Snyder. Despite the fact that these writers were extremely serious about their devotion to these ideas, the way some of them lived their lives and the content of their work seemed, to people like Watts, to miss the mark when it came to what Zen really was.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Watts argued, the music of John Cage, with his interest in eliminating himself from the role of a composer with an ego, was at best the result of a willy-nilly, anything-goes approach to Zen. Abstract artists of this time fell under Watts’ crosshairs as painting without an understanding of the discipline or the lack of whimsy necessary for a real expression of Zen.

Watts, although he was critical, understood the beat Zen impulse. The Eastern idea that the universe is unity, that it has in Watts’ words “a refreshing sense of

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<sup>1</sup> Fields, Rick. *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambala, 1986), 221.

<sup>2</sup> Gary Snyder went to Japan and studied Zen as a student. At one point Watts admitted that Snyder, since he became more serious about his training and understanding of Zen, could be considered in the category of square Zen.

wholeness,” and therefore that all ideas of duality or separation were constructions of the mind was something new and exciting to those who were so used to, and reacting against a worldview that was dependent on separation and boundaries.<sup>3</sup> This interest in wholeness, he explained, was attractive to “displaced Christians,” who are looking for something to replace this ethos from which they felt disconnected.<sup>4</sup> They also liked the down to earth quality of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, and his lack of divinity. Watts goes on to explain that the attraction to categories such as “beat” or “square” is really a choice between revolt and propping up of the status quo that has little to do with Zen. “For Zen is above all the liberation of the mind from conventional thought, and this is something utterly different from rebellion against convention, on the one hand, or adopting foreign conventions, on the other.”<sup>5</sup>

Watts then goes on to break down what a beatnik is. He explains how they are separate from other kinds of bohemians, or what he calls “hipsters.” “It is a younger generation’s nonparticipation in ‘the American Way of Life,’ a revolt which does not seek to change the existing order but simply turns away from it to find the significance of life in subjective experience rather than objective achievement.”<sup>6</sup> This rejection of the (particularly American) social order distinguishes beats and allows for beat Zen.

He then tries to explain how beat Zen is not Zen when it comes to being too self-aware of its own spirit, and too attached to an idea or concept of Zen as opposed to the experience of the real thing:

Beat Zen is a complex phenomenon. It ranges from a use of Zen for justifying sheer caprice in art, literature, and life, to a very forceful social criticism and “digging of the universe,” such as one may find in the poetry of Ginsberg and Snyder, and, rather unevenly in Kerouac. But, as I know it, it is always a shade too self-conscious, too subjective, and too strident to have the flavor of Zen. It is all very well for the philosopher, but when the poet (Ginsberg) says –

Live  
In the physical world  
Moment by moment  
  
I must write down  
Every recurring thought—  
Stop every beating second

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<sup>3</sup> Watts, Alan. “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen.” *Chicago Review* 12, no. 2 (1958): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Watts, *Beat Zen*, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Watts, *Beat Zen*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Watts, Alan. *This Is It, and Other Essays on Zen and Spiritual Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 91.

This is too indirect and didactic for Zen, which would rather have *the thing itself* without comment.

The sea darkens;  
The voices of the wild ducks  
Are faintly white.<sup>7</sup>

Watts explains that this “lawless” approach is very unsettling to those who he dubs “square Western Zennists.”<sup>8</sup> He traces square Zen to Western students who traveled to and studied in Japan and want to duplicate what they found there in their own countries. Still, as he explains, this is the wrong direction to go in because of the continued obsession with a certain experience, a “right” way that will lead to the desired result of enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> Although his vehement critique of both makes it seem otherwise, Watts did not really have a problem with either extreme, both of which, he claims, could lead to the goal of “satori” or awakening. He quotes William Blake, “the fool who persists in his folly will become wise,” stating that eventually the wrong path will still lead you in the right direction.<sup>10</sup> He then goes into an elaborate metaphor of the cat and the monkey about the two extremes of living and experiencing:

The cat—appropriately enough—follows the effortless way, since the mother cat carries her kittens. The monkey follows the hard way, since the baby monkey has to hang on to its mother’s hair. Thus for beat Zen there must be no effort, no discipline, no artificial striving to attain *satori* or to be anything but what one is. But for square Zen there can be no true *satori* without years of meditation-practice under the stern supervision of a qualified master.<sup>11</sup>

Buddhism tinged with “bohemian affectations,” is fine if that’s what you want, but it is not Zen. Neither presumably is a rigorous approach that becomes a single-minded obsession. Even though these are all valid points, he tempers his view with this silly addition:

If you really want to spend some years in a Japanese monastery, there is no earthly reason why you shouldn’t. Or if you want to spend your time hopping freight cars and digging Charlie Parker, it’s a free country.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Watts, *This Is It*, 92.

<sup>8</sup> Watts, *This Is It*, 108.

<sup>9</sup> Ironic, since the point of enlightenment is to eliminate suffering by eliminating desire.

<sup>10</sup> Watts, *This Is It*, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Watts, *This Is It*, 107.

<sup>12</sup> Watts, *This Is It*, 110.

At this point his argument falls apart as his equivocation between beat Zen and square Zen as both being equally viable in democracy negates the importance he stresses on real Zen, the “middle way.” His stressing of what real Zen is through words also may be in danger of missing the point of Zen as well as it is often argued Zen cannot be explained through conceptualization since it rejects words and ideas. Watts along with D.T Suzuki were disparaged by such figures as Zen priest Philip Kapleau, (who Watts would see as a square Zennist) as being too self-conscious of Zen and through trying to explain it conceptually:

Stimulating as the theoretical approach to Zen may be for the academic minded and the intellectually curious, for the earnest seeker aspiring to enlightenment it is worse than futile, it is downright hazardous. Those who have seriously attempted the practice of Zen after reading such books know not only how poorly such reading prepared them for zazen, but how in fact others hindered them by clogging their minds with splinters of koans and irrelevant fragments of philosophy, psychology, theology, and poetry which churn about in the brain, making it immeasurably difficult to quiet the mind and attain a state of Samadhi. Not without good reason have the Chinese and Japanese Zen masters warned the futility of the artificial, cerebral approach to the illuminating experience of genuine satori.<sup>13</sup>

However *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen* is still an important essay in so far as it defines what could be considered the different strains of Zen at this time.

Alexandra Munroe rebuts Watts’ thesis by explaining that these ‘beat’ artists were focused on the core of Zen Buddhism through its texts and practice and were creating art from the basis of an alternative to Western Judeo-Christian and philosophical background, as well as concentrating on Suzuki’s stressing of elimination of ego.<sup>14</sup> The importance of Zen for John Cage and these other artists, despite their deviations from what Watt's saw as the core of the religion, was that it was crucial to their work and to understanding it.<sup>15</sup> No matter what Watts might have said about what Zen really means, as a purist discipline and as the middle way between two extremes, for an understanding of the work of Cage and the other artists and writers he dubs ‘beat’, a recognition of

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<sup>13</sup> Zazen is defined as seated Zen meditation. Zazen literally means “sitting Zen” in Japanese. Koans are a method of teaching used by Zen masters, especially those in the Rinzai tradition. It consists of a teacher giving the student a riddle that cannot be solved using reason. It can only be discovered by expression in an unpremeditated fashion. Samadhi is complete and total awareness of the moment. Kapleau, Philip. *The Three Pillars of Zen* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1980), 96.

<sup>14</sup> Munroe, Alexandria, “Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Cage Zen, Beat Zen, and Zen.” In *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2009), ed., Munroe, Alexandra. 199-200.

<sup>15</sup> Munroe, “Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde,” *The Third Mind*, Munroe, ed., 200.

Zen's importance in that work is paramount. In this way we can get to a comprehension of the works in their larger cultural or philosophical context as well as a part of the general zeitgeist of much post-war American art.

The first section of this thesis focuses on the influence of Zen thought through a discussion of John Cage and his 'silent' piece, 4'33". Cage's stress on the Zen concept of 'emptiness' or 'void' in this work provides a way into understanding both the theoretical impact of Zen and to its manifestations in the visual arts of the time. Much of Cage's knowledge of Zen came from his teacher, Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, the man who helped make Zen popular during the 1950s in the West and in the United States in particular. By examining the interaction between Cage's art and the influence of Suzuki on his thinking, I will provide a context for approaching the visual work of Mark Tobey, Ad Reinhardt, and Robert Rauschenberg and their focus on an art of meditative emptiness influenced, in whole or in part, by Zen ideas.

In the second part of this thesis I will explain how Cage's Zen-derived appreciation of everyday life influenced the art of the 1960's, including the "Happenings" of Allan Kaprow. There will be a focus on "Events" and "Fluxkits" of artists in the Fluxus movement. I will also describe how several other Fluxus artists were concerned with similar themes, particularly with the importance of direct sensory experience. My consideration of Nam June Paik's work will emphasize the ways in which he translates this direct experience into a reflection of the Zen concept of transcendence of dualities as well as the sometimes violent nature of his performance practice, which reflects similar moments in Zen literature when violence is used to break down barriers between self and other. Through this investigation of a brief moment in contemporary art production, I hope to offer an understanding of the important theoretical influence of Zen Buddhism on artists of the 1950s and 1960s, often overlooked, marginalized, or misunderstood by scholars.

## Part I: John Cage's 4'33" and the Aesthetics of Emptiness

"Life goes on very well without me, and that will explain to you my silent piece, 4'33".<sup>16</sup> – John Cage

On August 29, 1952 John Cage premiered 4'33", one of the most controversial classical pieces ever written, at the Maverick Convert Hall in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. The piece consisted of composer David Tudor sitting at a piano while not making any unnecessary noise. He closed its lid, while watching a stopwatch count down. At the end of each 'movement' he put up the lid and then lowered it while turning the pages of an empty score. When the piece concluded, after four minutes and thirty-three seconds of performance time, Tudor got up to a round of applause. The event was attended both by those in the traditional music world as well as those interested in the most advanced music of the time.<sup>17</sup>

Referring to the first performance of the piece, Cage described the scene:

What they thought was silence because they didn't know how to listen, was full of accidental sounds. You could hear the wind stirring outside during the first movement. During the second, raindrops began pattering the roof, and during the third the people themselves made all kinds of interesting sounds as they talked or walked out."<sup>18</sup>

John Cage's importance is not to be underestimated. His presence was deeply felt during this era, as he was responsible for a whole new way of composing, performing, and talking about music. According to Morton Feldman:

Just to change one little thing in music was a lifework. But John changed everything. We got out of that straightjacket, and it made everything much more simple in one way and a lot harder in other ways. What we learned was that there are no catastrophes.<sup>19</sup>

Calvin Tompkins cited two events that initiated the upsurge of the classical avant-garde: Schoenberg's movement towards atonality and the invention of magnetic tape

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<sup>16</sup> Cage, John. "Letter to Paul Henry Lang." In *John Cage: An Anthology*. Kostelanetz, Richard, ed., (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 117-188.

<sup>17</sup> The time in between movements is not included in the performance time of 4'33".

<sup>18</sup> Kostelanetz, Richard. *Conversing with Cage*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 65-66.

<sup>19</sup> Tompkins, Calvin. "Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape. *The New Yorker*", November 28, 1964. 99.

technology which allowed for electronic music to take hold as a medium. These two elements together made Cage's work possible.<sup>20</sup> It can also be argued that without the introduction of Zen philosophical thought Cage's music would lack its intellectual edge and would have merely been seen (as it often has been) as Dadaist or anarchistic antics. Books and articles come out on a regular basis, which talk about Cage as an anarchist and often de-emphasize the Zen influence. In his article in remembrance of John Cage, music critic and longtime Cage confidant Richard Kostelanetz wrote an essay entitled *The Anarchist Art of John Cage*. In it he explains that while it is often argued that Cage had many influences they all stemmed from one main source: Anarchism:

I began to recognize Cage as someone who came of age in the 1930s, when ideas about social betterment through art were more plentiful. To me, Cage was essentially a thirties lefty, who was more interesting than others who came out of that period because he made some original perceptions not only about art but especially about the place of politics in art, and then the possible role of art for politics, all the while remaining true to the sentiment of that time. In my sense of Cage, Zen and chance and everything else came afterwards; they are merely icing on this essentially anarchist cake.<sup>21</sup>

In a way this is correct as far as it explains an interest in moving not against any particular politics, but away from all politics whatsoever and towards something else, in Cage's case towards Eastern spirituality and its denial of categorical limitations. His political sentiment, if it existed at all, was therefore an apolitical as opposed to anti-political stance, one that was removed from the realm of politics completely as opposed to being in opposition to government or systems. Tracing the chronology back to the 1930s where Kostelanetz claims his politics was spawned. We can also see how he came into contact with Zen and Eastern thinking, first incidentally and then more deliberately as the years progressed. All in all Cage was interested in a holistic approach to composition, which combined the most advanced ideas and techniques in music with a deep interest in seeing experience through a Zen lens. It is therefore important, in my view, to delineate that influence and see how it impacted his musical work.

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<sup>20</sup> Tompkins, "Profiles: Imaginary Landscape", 64.

<sup>21</sup> This essay is included in a volume of Kostelanetz's writings called *Toward Secession: 156 More Political Essays From a Fairly Orthodox Libertarian Anarchist*. This alone makes me suspicious of his attributing so much politics to Cage. Kostelanetz, John. "The Anarchist Art of John Cage." <http://www.sterneck.net/john-cage/kostelanetz/index.php>, accessed March 31, 2011.

## John Cage, D.T. Suzuki, and Zen

A student of Cage's at Black Mountain College, Francine du Plessix, recorded one of Cage's concise and coherent explanations of Zen:

In Zen Buddhism nothing is either good or bad. Or ugly or beautiful. The actions of man in nature are undifferentiated and unhierarchical complex of events, which hold equal indifference to the ultimate factor of oneness. No value judgements are possible because nothing is better than anything else. Art should not be different than life but an act within life. Like all of life, with its accidents and chances and variety and disorder and only momentary beauties. Only different from life in the sense: that in life appreciation is passive like listening to a sound complex of bird, waterfall and engine, whereas in art it must be a voluntary act on the part of the creator and the listener.<sup>22</sup>

Cage was devoted to Zen as inspiration and frequently wrote and lectured about it during this period. He claims that he had come to Zen because he needed it. As he began to move into middle age he felt he lacked connection with the outside world and that Zen gave him what he felt he was searching for.<sup>23</sup>

*Transformation of Nature in Art* by Ananda Coomarswamy is often credited as one of the origins of Cage's interest in Eastern thought. According to Coomarswamy, "Art is the imitation of nature in its method of operation."<sup>24</sup> This would be crucial to Cage's understanding of art and started him in a direction towards 4'33" as he began to create music that was not just an imitation of nature, but nature itself.<sup>25</sup> He first came into contact with Zen specifically during the 1930s, in a lecture by Nancy Wilson Ross, a novelist who had a fascination with and lectured greatly on Eastern philosophy and religion. The lecture Cage attended was on Zen and Dadaism, and although it did not influence him to read about the religion, it at least sparked his interest.<sup>26</sup> When he finally

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<sup>22</sup> Duberman, Martin. *Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community*. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc.), 1972. 349.

<sup>23</sup> This is also around the same time his marriage was falling apart and he had decided to accept and explore his own homosexuality. Westgeest, Helen. *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art Between East and West* (Zwolle, NE: Wanders Publishers, 1997), 55.

<sup>24</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 100.

<sup>25</sup> 'Nature' here is defined rather loosely. Despite the fact that the situation Cage is presenting is in no way 'natural' as he is creating a constructed experience within a man-made environment, the end result is an experience of nature in a broad sense, an unfiltered reception of sound waves, without that sound being planned or manipulated in anyway.

<sup>26</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 167.

did begin learning about the subject it became one of the most powerful forces in his life and work. Cage came to see Zen as a way to eliminate ego-based choice from composition as well as a means of allowing the world in, in order to express itself through sound.<sup>27</sup> He was not primarily interested in Zen as a religion, but instead adapted aspects of its practice to his creative work.

As Cage said: “Since the forties and through my study with D.T. Suzuki of the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, I’ve thought of music as a means of changing the mind . . . an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let sounds be themselves.”<sup>28</sup> Cage began attending D.T. Suzuki’s lectures as an alternative to psychoanalysis, and found that Suzuki’s Zen teachings suited him much better. He told the story of one of his classes with Suzuki at Columbia University. During a day of listening to Suzuki speak, planes were flying overhead to and from one of the local airports and since they had opened the windows, they drowned out the sound of Suzuki’s speaking. Nonetheless he would not raise his voice. Cage purpose in recounting this story was to illustrate Suzuki’s acceptance of the moment. It shows that Suzuki was steadfast when it came to living in a Zen manner as well as an illustration of what he studied and taught. Cage devoted himself to Suzuki, like a Zen student to his master, in a similar way to how he had when he was a student of Schoenberg in the mid-thirties at the UCLA and USC. During his time there, he reacted against the contemporary convention of twelve-tone composition.<sup>29</sup> Schoenberg had told him that his inability to work with harmony would make composition extremely difficult. Cage’s reaction was to respond that he would then continue to struggle against the problem of standard musical convention for the rest of his career. This is an oft-quoted story and what is notable about it, is that he did exactly that. It also has an interesting parallel to the relationship between Zen master and student where the student becomes frustrated by the question of the master until he realizes there is no answer.

As early as 1906 Suzuki had been writing about Zen and translating classic Buddhist texts in collections such as *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*. By 1951 he was so well respected that he was being supported by several American universities, including his famous stint at Columbia University, and was living on the upper west side with a Japanese family, the Okamuras. He would continue to have an impact on the intellectual scene well into the 1960s. Although many factors contributed to this sudden spark in Zen’s popularity, Suzuki’s influence must be recognized, as he seems to have touched so many elements of American high culture in some way, especially during his

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<sup>27</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 168.

<sup>28</sup> Kostelanetz, Richard. *Conversing with Cage*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 44.

<sup>29</sup> Park, Young M. “Fluxus Art: Its Use of Zen Philosophy as an Ahistorical Strategy.” (MA Thesis, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1996). 10.

time at Columbia. His sway was almost unparalleled during his lifetime.<sup>30</sup> Larry A. Fader lists those who he influenced, among others:

Thinkers of the stature of Martin Heidegger, James Bisset Pratt and Arnold Toynbee; writers and artists like Jackson Pollock, Herbert Read, Rudolf Ray, J.D. Salinger, Merce Cunningham, Jackson MacLow or Dizzy Gillespie; philosophers of religion such as John Cobb, Richard DeMartino or Hutson Smith. They include many people who were influenced ephemerally, indirectly, or as a part of the larger movement of Western culture in general. In one way or other, Suzuki touched them all.<sup>31</sup>

During the 1950s, many famous and important figures in the worlds of art, music, literature, as well as psychoanalysis, attended his lectures in Philosophy Hall. Winthrop Sargent in his 1957 *New Yorker* profile of Suzuki, set up a physical picture of the man in his classroom:

a small, wiry, and very aged Japanese man name Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki regularly unwraps a shawlfull of books in various ancient Oriental languages and, as he lovingly fingers and rubs them, delivers a lecture in an all but inaudible voice to a rapt and unusual-looking group of graduate students.<sup>32</sup>

Many have remarked on Suzuki's appearance and mannerisms, especially about his large horn-shaped eyebrows and the softness of his speaking. Despite this, as Winthrop explains, Suzuki's power to persuade lay in a particularly Zen affability that made people who came in contact with him immediately noticed:

Even the most skeptical visitor, when under the spell of Dr. Suzuki's soft-spoken, earnest, but humorous words, is apt to find himself believing – for the moment, at least – that zero is in fact equal to infinity, that the timeless and eternal instant of perception is all there is to the real world, and that 'emptiness' is the thing.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Alan Watts claims that European developments such as existentialism, semantics and psychotherapy, a rejection of absolutist Western traditions such as Christianity and belief in God as creator as well as the attraction of "a conceptual, experiential philosophy in the climate of scientific relativism," were all factors in the West's interest in Zen. Watts, *Beat Zen*, 5-6.

<sup>31</sup> Fader, Larry A. "D.T. Suzuki's Contribution to the West." In *A Zen Life: D.T. Suzuki Remembered*, Ed., Abe, Mazao. (Boston: Weatherhill Publishers, 1986), 108.

<sup>32</sup> Winthrop, Sargent. "Profiles: Great Simplicity: Dr. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki." *The New Yorker*, August 31, 1957, 34.

<sup>33</sup> Winthrop, "Profiles: Great Simplicity," 34.

People as diverse as Cage, poets and writers like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, Zen priest Philip Kapleau, and psychoanalyst Erich Fromm attended the course and learned about Zen from one of its foremost contemporary experts.<sup>34</sup> Part of what attracted so many figures from the Western cultural and intellectual scene was that Suzuki was convinced that he could teach the tenets of Zen to anyone, and that it could be done through language. This is quite an impressive feat, as for centuries it has been argued that Zen cannot be explained rationally, that it has contradiction in its very nature, and that the only way to understand it is to live it and experience it. Despite this, Suzuki devoted the majority of his life to explaining Zen to Westerners.

His main goal, as recounted many times by scholars and by those who knew him, was the universalizing one of creating an intellectual conversation between West and East through Zen. Edward Conze claimed that Suzuki put Zen “on the map, and for long he was the only source of what we in the West believe we know about Zen.”<sup>35</sup> As Torataro Shimomura explained:

That we feel a freshness from and sympathize with D.T. Suzuki’s narrative is because there they really are no longer Buddhist terms but become, so to speak, an international language. That we now can sympathize with his words and thoughts is because he expressed them as an international language.<sup>36</sup>

Religious studies scholar, Masao Abe explained this unity between East and West that Suzuki was wishing to find in his investigation of Zen. “His awareness of himself as an Asian was due to him having found, within Asian tradition, this ‘Root-Awakening,’ which is not ultimately something confined to East or West.”<sup>37</sup> Shimomura wrote how in Eastern thought there exists “something beyond verbal expression, denying conceptual understanding; moreover, this is precisely the case with its most crucial essence.”<sup>38</sup> He also explained how this was connected to Suzuki’s interest in Satori, or the awakening to true reality, which is the “goal” of Zen practice:

those who have been involved with him personally or with his writings—positively or negatively—must come to appreciate

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<sup>34</sup> Fader explains how Fromm’s interest in Zen differed from Carl Jung’s. Fromm’s point of view was much closer to Suzuki’s as he had come into contact with Zen through Suzuki’s writings and attended his classes. Fromm explained that his main understanding of Zen came not only from what Suzuki had said or written, “but by his being.” Fader, “D.T. Suzuki’s Contribution,” in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, Masao. 102.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Conze quoted in Fader, “D.T. Suzuki’s Contribution,” in *A Zen Life*, Abe. 100.

<sup>36</sup> Shimomura, Torataro. “D.T. Suzuki’s Place in the History of Human Thought.” In *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Abe, Masao. “The Influence of D.T Suzuki,” in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 115.

<sup>38</sup> Shimomura, “D.T. Suzuki’s Place,” in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 65.

that what motivated D. T. Suzuki was the spirit of the vow to attain, together with one's self and all others, "Awakening"—and thereby opening up a new spiritual vista in which Easterner and Westerner can work hand in hand to fulfill humanity. It is important for us, to share that spirit of "vow" and try to materialize it in our own way.<sup>39</sup>

The difference Shimomura cites between the West and the East is that in Western thought religion is a matter of faith and therefore moves beyond intellect, that is it is still based on rational understandings which it then transcends whereas in the East transcendence takes the form of sensory awareness and is therefore a unique type of intellect, which is apart from rational thought.<sup>40</sup> Suzuki, therefore, had the goal of opening up Zen to a worldwide audience, and by comparing it to other philosophical and religious traditions and concepts, he hoped that those from the West could more easily understand it.

Suzuki did not claim himself to be a Zen philosopher, nor did he wish to philosophize Zen. At the same time he was well acquainted with the Zen philosophers of the Kyoto school, including Kitaro Nishida and Hajime Tanabe.<sup>41</sup> However, as Shimomura states, Nishida and Tanabe, influenced by Western philosophical practice tried to analyze Zen logically, whereas "D.T. Suzuki's efforts were directed toward Zen *mind*," that is a concentration of the moment through personal awareness, experiencing as opposed to thinking and verbalizing thought.<sup>42</sup> However Shimomura considers all three to be practicing a form of Japanese philosophy.<sup>43</sup> Abe said that there were in fact several Suzukis in the Western mind. The first was a "Buddhist missionary, or Zen evangelist, working to spread Buddhism in the Western world."<sup>44</sup> Those who had this view either saw him positively or negatively in conjunction with their Western-oriented Christian traditions. East-Asian scholars, on the other hand, recognized his importance as an educator of Zen yet often rejected him in part or in whole because of his "subjective", and what Abe calls "unscholarly," stance on the religion. Then there was a third group that believed his concentration on 'satori' or awakening was misguided and that he should have focused more on zazen.

Despite Abe's claims to the contrary, Suzuki had always been interested in studying Zen from the realm of logic. His methodology was therefore more traditionally

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<sup>39</sup> Abe, "Influence of D.T. Suzuki," in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 116-117.

<sup>40</sup> Shimomura, "D.T. Suzuki's Place," in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 66.

<sup>41</sup> Shimomura cites Nishida as "the first Japanese person that could be said to have had his own philosophy." Shimomura, "D.T. Suzuki's Place," in "A Zen Life," Abe, 75.

<sup>42</sup> Shimomura, "D.T. Suzuki's Place," in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 78.

<sup>43</sup> Shimomura, "D.T. Suzuki's Place," in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 79.

<sup>44</sup> Abe, Masuo, "The Influence of Suzuki in the West" in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 113.

Western than Eastern in style and scope.<sup>45</sup> Some did not trust Suzuki's assertion that Zen could be explained. Writer Arthur Koestler wrote *The Lotus and the Robot* in 1960 claiming that the vagueness of Suzuki's philosophy was "at best an existential hoax, at worst a web of solemn absurdities."<sup>46</sup> It may be seen as ironic, and has often been noted, that Zen, being a religion, which wishes to strip away the symbolic nature of language from experience, has had quite so much literature written about it.<sup>47</sup> Suzuki himself recognized this contradiction, referring to it almost as sin. "The Zen master, generally speaking, despises those who indulge in word- or idea-mongering, and in this respect Hu Shi and myself are great sinners, murderers of Buddhas and patriarchs; we are both destined for hell."<sup>48</sup>

Through Cage's interaction with Suzuki he began to formulate a new way of constructing music based on the Zen idea of meditation on experience. Through his contact with Zen, he saw a way to open up his compositions to all new possibilities, an externalized version of what Zen was able to do within his mind. Zen was not Cage's sole jumping off point. As Kyle Gann puts it, Cage's interest in Zen awaking did not lead in a straight line to 4'33" as an end result. "Cage's experience of Zen consciousness did not necessarily have to result in the gesture of 4'33". As R.H. Blyth's innumerable poetic examples make clear, the spontaneity, the unconscious selflessness of great art is also of Zen."<sup>49</sup>

Cage was not interested in the specific rituals practiced in traditional Zen, but in how Zen could aid him in his creative process. In this way his more thought-based understanding of Zen correlated very directly with Suzuki's teachings. At the same time, Cage saw himself as going about Zen in a traditional fashion, aligned with the concept of direct transmission of Zen awakening from teacher to student. This, as Munroe mentions, is similar to the relationship he wanted to create between the composer and the listener, with the composer as teacher relating true, unfiltered reality to the audience as student.<sup>50</sup> It has often been argued that Cage was a creator before anything else, and that Zen, while a powerful force, was only one of many. On the other hand, Cage lived his life in such a way that people could not avoid his spiritual outlook. He, like Suzuki, began to live Zen as much as he talked about it.

Musicologist Peter Yates explains that Cage arrived in a room:

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<sup>45</sup> Winthrop, "Profiles: Great Simplicity," 36.

<sup>46</sup> Fader, Larry A., "D.T. Suzuki's Contribution," In *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 100.

<sup>47</sup> Shimomura, "D.T. Suzuki's Place," In *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 77.

<sup>48</sup> Suzuki, Daisetz T. "Zen: A Reply to Hu Shih." *Philosophy East and West* 3, no. 1 (1953): 30.

<sup>49</sup> Blythe was an English writer and poet and expert on Zen and Japanese culture. Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 54.

<sup>50</sup> Munroe, "Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde," in *The Third Mind*, ed., Munroe, Alexandra. 201.

like a bodhisattva, floating. After he had studied Japanese Zen philosophy and learned by it to master himself, he became, as he remained, the man of great smile, the outgoing laugh, willing to explain but not, in my recent experience, to argue, tolerant of misconception, self-forgetful, and considerate. Around him everyone laughs.<sup>51</sup>

Jasper Johns saw Cage as a kind of guru figure saying, “I saw John as a sort of teacher/preacher/soldier.”<sup>52</sup> Cage explained that Zen was one of the most powerful elements in his life as it was in his work. In an introduction to his most famous collection of writings and talks, *Silence*, he explains exactly what kind of impact it had. He also addressed Alan Watts’ critiques of him as a practitioner of beat Zen:

What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki, reading of the literature) I doubt whether I would have done what I have done. I am told that Alan Watts has questioned the relation between my work and Zen. I mention this in order to free Zen of any responsibility for my actions. I shall continue making them, however.<sup>53</sup>

His excusing of Zen from a place of blame for his actions is consciously ironic in some ways. Since Zen works through an acceptance of reality as it is, his negation of Zen from a place of control is just another way of expressing Zen. He accepts that Zen does not control his actions and in so doing expresses Zen directly. The confusion between what Zen is and how it is labeled is a Western misunderstanding. The difference between East and West for Cage was that in the Western view things are seen as separate and everything is understood as a relation between cause and effect, whereas in the East reality is considered to be interconnected and thus a collection of many facets, and infinite causes and effects are said to exist between these different aspects. This latter understanding forms a major basis for Zen.

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<sup>51</sup> A “bodhisattva” is a Buddhist saint who returns from the state of Nirvana in order to save humanity.

<sup>52</sup> Munroe, “Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde,” in *The Third Mind*, ed., Munroe, 201.

<sup>53</sup> Cage, John. *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writing by John Cage*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), xi.

## The World of Sound

According to Calvin Tompkins, *4'33"* was greeted in its original form much as it has been regarded since, as either a joke or insult.<sup>54</sup> The work was so controversial that Cage actually lost friends because of it. "They didn't laugh- they were irritated when they realized nothing was going to happen, and they haven't forgotten it 30 years later: they're still angry."<sup>55</sup> Robert Motherwell claimed that Cage's avant-garde pieces were merely an attempt to spit in the faces of listeners. "It's a kind of compulsion, this pushing an absurd premise to its logical conclusion. He's just not in the real world anymore."<sup>56</sup> Sculptor Richard Lippold accused Cage of getting rid of his great intellect through his elimination of control.<sup>57</sup>

Critics' reactions to the piece were very harsh on the whole. For instance, reviews in the *New York Times* and *New York Post* were both extremely negative.<sup>58</sup> Despite these reactions to the piece, Cage saw the premier performance as a success as listeners were able to directly experience the natural world unfiltered by egocentric choice making. Cage's conviction, according to Tompkins, was that traditional Western beliefs about music and composition were a thing of the past and that composers must now embrace Eastern ones, particularly Zen, which meant that old convictions such as the selective choice of the composer would disappear in favor of chance and indeterminacy, expressions of natural law. It was through Zen's focus on the elimination of "wishes and desires" that music would be able to move into a new and radical direction. "Purposelessness," that is an experiencing of life without symbolic meaning, was where Cage now wished to focus his life and music.<sup>59</sup>

Cage spoke of *4'33"* as being the work that was most important to him, the one he returned to again and again.<sup>60</sup> In *4'33"* Cage decided to open the audience up to all of experience, to all sound that could be heard. He became interested in what he called acoustical "transparency," allowing sounds from outside the world to penetrate into the work itself.<sup>61</sup> "I would like to think that the sounds people hear in a concert," he said,

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<sup>54</sup> Tompkins, Calvin. *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*. *The New Yorker*, November 28, 1964. 106.

<sup>55</sup> Kostelanetz, Richard. *Conversing with Cage*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 65.

<sup>56</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Gann, *No Such Thing As Silence*, 192.

<sup>59</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 66-67.

<sup>60</sup> Gann, *No Such Things As Silence*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph, Branden. *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 49.

“could make them more aware of the sounds they hear in the street, or out in the country, or anywhere they may be.”<sup>62</sup> In addition he claimed that outside sounds were not harmful. “A cough or a baby crying will not ruin a good piece of modern music.”<sup>63</sup> He talked about how Zen practitioners delight in all kinds of sounds, even those that anyone else might find excruciating:

I was at a house on Riverside Drive where people were invited to be present at a Zen service conducted by a Zen Roshi.<sup>64</sup> He did the ritual, rose petals and all. Afterwards tea was served with rice cookies. And then the hostess and her husband, employing an out-of-tune piano and a cracked voice, gave a wretched performance of an excerpt from a third-rate Italian opera. I was embarrassed and glanced toward the Roshi to see how he was taking it. The expression on his face was absolutely beatific.<sup>65</sup>

When one taps into the moment and truly listens, one hears the sounds that normally go unnoticed. Cage allows us to hear these sounds as music for the first time, as we listened to them with aesthetic enjoyment. Gann claims that the work was a form of “*framing*, of enclosing environmental and unintended sounds in a moment of attention in order to open the mind to the fact that all sounds are music.”<sup>66</sup> Jacquelyn Baas explained that Cage was interested in moving the audience of *4'33*” towards an experience of enlightenment by presenting them unaltered base experience.<sup>67</sup> Cage's interest was in an unmediated experience that united the self, or the illusion of a sense of self, with the world, as it exists, without subjective intervention. The use of everyday sounds was a way of letting the listener experience existence without a filter.<sup>68</sup> He wanted us as the audience to be in the act of “waking up to the very life we are living.”<sup>69</sup>

Another way of understanding this would be to see Cage as interested in spanning the gap between art and life, a gap that Allan Kaprow claimed he himself totally eliminated in his “Happenings.” Cage once said that his goal was “to stop all the thinking

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<sup>62</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 88.

<sup>63</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 49.

<sup>64</sup> Roshi is an honorific title given to Zen masters.

<sup>65</sup> Cage, John. *Silence*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 6.

<sup>66</sup> Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 11.

<sup>67</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 170.

<sup>68</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 77-78.

<sup>69</sup> Cage was also interested in Haiku, which was another Zen-oriented expression of immediate experience. The concept of *Haiku* was a way for Cage to express his interest in the moment. In 1952, the same year R.H. Blythe published his translation of *Haiku*, Cage created a piece by the same name. Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 57.

that separates music from living.”<sup>70</sup> In a performance such as *4'33"* therefore, the work rests somewhere between the anarchic direct experience of living and the ordered system of musical performance. It uses the strict construction of performance in order to ultimately liberate it. This use of strict discipline in order to allow for naturalness to come through is also a very direct Zen phenomenon. Alan Watts has discussed how when Buddhist monks train they are forced into an extreme form of disciplined action in order to ultimately free them from the enslavement of the ego and to allow them to live life in as natural a way as possible:

Although Zen people do have a very exacting and demanding discipline, the function of this discipline is rather curious: it is to enable them to be comfortable. It is to enable them, for example, to be able to sleep on a concrete sidewalk on a cold, wet night and enjoy it. It is to enable them to be able to relax completely under any situation of hardship. Ordinarily, if you sit out in the cold you will start shivering. This is because you will be resisting the cold, tightening your muscles against it. But Zen discipline teaches you something else, to take it easy, go with the cold, relax.<sup>71</sup>

In a very similar way *4'33"* teaches you, by forcing you to listen to the sound of the world as it really happens, to relax and experience the world directly. Without this important meditative element, *4'33"* will be difficult and boring. If one does the work to tune into the sounds and does not allow the ego to get in the way, then Cage's goal of getting us to really enjoy sound for what it is will succeed.

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<sup>70</sup> Munroe, "Buddhism and the Neo-Avant-Garde," in *The Third Mind*, ed., Munroe, 201.

<sup>71</sup> Watts, Alan. *Buddhism: The Religion of No Religion*. (Rutland: Tuttle Publishing, 1999), 53.

## Silence, Emptiness, Indeterminacy, and Chance

The work has often been thus misunderstood to be about silence. Cage, on the other hand, was convinced that silence was an illusion. This is because he believed that sound and silence do not exist in distinct entities but are intrinsically linked.<sup>72</sup> In other words they should no longer be viewed dualistically, but as two aspects of a single entity. “There is no such thing as an empty space or empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear.”<sup>73</sup> He went so far as to say that the two needed each other to exist at all. “What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking.”<sup>74</sup> He even claimed that sounds are all that exist, “those that are notated and those that are not.”<sup>75</sup>

As Douglas Kahn explained, in the Western musical tradition it is already the norm for the place of performance to be silent, a regulation of how people listen to music.<sup>76</sup> It could therefore be argued that Cage’s success is in both forcing the viewer to listen, while at the same time freeing them up to do so. This equates with Zen’s focus on rigorous discipline, which ultimately allows a deeper experience of reality. According to Kahn, silence in Cage is “dependent on silencing.”<sup>77</sup> Allowing silence to penetrate the space also allows both silence and sound to coexist.<sup>78</sup>

The date of 4’33’’’s composition has been moved by some historians from 1952 to 1948. In that year Cage presented a lecture, *A Composer’s Confessions*, at Vassar College, in which he explained that his new goals were:

To compose a piece of uninterrupted silence and sell it to Muzak Co. It will be 3 or 4-½ minutes long—those being the standard lengths of “canned” music and its title will be *Silent Prayer*. It will open with a single idea which I will attempt to make as seductive as the color and shape and fragrance of a flower. The ending will approach imperceptibility.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 46.

<sup>73</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 8.

<sup>74</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 9.

<sup>75</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 7.

<sup>76</sup> Kahn, Douglas. *Noise, Water, Meat: a History of Sound in the Arts*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>77</sup> Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 19.

<sup>78</sup> Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 45.

Branden Joseph explained that *Silent Prayer* would allow silence to exist in its pure form, therefore negating its natural state as absence and allowing it into equal partnership with sound as presence. Cage would soon come to the conclusion that silence was illusory in an oft-quoted section of his book *A Year from Monday*, on his trip to the anechoic chamber in Harvard University:

It was after I got to Boston that I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University. Anybody who knows me knows this story. I am constantly telling it. Anyway, in that silent room, I heard two sounds, one high and one low. Afterward I asked the engineer in charge why, if the room was so silent, I had heard two sounds. He said, "Describe them." I did. He said, "The high one was your nervous system in operation. The low one was your blood in circulation."<sup>80</sup>

Cage considered this proof of his ideas about silence and sound. "Silence," so called, was to Cage, as important in music as the sounds generated through musical notes. His experience in the anechoic chamber convinced him that the only place silence could exist was in a vacuum. It was therefore a fallacy in ordinary experience. Because of this "absolute" silence was never used by Cage in any of his compositions.<sup>81</sup>

"Emptiness," he explained, as separate from substance could not exist because the two could not be separated. "Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments."<sup>82</sup>

Kyle Gann argues that the effect of *4'33"* is really to confuse the difference between "art" and "non-art" through revealing the difference as an act of perception.<sup>83</sup> Perception of reality is the root of Zen practice, because it is through direct experience of the real that one attains understanding of it as separate from logical understanding. This is often spoken about as an emptying of the mind, experienced through meditation on the moment, apart from language as a filter, in order to bring one into congruence with the flow of reality. Cage spoke on this when he explained what he hoped the reception of *4'33"* should be:

What we hear is determined by our own emptiness, our own receptivity; we receive to the extent we are empty to do so. . . .  
This is an action among the ten thousand: it moves in all

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<sup>80</sup> Cage, John. *A Year from Monday: New Lectures and Writing by John Cage*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 134.

<sup>81</sup> Gann, *No Such This As Silence*, vix.

<sup>82</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 3.

<sup>83</sup> Gann, *No Such This As Silence*, 20.

directions and will be received in unpredictable ways. These will vary from shock and bewilderment to quietness of mind and enlightenment.<sup>84</sup>

The experience of the piece was still somewhat subjective and relied on a mixture of intention and accident, or the term Cage loved: chance. “the situation one is clearly in, is not objective (sound-silence), but rather subjective (sounds only), those intended and those others (so-called silence) not intended.”<sup>85</sup> The idea of creating a piece that is completely made up of "silence" and nothing else (setting aside for the moment the fact that silence is an illusion according to Cage) may seem to be purely a statement of anarchic rebellion, a Duchampian Dadaist gesture. This assertion that Cage was only interested in upsetting the traditional power relationship of composer versus piece and performer or in contemptuously shocking the audience, ignores the fact that since this work moves beyond the concept of silence and speaks directly to the Zen concept of “the void,” or the emptiness that encompasses all existence within it (a transcendence of the mental dualities of something and nothing), it is therefore not really empty. In Zen it is only the symbolization of what we experience that is really empty. Thomas Merton has referred to the void as the “ontological *awareness of pure being beyond subject and object*, an immediate grasp of being in its ‘suchness’ and ‘thusness.’”<sup>86</sup> Psychoanalyst Karen Horney also was interested in the concept of “void.” Horney had written much about Zen and knew Suzuki. As she explained, “the unawareness of inner experiences gives a person a feeling of emptiness or nothingness which in itself may or may not be conscious. But whether this feeling is conscious or not, it is in any case frightening.”<sup>87</sup> To this John Cage or D.T. Suzuki might argue that this fear of emptiness is merely a result of attachment to the illusion of the ego as separate from the rest of existence.

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<sup>84</sup> The ten-thousand refers to the “ten-thousand things,” a Taoist concept, which also appears in Buddhism, referring to the innumerable aspects of experience that appear as part of the continuum of existence. "The Encyclopedia of Taoism: A-Z." ed., Fabrizio Pregadio, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 552. In Taoist and Buddhist texts when one refers to attachment to the ten thousand things it means attachment to an illusion of separateness, which those traditions maintain is a mental construction. Gann, *No Such Thing As Silence*, 191.

<sup>85</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 14.

<sup>86</sup> Merton was a Trappist Monk and writer on Eastern as well as Western religious thought. It is interesting, therefore, to consider his emphasis on silence. Although Trappist monks do not take vows of silence, they only speak when they feel it is right and do not speak idly. In this way such an emphasis on a concept of absence such as that of the Zen idea of the ‘void’ or emptiness may have been seen by Merton as attractive. Merton, Thomas. "Mystics & Zen Masters." *Escape From the Watch Tower*. Accessed May 17, 2010. <http://www.escapefromwatchtower.com/merton-mystics-and-zen-chapone.html>.

<sup>87</sup> Fader, “D.T. Suzuki’s Contribution,” in *A Zen Life*, Abe, Masao. 103.

Larry Fader explains the importance of “emptiness” in Zen in this anecdote about Suzuki.<sup>88</sup> “‘Emptiness’ was his message as well as his medium. To the question, ‘How many varieties of garlands can skilled hands fashion with the same flowers?’ we may well respond, ‘What is the meaning of Suzuki coming from East to West?’”<sup>89</sup>

Shokin Furuta explained Suzuki’s conception of the “void.” “For Daisetz, the quintessence of the ‘void’ was not the white snow, but the new shoots pushing their way up through it.”<sup>90</sup> This is a very useful metaphor for silence versus sound in 4’33”. Like the new shoots pushing their way through snow, the sounds of the concert hall push themselves through the silence of the surrounding space. The two are interconnected, as are the shoots and snow.

In 1958, Stanly Bruel wrote an essay called “Kill the Buddha,” which dealt in depth with the Zen concept of absence and presence as well as contradiction and transcendence of dualism. In this poetic passage, through the use of direct contradictions, Bruel simultaneously illustrates the traps of language and logical thought, suggesting that the concept of duality is really a fallacy.<sup>91</sup> When put together in such a way words become meaningless, which is another way to show that they are merely symbols, separate from reality as it is experienced directly without the mediation of language: “Zen is not Zen. Zen begins in Zen: passes through No Zen; ends in neither Zen nor No-Zen. Freedom – from Zen. Freedom . . . through the living logic of endless negotiations and negation negating negation.”<sup>92</sup>

In this metaphor for direct experience, subject and object, the side effect of the illusion of ego-separateness, disappear and are replaced by a total continuum.

Intentionality, for Cage, got in the way. He was more interested in a kind of open-minded receptive acceptance. He therefore wished to eliminate intentionality, as in Zen it is believed that choice is just a form of attachment to the illusion of the ego. In its place he posited indeterminacy. At the same time, in typical Zen fashion, he argued that neither was really in conflict, that one was only the opposite side of the coin from the other.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> In Zen, in attempt to move away from language and rationality, questions that are asked about ordinary life are often answered with a religious answer and vice-versa. These answers at first hearing may sound like they have nothing to do with the questions but they are in fact just another form of answer. This is once more a method that is often used to bring the Zen student into a place of spiritual awareness in the same way has being hit, realizing the answer to a koan, or sitting in zazen do.

<sup>89</sup> Fader, “D.T. Suzuki’s Contribution,” in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 108.

<sup>90</sup> Furuta, Shokin. “Daisetz T. Suzuki.” In *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 177.

<sup>91</sup> This refers to a proclamation by a Zen master named Lin-Chi from medieval China. For more information see Part II.

<sup>92</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 72.

<sup>93</sup> In Zen contradictions are often posited in the goal of explaining that opposed entities are really an illusion since one cannot be defined without having the other. Without both, neither can be understood.

“Opposites. That is to say indeterminacy and disorder and on the other hand determination or order are not truly opposed. It’s like the Zen statement ‘every day is a beautiful day.’ Everything is pleasing provided you haven’t got a notion of pleasing and displeasing in you.”<sup>94</sup>

Posing indeterminacy and order as an unavoidable choice leads one to seek order above disorder. However this is again a product of thinking. If one truly listens, order is unnecessary in music, because the very experience of sound is pleasing in itself; randomness would mean more of the world could find its way into the work than could be achieved through conscious choices and decisions. Cage spoke of the absence of intentionality in his compositions:

I wanted my work to be free of my own likes and dislikes, because I think music should be free of the feelings and ideas of the composer. I have felt and hoped to have led other people to feel that the sounds of their environment constitute a music which is more interesting than the music which they would hear if they went into a concert hall.<sup>95</sup>

Such concerns led Cage to adopt chance operations as his main compositional tool. He saw it as embodied within the very fabric of nature. As he explained, “I was intent on making something that didn’t tell people what to do. What I would like to arrive at, though I may never . . . would be a situation in which no one told anyone what to do and it all turned out perfect anyway.”<sup>96</sup> Despite what Alan Watts might claim about Cage being an exponent of an anarchic ‘beat Zen,’ Cage himself claimed that he used “chance as a discipline.”<sup>97</sup>

To do this he turned to an ancient Chinese text, the *I Ching*, which is associated with another Eastern religious and philosophical practice, Taoism.<sup>98</sup> He claimed that this was a kind of “computer,” a tool that aided in chance operations.<sup>99</sup> It became a very useful instrument for all kinds of Cage’s creative endeavors. “Every time I had a

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<sup>94</sup> "Nam June Paik in EDITED FOR TELEVISION." New York Public Television. New York, NY, WNET, 1975.

<sup>95</sup> Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 69.

<sup>96</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 168.

<sup>97</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 169.

<sup>98</sup> Taoism is a Chinese religion and philosophy based on the teachings of Lao-Tzu in his book the Tao te Ching. Lao-Tzu (about 600-300 BCE) was an ancient Chinese philosopher and mystic. Taoism emphasizes living according to the principles of nature and of balance and not going against what is natural. Manifestations of the religion also have emphasized immortality and contain many aspects of Chinese folk religion and spiritual practice.

<sup>99</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 168.

problem. I used it very often for practical matters, to write my articles and my music—for everything.”<sup>100</sup> He explained how he came to use the *I Ching*:

The moment I opened the book and saw the hearts and the hexagrams that were used for obtaining oracles according to the tossing of coins or yarrow sticks, I saw a connection with the charts I had been using. It was immediately apparent that I could derive a means of composing from these operations, and right then and there I sketched out the whole procedure for my ‘Music of Changes,’ which took its title from the book. I ran over to show Morton Feldman, who had rented a studio in the same building, and I can still remember him saying, ‘You’ve hit it.’<sup>101</sup>

The *I Ching* became the basis of Cage’s compositions as well as his lectures.<sup>102</sup> In 1951 Cage composed *The Music of Changes*, in which he used chance as the method of selecting sounds for the piece.<sup>103</sup> Calvin Tompkins describes the composition of the work step by step:

In composing his “Music of Changes” Cage began by drawing up twenty-six large charts on which to plot various aspects of the composition—sounds, durations, dynamics tempi, and also silences, which were given a value equal to that of the sounds. Every single notation on each of these charts was determined by chance operations based on the “I Ching.” To plot a single note, for example, Cage would toss three coins six times; the results, carefully noted down on paper, would direct him to a particular number in the “I Ching,” which, in turn, would correspond to a numbered position on the chart. This, however, would determine only the pitch of the note, and the whole procedure would have to be repeated over and over to find its duration, timbre, and other characteristics. Since the piece lasts forty-three minutes, the total number of coin tosses that went into it was astronomical.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Cage, John and Charles, Daniel. *For the Birds*. (New York: M. Boyars, 1981), 43.

<sup>101</sup> Morton Feldman quoted in Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 97.

<sup>102</sup> Up until this point Cage had been most known for his works done for “prepared piano,” a technique of manipulating the strings within a piano in order to create a whole new range of percussive sounds. These works gained him notoriety and awards from the National Academy of Arts and Letters and Guggenheim foundation. They had been created as a solution to the problem of not having enough room for a percussion ensemble for his earlier percussion pieces.

<sup>103</sup> Music that used chance operations as a composition method was referred to as “aleatory” music. Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 64.

<sup>104</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 99.

In various works Cage would add outside elements including radios, and audiotape with pre-recorded sounds such as those from nature or from a radio broadcast spliced together, as well as other electronic effects. Cage found many ways to use chance operations to his benefit. Calvin Tompkins describes one such method:

When performing his 'Variations IV,' he simply obtains a map or plan of the performance area and then, by chance calculations, determines *where* the sounds will come from; any sounds will do - radios, conventional instruments, even the sound of a door slamming - for Cage is now convinced 'everything we do is music.'<sup>105</sup>

Cage was interested in putting to the test the very definitions that had governed music and art for centuries. Gone was all semblance of intentionality. Gone the human touch, imagination, and genius.<sup>106</sup> The thought of a work of art being created as a mirror of experience now seemed very limiting. Instead art could be experience itself. Music becomes sound and sound music. As Tompkins put it, "he urges a perpetual process of artistic discovery in our daily lives."<sup>107</sup> Since sound is a mirror of experience and experience is essentially meaningless, that is it exists outside the straightjacket of concepts, noises in the Cagean paradigm have no purpose other than that we may find enjoyment in listening to them. This Cage associated with a kind of "purposelessness" and "play." Zen often mixes play and seriousness in its stories and rhetoric as both are seen as expressions of the real, which are direct and unmodified by thought and language. As Cage explained, "This play, however, is an affirmation of life - not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord."<sup>108</sup> It is this act of "waking up" that was Cage's main point in writing 4'33".

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<sup>105</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 64.

<sup>106</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 65.

<sup>107</sup> Tompkins, *Profiles: Figure in an Imaginary Landscape*, 65.

<sup>108</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 12.

## Abstract Painting and Emptiness

Zen also found its way, through Cage, into the New York City group of painters and sculptors, the Artists' Club. Cage gave lectures at The Club, including his "Lecture on Something," and "Lecture on Nothing." "Lecture on Nothing" was especially important as it illuminated the concept of emptiness. As Cage explained, "I am here and I have nothing to say" and "I have nothing to say and I am saying it."<sup>109</sup> This was a spoken meditation on the same concepts that we find in *4'33*" that is the idea that emptiness cannot exist without its opposite presence and in meditating on silence one necessarily comes into a direct confrontation with noise. Silence, in a way becomes a vessel for that noise. "It is like a glass of milk. We need the glass and we need the milk. Or again it is like the empty glass into which at any moment anything can be poured."<sup>110</sup>

According to James Brooks, a member of the New York Artist's Club, "Zen came in pretty strong to The Club and a good many members were very receptive to it because it emphasized the pure confrontation of things rather than intellectualization . . . there was the deep felt need to confront things in a purer way, without bias, or as innocently as could be done."<sup>111</sup> There was also an attraction to the Zen lifestyle and worldview. According to Westgeest, artists in New York who felt lost found Zen to be an excellent way for them to find a kind of meaning, and that through Cage, they were able to push in a new and exciting direction in their discussions. But, she argues, it is unclear to what extent his influence and that of Zen did much to change the way Cage's fellow artists lived or saw the world.<sup>112</sup> In 1946, Robert Motherwell painted *Homage to John Cage*, which features brushstrokes similar to those of Zen *sumi-e* painting. Motherwell's adaptation of this Japanese style highlights what Westgeest claims to be the "uniting of the individual and the universal."<sup>113</sup> Painter Franz Kline, though not interested in Zen himself, did paint in a style similar to *sumi-e*, but was only formally influenced by Zen brush painting.<sup>114</sup>

The dominant intellectual force behind Abstract Expressionism, besides the writings on artistic purity by Clement Greenberg, was psychoanalysis. These artists were specifically interested in the depths of the unconscious, which had been first explored in artistic practice by the Surrealists in Europe. Jackson Pollock had a particular fascination with the unconscious that can be seen in his work starting with his more symbolic

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<sup>109</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 109.

<sup>110</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 110.

<sup>111</sup> Brooks, James. Interview with Dorothy Seckler, Archives of American Art, 1965.

<sup>112</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 59.

<sup>113</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 61.

<sup>114</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 61.

paintings of the 1940s and moving into his later “all-over style.” His interest was in, as Michael Leja puts it, “painting out of the unconscious”<sup>115</sup> He was therefore interested in an internalized version of investigation, one that came from deep inside the mind of the creator and recognized him as the source, process, and even in a sense end result of the work, a kind of painted improvisation similar to jazz. In *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* the painting becomes a mirror for the painter’s own unconscious mind. Compare this to the painters who were interested in Zen, such as Mark Tobey and Ad Reinhardt. Their main area of investigation was both the inside and the outside as Zen seeks to bring both into harmony through meditation. While Pollock’s deep investigation of the ego represents one side of the Abstract Expressionist coin, the other may be represented by the ego-denying Mark Tobey and Ad Reinhardt.

Mark Tobey had been in New York since around 1910 and had been a part of the famous Stieglitz circle. In the first few decades of the twentieth century he discovered an interest in Eastern philosophy. During a stint in England in the early thirties he came into contact with Aldous Huxley, potter Bernard Leach, and Arthur Waley. Waley had earlier written a book called *Zen Buddhism and Its Relation to Art*. He focused on the expansion of consciousness that he claimed would come out of a marriage between art and Zen. Tobey would have found these developments quite attractive.<sup>116</sup> In 1934 Tobey traveled to Shanghai with Leach, where he stayed with a Chinese artist, Teng Kuei, who he had met in Seattle in 1922. Kuei was a master of Chinese brush painting and Tobey learned some of his techniques. Four weeks later Leach and Tobey traveled independently to Japan where Tobey spent a month at a Zen monastery near Kyoto learning Japanese painting techniques. Through his painting he found a new freedom, a meditative spirit, something that is often experienced by those who practice Zen arts.<sup>117</sup> Tobey had learned about the concept of direct experience in Japan at the Zen monastery. He meditated in front of a paper with a circle painted on it, what is referred to in Zen painting as an *enso*.<sup>118</sup> The painting, he claimed, had changed his perspective on looking at the world. He also claimed that through his change of physical position, his closeness to the floor, he saw the world from another point of view.<sup>119</sup>

Tobey, shortly after arriving back in the United States in 1935, developed a style dubbed “white writing,” which consisted of calligraphic-like lines painted over a dark background. He described them as “moving lines,” and developed them out of the painting styles he had learned in Asia.<sup>120</sup> They also could allude to a chaotic version of

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<sup>115</sup> Leja, Michael. *Reframing Abstract Expressionism: Subjectivity and Painting in the 1940s*. (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1997. 127.

<sup>116</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 46.

<sup>117</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 49.

<sup>118</sup> The “enso” is a circular shape made with a single brushstroke in Japanese Zen painting, which is meant to be a symbolic visual representation of the “void.”

<sup>119</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 78.

<sup>120</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 50.

the lines in Zen sand gardens, lines that Zen practitioners meditate upon. This is evident in Tobey's *Universal Field*, from 1949 for instance, a work which consists of chaotic lines of black white and gray which run over each other at different diagonal angles.<sup>121</sup> While the lines could be seen as independent, they lace through each other and intersect in such a way that it appears no line can exist without any other. The painted amalgam could be described at first as an undifferentiated mass, but as you look deeper you realize the extreme complexity of the lines contained within. Unlike Jackson Pollock's chaotic unorganized splatters of the all-over style, this work is not chaotic, but disciplined and still retains a tense freedom. The tight coils of paint appear almost systematized and regular as opposed to Pollock's natural anarchy of splattered paint. The lines are also, of course, an allusion to Asian calligraphy, and as such they retain an order and stability that is unique to this period in abstract painting. Their inability to be read, however, says something about the way Zen looks at language, as limited compared to the vastness of actual experience.

Westgeest ties Tobey's white writings to the fog-like atmosphere of Zen brush paintings, their sense of indefinite space.<sup>122</sup> This is a visual translation of the Zen concept of the impenetrability and imperceptibility of the infinite as described by Torataro Shimomura, which also refers to the limits of language. "As long as we try to understand the infinite by means of an analogy with the finite we cannot help turning it into something finite . . . This realization is that the infinite cannot be understood."<sup>123</sup> It is possible, therefore, to link Tobey's work to this concept of emptiness. Westgeest also ties them to Tobey's interest in urban dynamism and by extension to his interest in the tactile above the visual.<sup>124</sup> An earlier painting, *Broadway*, from 1936 takes a section of the city, Times Square in Manhattan, and makes it resemble a creature, which breathes with frenetic energy.<sup>125</sup> It retains the white writings, becoming the basis of an urban landscape that is more organic than synthetic, a nod to the Eastern idea that existence is primarily natural, as opposed to the mechanistic understanding of reality favored by the West. Tobey exhibited at the Willard Gallery in the early forties along with several other artists from both the United States and Europe who were interested in Zen.<sup>126</sup> The gallery owner,

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<sup>121</sup> For an image of *Universal Field* see *The Third Mind*, ed., Munroe, 160.

<sup>122</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 76.

<sup>123</sup> Shimomura, "D.T. Suzuki's Place," in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 68.

<sup>124</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 79.

<sup>125</sup> For an image of *Broadway* see Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 47.

<sup>126</sup> Artists in this group included Andre Masson, Richard Lippold, Ralph Rosenborg, Rudolf Ray, and John Ferren. Another of these artists was Morris Graves. Graves also had been to Japan and had studied at a Zen Buddhist temple, this time in Seattle. He was also a friend of Cage's and had discussed Zen with him at length. He became interested in the concept of the Inner Eye and much of his paintings featured similar stylistic calligraphic-like lines to Tobey's along with images of birds which became a major stylistic convention for Graves.

Marian Willard, stated her goal in these exhibitions. “A kinship among men and the realization of the oneness of mankind. . .”<sup>127</sup>

Ad Reinhardt, who was a member of The Club, was also quite interested in Asian art and philosophy.<sup>128</sup> Jacquelyn Baas described Reinhardt’s application of Zen thus: “For Ad Reinhardt, art was not a practice leading to enlightenment; art is enlightenment.”<sup>129</sup> He described Zen painting as “one of the greatest achievements in human history.”<sup>130</sup> He wrote articles on the subject, highlighting its timeless, calmness, and emptiness.<sup>131</sup> In his essay “Art-as-Art,” he explained about that art “is one thing.” In the essay he filters the concept of emptiness through such terms as “formlessness, spacelessness, and timelessness.”<sup>132</sup> His written works were also invested in the concept of abstraction and the importance of purity in painting. Reinhardt had attended Suzuki’s lectures and read some of his works, as well as those of Coomarswamy. He taught about Asian art at Brooklyn College and wrote articles on the subject for *Art News*. Torataro Shinamura may have described investigations such as his when he wrote, “The West’s evaluation of ukiyo-e even motivated the Japanese themselves to re-evaluate it.”<sup>133</sup>

In 1960 Reinhardt wrote an essay called *Timeless in Asia*, in which he put himself in opposition to Abstract Expressionism’s concentration on spontaneity and the unconscious. “Nowhere in world art has it been clearer than in Asia that anything irrational, momentary, spontaneous, unconscious, primitive, expressionistic, accidental, or informal, cannot be called serious art. Only blankness, complete awareness, disinterestedness.”<sup>134</sup> Unlike Cage, he was also political and saw Asian art as containing and extolling his particular values. He explained how the East had “a long tradition of negative theology in which the essence of religion, and in my case the essence of art, is protected or the attempt is made to protect it from being pinned down or vulgarized or

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<sup>127</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 51.

<sup>128</sup> For Reinhardt’s images discussed in this section see the Ad Reinhardt section of Bass, *Smile of the Buddha*, 125-131.

<sup>129</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 131.

<sup>130</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 67.

<sup>131</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 67.

<sup>132</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 125.

<sup>133</sup> Shimomura’s evaluation of Western painting, on the other hand, seems much more dated as he description of it as purely representational had not been true for decades, because many Western painters had moved away from representation in part or entirely by this time. “Western paintings are generally realistic whereas Oriental paintings have a metaphysical and symbolic character and a ‘thought’ behind them.” Shimomura, “D.T. Suzuki’s Place,” in *A Zen Life*, ed., Abe, 73.

<sup>134</sup> Reinhardt, Ad. “Timelessness in Asia.” *Art News*, January 1960, 34.

exploited.”<sup>135</sup> Asian artistic creation, for Reinhardt then, is deeply political because it denies commercial relevancy of the artwork, its use as commodity. This is of course a deeply problematic reading, as works of art in Asia were sold and used often as decoration. But the main point here for Reinhardt was more that the intensely concentrated effort that Asian artists used in creating their work was an attempt to keep it pure and uncontaminated by fashion or commercial interests.

Reinhardt’s work combined elements of Eastern and Western art and was a meditative alternative to the anarchic quality of much art at that time. It searched for an ascetic spirit separate from that of worldly materialistic modernism. His paintings were about space and emptiness when so much other work at that time was busy and frenetic. He related this concept of an art of divine emptiness to Zen. In his essays he discussed the Buddhist concept of nirvana as “one-ness, nothingness, all-in-one, nothing.”<sup>136</sup> When he talked about the end of art, he meant it in Zen terms, as being about overcoming the illusion of time and on meditation on the moment.<sup>137</sup> Reinhardt also spoke of the difference between the worldview of the egocentric West versus the anti-ego-oriented East. “The Eastern perspective begins with an awareness of the ‘immeasurable vastness’ and ‘endlessness of things’ out there, as things get smaller as they get closer, the viewer ends up by losing (finding) himself in his own mind.”<sup>138</sup>

This is of course the opposite of Pollock’s model, which moves from the inside out, a sublimation of the painter’s unconscious. Reinhardt’s goal was to move from the outside in and in so doing to depersonalize, and in a sense universalize the viewership and comprehension of the work. Instead of being a work of an individual author’s unconscious, that of Pollock’s for instance, it becomes a recognition of everyone’s experience. Also instead of separating the outside world from the inside one, the two come together through the phenomenological experience of viewing the work, its meditative essence that could be tapped into if viewed correctly.

Reinhardt’s work did not deal with the immediacy found in that of other abstract painters but with the endless, the timeless. Unlike Tobey, who referenced language, Reinhardt’s work moved completely away from any reference to text or indeed to ideas, recognizing only the experience of viewing. According to Westgeest, he described his paintings in exactly the same terms he used to describe works by Zen masters.<sup>139</sup> Reinhardt also surrounded himself with others who were interested in Zen Buddhism and corresponded with them about the religion. During the years 1947-1949 his pieces looked much like the classical scroll paintings of China or Japan. They also contained elements, which like the “white writings” in Tobey’s work were similar to the calligraphic writing

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<sup>135</sup> He was also interested in civil rights and anti-war protests and was against art for profit. Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 72.

<sup>136</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 125.

<sup>137</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 126-127.

<sup>138</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 77.

<sup>139</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 68.

of those cultures. One, entitled appropriately *Calligraphic Painting*, from 1949-1950 consists of a very simple black and white design of empty shapes alternating with closely bunched together chaotic lines of black and occasional grayish shading. The work emulates calligraphy through its use of long smooth lines accented by squiggles. The duality of the calm deliberate lines versus the quick rough ones speaks to the oneness of existence Zen tries to tap into, its inclusion of all areas of experience, both anarchic and organized, chaotic and calm. The work, with its smudgy vibrating strokes resembles Taoist Chinese landscape paintings of the Song Dynasty, complete with gently rolling hills and streams, and sharp, smudgy, and wiggly trees and rocks. At this point he is still working within the realm of reference, pointing to the history of Eastern painting, but soon he would move away from this entirely and into a new paradigm of complete abstraction, without these referential elements, focused on the direct experience of looking and concentrating itself.

During the 1950s Reinhardt's paintings began to take on an increasingly meditative and less textual character with dark shades barely discernable from one another, meditations on pure color and form.<sup>140</sup> The geometrical abstract elements were replaced by broad shades eventually taking on a single color with slight differences of shade. Paintings such as *Red Painting* from 1952, have large color-field blocks that overlap. The difference between each block of red in this work is gradual and the overall effect allows for a meditation on similarity and difference. Later his paintings became completely black, and the deviations between shades began to diminish. In order to tell one color from another it was necessary to concentrate on them as a Zen monk might concentrate on a sand garden or the grain of wood on a temple wall. By 1960 these paintings became even more visually subtle, to the point where shifts of tone would be impossible to discern without close attention.<sup>141</sup> The slight shade variations of *Abstract Painting No. 5* from 1962, for instance, take focus and concentration to pick out. The viewer stands and stares at the image in order to discern the slight differences. When we look deeply into a Reinhardt painting we might at first feel like we are staring into the abyss. What we see is total absence, complete emptiness. As we continue to stare we begin to see the existence of substance within that absence, that is shapes, barely discernable, which float in what we thought was empty space. Like Cage's 4'33" emptiness is penetrated by its opposite, and through these juxtapositions we see that fallacy of the separation between what is there and what is not. Reinhardt saw these paintings as the logical extension of art history both in the East and West.<sup>142</sup> They can also be looked at as an experiment in the transcendence of duality, and a negation of the notion that things are by nature separate.

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<sup>140</sup> By being less interested in approximations of calligraphic writing and instead moving into a largely non-expressionistic paradigm of color fields, Reinhardt's work moves towards a much more direct Zen-like approach as it moves away from an association with ideas.

<sup>141</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 67-68.

<sup>142</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 68.

Reinhardt, like Alan Watts, was skeptical of the “Zen boom” and saw those artists who could be described as part of it as “Neo-Zen Bohemians.”<sup>143</sup> His rejection of the impulse to create works influenced by Zen and by Zen-aesthetics seems hypocritical, as that was exactly what he was doing in his own work. All the same, his works, which were an experiment in seeing into the void in order to experience what lies within apparent absence, are quite similar in effect to Cage’s 4’33”. Reinhardt saw the absence in his paintings as a positive force and he saw its link with Zen. In a catalog essay from 1952 he explained all the things he did not want in his paintings, including, “no experiments, no rules, no anarchy, no anti-intellectualism, no innocence, no irrationalism . . . no confusing painting with everything that is not painting.”<sup>144</sup> This can be seen, as Westgeest argues, in direct relation to the ideas of the ‘Śūnyatā’ or ‘Emptiness Sutra’ that was described by Suzuki. Reinhardt also claimed that Zen was a way to create meaning in a painting. Although Westgeest argues that Cage and Reinhardt’s goals were completely different, that while Cage was interested in nihilism, Reinhardt was interested in purism, this seems unsubstantiated by Cage’s actual production.<sup>145</sup> She explains that his interest in Zen extended as far as his focus on ordinary sounds. This is true. However Cage’s music was in no way nihilistic. Both Cage’s 4’33” and Reinhardt’s black paintings dealt directly with the transcendence of dualism between substance and absence. Cage’s supposed nihilism was in fact a celebration of existence and of unfiltered reality. Cage and Reinhardt were also both interested in the writings of Christian theologian Meister Eckhardt especially his conception of the ‘divine dark,’ as well as the stress he placed both on moving into the self to find the deepest silence and on unity within opposites.<sup>146</sup>

Reinhardt was not the only painter who was investigating the connotations of emptiness in the 1950s. One of Cage’s many important friends was the painter Robert Rauschenberg.<sup>147</sup> Cage had met Rauschenberg at Black Mountain College where Rauschenberg was a student. Cage had applied to work there in the late thirties and in 1942 had proposed the opening of a Center for Experimental Music, with no success. He tried again in 1948 to come to visit the school and was welcomed without pay to give a performance. Cage brought Cunningham with him, and the performances received a very positive reaction. The works, according to Cage “were written in a very strict rhythmic structure, and yet within that rhythmic structure had a good deal of freedom; or what would seem to be spontaneous.”<sup>148</sup> He accompanied the works with a lecture on his music. When they were about to leave they discovered that students had left paintings and drawings and other presents under their car, which helped persuade them to come

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<sup>143</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 72.

<sup>144</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 73.

<sup>145</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 73.

<sup>146</sup> Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 83.

<sup>147</sup> For the Rauschenberg images discussed in this section see Joseph, *Random Order*, 24-71.

<sup>148</sup> Duberman, *Black Mountain College*, 278.

back. Cage went on to teach composition at the school and educate students about Zen. He read Chinese master Huang Po aloud to them and was impressed with the results. He commissioned and ran a special event, often described as a Happening that included Rauschenberg's *White Paintings*.

In a letter to Betty Parsons describing the *White Paintings*, Rauschenberg also wrote about a work called *Mother of God* from 1950, a large white circle, which resembles the Zen *enso*, surrounded by black and white maps:

They are large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and scheduled with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point the circle begins and ends, they are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of intuitional optimism. It is completely irrelevant that I am making them – *Today* is their creator.<sup>149</sup>

The effect of a giant hole located within a series of maps could be a kind of negation of reality, a statement of nihilism. On the other hand it could also illustrate the concept of the emptiness Zen practitioners explain lies at the heart of experience that is in fact not really empty since it is connected to what exists by the very fact that the two cannot exist without each other. The idea of the circle as God is therefore the idea of existence itself as deeply spiritual, a pantheistic conception very close to the Zen concept of the spirituality of everyday life. At the same time, in this quote by Rauschenberg, we see a similar notion of the negation of the hand or identity of the creator that we see in Cage's ideas of composition, the elimination of the ego-self as part of the creative process. The work finally concentrates on the act of looking as again one is forced into the act of viewership and knowledge of that act by the confrontation between the empty circle and the maps. The viewer is forced to ask the question of what they are looking at when confronted by nothingness. It therefore puts what the viewer sees into a direct relationship between the substance of the maps, a territory to be traversed, and the absence of the circle, a territory that cannot be reached.

Rauschenberg also created other works about the fallacy of negation. In 1953, he took a drawing that Abstract Expressionist Willem De Kooning had given him and carefully erased it. At first glimpse *Erased De Kooning Drawing* appears to be an empty piece of paper within a frame, just another Duchampian publicity stunt. However, like *4'33"* it is deeper than that. If one looks closely one realizes that traces of the erased work remain. Once again the negative cannot exist without the positive, the figure, which Rauschenberg erased, peeks through the texture of the paper and continues to exert its presence. What is there and what is absent comeingle. What is erased here is not only the work itself but the authorship of the work, negating the ego of the artistic genius. It does

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<sup>149</sup> Alloway, Lawrence, Duchamp, Marcel, et al., "The Art of Assemblage: A Symposium" (1961) in *Essays on Assemblage*, ed., Leggio, Jaes and Frank, Hellen M., *Studies in Modern Art*, vol. 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 124.

not matter who created it or who destroyed it. The only thing left is the process that is action, which created and then negated it.

Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* completed in 1951, were a series of large panels painted completely white. Unlike Reinhardt's black works there is no deviation of tone within the image. As the viewer moves in front of them a shadow falls on the panels and, in effect, becomes part of the work. Just as *4'33"* was a blank canvas of silence in which sound collected, in the *White Paintings* the effect of shadows in the room falling on the panels has an equivalent effect. The paintings were exhibited a year later in the Black Mountain Happening that Cage organized. As Branden Joseph describes them, they are empty in that they are scrubbed of everything that typically makes up a painting, "... image, mark, or color that could represent or imply illusionistic depth."<sup>150</sup> He goes on to explain that the terms Rauschenberg utilized to describe the work such as 'silence,' 'absence,' and 'nothing,' meant that the work was designed to convey a feeling of "finality."<sup>151</sup>

Rauschenberg had once explained: "A canvas is never empty."<sup>152</sup> Thus the blank canvas is not really blank but allows for all kinds of connections and associations with the outside world. It becomes a literal instead of a figurative window onto experience, or perhaps it is a reflection of that world via the traditional medium of the canvas. Either way the world now makes itself known through the work directly confronting us as viewers and interacting with us.

Cage had made it clear that the *White Paintings* were an influence on *4'33"*, that he now felt brave enough to compose such a piece since he now realized music was lagging behind painting.<sup>153</sup>

As Cage wrote:

To Whom it May Concern:  
The white paintings came  
First; my silent piece  
came later.<sup>154</sup>

Cage wrote in his piece about the *White Paintings*, that they contained:

No Subject  
No image  
No taste  
No object  
No beauty

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<sup>150</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 30.

<sup>151</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 30.

<sup>152</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 48.

<sup>153</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 45.

<sup>154</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 98.

No message  
No talent  
No technique (no why)  
No idea  
No intention  
No art  
No feeling  
No black  
No white (no *and*).<sup>155</sup>

He claimed that the paintings were not actually empty but instead were a place for the outside world to collide with the canvas.<sup>156</sup> When Cage created a visual score for *4'33"*, its resemblance to the *White Paintings* was striking.<sup>157</sup>

Critical reception of the *White Paintings* was mixed. Herbert Crehan, *Art Digest* reviewer explained his view of them: "Rauschenberg's pair of albinos (one is made up of seven tall panels, the other of two wider panels), of course, are the image of these ascetic ideas reduced to their ultimate plastic reality. Their exhibition is a *chef-d'oeuvre* of [canvas] duck pressed to the point of no return."<sup>158</sup>

Crehan saw the work as a form of "dada shenanigans," and therefore denied its seriousness in much the same way that Cage's work was to be ignored with similar rhetoric. Clement Greenburg thought that the paintings were responsible for every 1960s art movement that he did not respect: minimalism, op, pop, assemblage, and the rest of what he called "novelty art."<sup>159</sup>

In works such as his dirt and grass paintings, Rauschenberg took the idea of painting as a collection plate for the world to a further extreme. In *Dirt Painting (for John Cage)* dirt becomes again both emptiness and substance. It is pure physical ambience, a tapestry of interrelated parts, which are both interesting and dull. At the same time the pure act of creating an artwork entirely made from dirt says something about the spirituality of the everyday, about the ordinary world of dust being uplifted to the almost religious sanctity of art. In this way the two are conflated and neither art nor life becomes more important than the other. Art, which is often raised to the level of extreme meaning, and ordinary life, lowered to a state of meaninglessness, are negated by this process. Life becomes meaningful, art becomes meaningless and therefore both are neither. Cage said, "He is not saying; he is painting," and that the work itself changes, responding to each moment and its environment. "(What is Rauschenberg saying?) the message is conveyed by dirt which, mixed with an adhesive, sticks to itself and to the canvas upon which he

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<sup>155</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 102.

<sup>156</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 55.

<sup>157</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 49.

<sup>158</sup> Crehan, Herbert. "The See Change: Raw Duck," *Art Digest* 27, no. 20 (1953): 25.

<sup>159</sup> Joseph, *Random Order*, 31.

places it. Crumbling and responding to changes in weather, the dirt unceasingly does my thinking.”<sup>160</sup>

The *Grass Painting* too takes this idea and brings it a step further. Now not only dirt but also grass, an actual substance from nature, finds its way onto the museum wall. The painting is not a simulacrum for life but life itself and therefore shuts down the gap between the two. The idea of grass coming through the surface of painting also relates to Suzuki’s metaphor about plants growing through snow. Absence and presence comeingle in a literal way. Emptiness is presence and art is life.

Rauschenberg continued this idea of putting everyday life on the museum wall. The painting became a kind of “flypaper”<sup>161</sup> that elements of the world would stick to. This analogy is also used by Robert Hughes in explaining Rauschenberg’s combines, which went further than these earlier works, in that real objects from the world and images silkscreened from media find their way into, onto, or on top of the canvas. This was just an extension of the ideas that he explored in the *White Paintings*, much in the same way that Cage’s works that included found sound were an extension of those in *4’33”*. Emptiness that is filled by the unfiltered world around it, and is thus not really empty, is replaced by a great abundance made up from the world, filtered by chance operations.

In 1953, Cage and Rauschenberg cooperated to make *Automobile Tire Print*. It consisted of driving a Model A over a 72 feet long scroll of paper. As Baas postulates, there is an element of Chinese brush painting in this work.<sup>162</sup> She quotes Paul Schimmel who wrote that the painting was “the visual equivalent of a sustained single note.”<sup>163</sup> As in Japanese brush painting, its effect is to concentrate all energy onto a single point of focus, which then is followed to its conclusion. Nam June Paik, an important composer, performance artist, and creator of video art from Korea, would echo this kind of focus in his performance piece *Zen for Head*. The minimal impact of the tire track is similar to that of *4’33”* in that it strips down what is there to its simplest elements: music becoming pure sound, painting a single line. The line is also abstract, a projection of nothing other than itself. At the same time there is no real content. In this way it is also highlighting emptiness. The use of the car as the method of application also speaks to Rauschenberg and Cage’s interest in the everyday as a powerful element in their art. Everything in Zen is holy or meaningful if seen as a thing in itself apart from symbolization or conceptualization. In this way the emulation of Zen painting in *Automobile Tire Print* is purely formal; it is the use of the tire, an element of real life, and the minimal nature of its presentation, the emptiness inherent within that make it an expression of Zen.

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<sup>160</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 99-100.

<sup>161</sup> Hughes, Robert. *American Visions*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 1997. 518.

<sup>162</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 172.

<sup>163</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 172.

## Part II: Zen and Art of the 1960s

Referring to John Cage's work during the early 1960s, Calvin Tompkins explained how the unceasing barrage from critics had done nothing to slow down the pace of his avant-garde stance:

Those who claim that Cage, in spreading his joy and revolution, has left the real world entirely must cope with the fact that in the last few years his ability to shock, enrage, and stimulate others has never been more pronounced. College students no longer react with incredulous laughter to the Cage-Cunningham appearances; they pack the auditoriums to capacity, and line up afterward to talk with the dancers and with Cage.<sup>164</sup>

Cage began to be taken more seriously, performing with such establishment organizations as the New York Philharmonic under Leonard Bernstein, with less than the desired results from the composer's point of view.<sup>165</sup> He did not shy away from this new attention from the mainstream, and went to it with a typically Cagean acceptance. "I will . . . not refuse situations such as the Philharmonic, when and if they come up. I will let circumstances decide."<sup>166</sup> Cage's slow but steady acceptance by the classical music establishment and thus the squarification (if I may coin the phrase) of the Classical avant-garde, its acceptance by the mainstream, is somewhat similar to the move towards an increasingly traditionalist approach to Zen being practiced by such organizations as the Rochester Zen Center, whose Roshi, Philip Kapleau, was interested in a Zen methodology more closely aligned with how it is was being practiced in Japan at that time than with much of the do-it-yourself kinds of practice favored by the Beats.<sup>167</sup> While

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<sup>164</sup> Tompkins, "Profiles: Imaginary Landscape", 122.

<sup>165</sup> Tompkins, "Profiles: Imaginary Landscape", 126-128.

<sup>166</sup> Tompkins, Profiles: Imaginary Landscape", 128.

<sup>167</sup> It is interesting to consider whether Cage has moved fully into the culture industry or whether he remains firmly in the camp of the avant-garde or somewhere in between. Works that had once been greeted with admonishment or musicians ruining them out of protest are now performed with the respect given a piece by Mozart, Bach, or Beethoven. *4'33"* for instance was recently performed by the BBC Orchestra in 2004 in the Barbican center where it was broadcast over television and radio with commentary by presenters. On the other hand it appeared hard for even the conductor to take the work too seriously. In between the first and second movements he wiped his brow with mock exhaustion to the sound of laughter from the audience. The audience also coughed between movements instead of allowing themselves to behave naturally as was Cage's original Zen-oriented wish. At the end of the performance the work was received by a huge round of applause. John Cage is still seen by many as well outside the mainstream of the musical world and it is hard to know whether listeners of classical music have really caught up to John Cage's vision of the democracy of sounds as music.

the American musical establishment was beginning to accept avant-garde practices  
American Zen was moving towards the Squares, with their stress on tradition and a 'right  
way' of practicing Zen. An establishment mentality was taking over.

## Happenings and Fluxus: The Wonder of the Everyday

But no reactionary move exists without a backlash. While the American art establishment was embracing once anathema abstract painting as its favorite house style some artists were moving in a different direction. Several burgeoning movements were developing including Pop Art and Minimalism. In New York, artist Allan Kaprow was inventing a new kind of art experience that mixed performance, process, and participation, known as “Happenings.” Happenings were about art and life merging and developed through Kaprow’s interest in American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey as well as in Zen’s philosophical underpinnings associated with the merging of spirituality with everyday life. It was a reflection of the experience of the ordinary by enacting within it performed action, which was meant to connote life as it is ordinarily lived or experienced. The Happening’s exploration of the elimination of the fourth wall and of the participation between the performers and the audience meant that it was moving closer to breaking down the barrier between art and life. This was Kaprow’s stated goal.

In Zen, all actions, if performed according to an appreciation of the moment (that is not done in a distracted fashion), are considered Zen. In bringing spirituality down to the level of the everyday, simple actions whether spontaneous or carefully planned take on the sanctity of religious activities and may lead to instantaneous realization or enlightenment. Kaprow had a similar goal in mind with his Happenings. Instead of operating in a symbolic place of culture well above the incidental moments of ordinary experience, the idea was that art becomes equivalent to those moments as it merges with life, eliminating the distance between the symbolic place of art and the real. Kaprow used ordinary objects in ordinary ways, although the performances were not, and were not meant to be, one-to-one copies of the actions of everyday life, retaining a theatrical quality. The elements enacted by performers are carefully constructed in a way where actions are deliberate, not spontaneous, and performed with precision, which then juxtaposes itself with the more unplanned actions of the audience. In Zen one must be disciplined and participate in certain rituals which have a pre-formulated structure. At the same time in certain environments, such as in dialogues with the master, the Zen student is encouraged to be spontaneous and not be tied to words as symbols or to prescribed ways of behaving. On the other hand Happenings moved away from Zen in one crucial way. They still remained symbolic in that they simulated everyday actions or activities, such as the life of a busy city, for instance, but did so through the language of theater and performance, with actors playing roles instead of merely as actions participated in as they would ordinarily in life. Happenings in this form therefore are not very Zen, as Zen maintains a direct correspondence between practice and reality. Any symbolism associated with activity is conceptualizing what should be experienced directly.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> There is one caveat to this. In Zen poetry or stories, metaphors are often utilized to help express certain Zen ideas. At the same time those who use them realize their imperfection and drawbacks. Poetry is, of course, an action of trying to express what cannot be expressed in language. Therefore Zen masters who used metaphors such as pearls, streams, or a finger pointing at the moon realize that these are merely stand-ins, mental images, and therefore not really true reality.

One Happening entitled *Calling* from 1965 is a good example of what Kaprow had in mind. The performance began at three different corners in New York City, where participants waited to be picked up by different cars. They carried paper bags in which were placed tin foil, cord in a ball, and muslin. When 4:30 came the cars arrived and they got in after their names were yelled out. The cars began to drive around Manhattan as three participants were wrapped in the foil. 4:50 arrived and each car was parked. Everyone inside the car except the sole member in tinfoil got out of it. The car was then locked and a coin was put into a meter. As the work progressed the three cars were driven to other destinations and three other cars replaced them. These cars were once again “shuffled” and new passengers were added to the mix. The cars drove around until 5:45 when they were meant to bring the wrapped passengers to Grand Central Terminal. By the time they arrived a large crowd had arrived at the station and two of the participants began yelling out the name of one another. Then the wrapped participants removed the tin foil and went to phone booths on the premises. They called the original drivers, who waited for fifty rings to answer. The drivers answered the phone with a simple “hello” and then hung up immediately. The second part of the performance took place in New Jersey the following day. Participants walked around a forest as they heard voices calling the names of other performers in the Happening who had been hung from trees, upside down, in muslin bags. As Kaprow describes it:

For perhaps ten minutes the names of the five hanging people were the material for a random vocal symphony, sounding from various locations and with various volumes and quantities. Finally the pauses in the calling grew longer and the voices stopped. The five people who had been stripped of their clothing still hung in their uncomfortable positions. After a moment, a sound was heard among the trees indicating that someone had begun to leave. The hanging people swung down, and everyone moved slowly and quietly out of the woods.<sup>169</sup>

While Kaprow’s goal was to move experience into the realm of art in the Deweyian sense, that is to make art so confused with experience that the two had become equal, my contention is that the result was very much the opposite. The extreme theatrics of an event such as this, its use of costumes, props, and a pre-determined scheme negates any pretenses it might have towards an emulation or exact copy of ordinary experience. Its theatricality, an acting out of elements of life while combining them with elements of the surreal, the dramatic, and in a sense the poetic makes it move too far into the realm of representation for it to be considered ordinary experience. It is too self-conscious of its own attempt to be true to life. It is therefore too symbolically laden and to be considered a true expression of Zen. In another related issue, the Happenings created by Kaprow were too tied up with the identity and personality, and therefore the particular ego of Alan Kaprow, for them to exist as works in and of themselves. Each of his works has its own particular identity, as an element of a certain time and place and this is very different from the timeless quality of the moment found in Zen or *4’33”*. By the 1980s his works

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<sup>169</sup> Sandford, Mariellen R. *Happenings and Other Acts* (London: Routledge, 1995), 197-198.

would become more personal and a Zen influence more palpable, but for the time being, their theatrical nature made them too indirect to be put under this heading of Zen-inspired art.

It might be possible to look at Happenings as a kind of extremely structured ritual, something that helps us see reality more clearly through a pre-constructed and in this case theatrical means. However here we also run into a problem since the elements of Happenings, such as part two of *Calling*, where participants wandered around in a forest, were too unpredictable to be considered ritual. They allowed for some elements of chance within the extremely rigid pre-formulated structure, while ritual, on the other hand, is always consistent, with every action meant to be performed in precisely the same way, such as the Japanese Tea Ceremony (a kind of Zen performance) or specifically Zen rituals such as the taking of the Three Refuges or any of the many ceremonies performed by Zen monks on a daily basis.<sup>170</sup> Even the ways one sits for zazen or walk in kinhin become a form of ritual in Zen.<sup>171</sup> There is a right way and a wrong way to do everything. Spontaneity does not enter into the ritual and is left for certain situations such as in consultation with the master, where it takes on the form of its own kind of ritual, where a student performs a spontaneous action as a way of showing an unmediated expression of reality. In the Happening however, though the basic structure has been set, unpredictability (and occasional mishaps) become a part of the performance itself, especially when the audience enters into it.

On the other hand, another kind of performance work was being created around the same time by artists in the Fluxus movement called “events” which relate much more closely to Zen. Kaprow’s Happenings draw a direct link to Fluxus events and performance, while at the same time being something different entirely. Both Kaprow and several Fluxus artists owe a debt to John Cage and his particular method of teaching composition. Kaprow was one of Cage’s New School students along with many who would join the Fluxus movement. His class could be considered as the beginning of the 1960s performance art movements, since from 1957-1959 Cage’s students included such artists and musicians as Lamonte Young, George Brecht, Dick Higgins, Jim Dine, Al Hanson, Larry Poons, and others. As Cage explained “I wasn’t concerned with a teaching situation that involved a body of material to be transmitted to them.”<sup>172</sup> In this way he allowed them to experiment and open up their art to a wider range of influences. In this class George Brecht invented the ‘event score’, a kind of short instruction that would be used in Fluxus performance. The model of classroom as experimental laboratory was an important step forward into the realm of experimental art. The creators of Fluxus Events

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<sup>170</sup> All practicing Buddhists are expected to take the Three Refuges. “I take refuge in Buddha. I take refuge in dharma. I take refuge in sangha.” Anderson, Reb. *Being Upright: Zen Meditation and the Bodhisattva Precepts*, (Berkeley: Rodmell Press, 2000), 40. The dharma is a statement of fact: the way the world is according to Buddha. The Sangha is the religious community of Buddhism.

<sup>171</sup> Walking meditation.

<sup>172</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 1.

and Happenings modeled their processes on what was learned in Cage's class.<sup>173</sup> However the two were very distinct in how they operated. Young M. Park describes Fluxus Events as being much more minimalist than Happenings, without all the dressings of Kaprow's theatricality.<sup>174</sup> Thus they could be seen as stripping away theater in order to leave only pure expression, unmediated by dramatic convention.

Fluxus was an international art movement that included artists from the United States, Europe, and Asia. Wolfgang Dreschler explains that the term "Fluxus" does not only refer to constant flux, but also to endless possibilities. But, he argues, new boundaries were arranged since total anarchy means that an avant-garde cannot move any further forward.<sup>175</sup> Fluxus artists did move art in a new direction. As a movement it has often been compared to Dada in its rejection of tradition and elements of high culture. On the other hand its anarchic spirit, unlike Dada, was neither expressly political (despite George Maciunas' best efforts) nor anti-establishment. As the Fluxus artist Dick Higgins put it:

Early Happenings and Fluxus (like the works of Rauschenberg and Johns) were often dismissed as "neo-Dada." This was, of course, extremely annoying and embarrassing to those of us who knew that Dada was or had been . . . Fluxus seems to be like Dada . . . at least like the popular image of Dada . . . in being crazy, iconoclastic, essentially a negative tendency towards rejecting all precedents, and so on. . . Fluxus was never as undirected as Dada, never so close to its historical precedents.<sup>176</sup>

It was overall the playfulness of Fluxus and its lack of nihilism or politics, descriptions that have also been often used for Zen, that separated it from Dada. As Higgins argues, these artists were involved with "replacing the illusion of a unified field of representation (the perceptively coherent film space) with primary experience."<sup>177</sup> This is exactly Zen's goal. Members of Fluxus embraced different philosophies including Zen, in much the same way beat Zennists had done the decade before. Much of the Zen influence came from John Cage. It can be argued that Fluxus took Cage's ideas and began to apply them to a whole host of areas that Cage had not engaged with or only touched on, such as theater, film, and poetry.

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<sup>173</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 9-11.

<sup>174</sup> Park, *Fluxus Art*, 37.

<sup>175</sup> Dreschler, Wolfgang, "Sonatine for Goldfish." In *Nam June Paik: Video Time – Videos Space*. Ed., Kellein, Thomas, and Stooss, Toni. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1993), 41.

<sup>176</sup> Dick Higgins "Fluxus theory and reception." Paper presented in *Fluxus: A Workshop Series, Aternate Traditions in Contemporary Arts*, The University of Iowa School of Art and Art History, April 1985, 4, quoted in Park, *Zen Art*, 37-38.

<sup>177</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 22.

Hannah Higgins models Fluxus Events as a way for the participant in a work would be brought back into direct ordinary experience and away from simple representation.<sup>178</sup> Often an artist or participant would perform a specific unmediated action. One example of this would be George Brecht's *Drip Music* from 1959 where the score delineated that water from one full container be placed so that water fall into an empty one: it was up to the performer how the piece would be performed. *Drip Music* relies on an extremely Zen-like appreciation of the moment. A single, what some would consider banal action is performed in such a way that it is given the import of a great performance. The action itself, not the ego of the performer, becomes the star of the piece. If the audience allows themselves to give the piece any kind of serious attention, to view it like they would a piece a serious work of art, theater, or music, with very little or no irony (something that might be difficult to do), then the piece achieves something similar to 4'33". It becomes about the beauty of such a simple action or expression (or not so simple depending on how the work is performed). In a simpler version it could allude to the sound of water moving from vessel to vessel, or in an elaborate to the noises it makes moving through all kinds of mechanisms. The main point of Events like this was for those taking part in the action to experience life without any sort of filter and to raise ordinary bits and pieces of experience to the level of art or, conversely, to bring art down to the level of life. I would argue that this was exactly the same goal as that of Zen, and that through this direct action one tapped into the same kind of unmediated confrontation with and exploration of the everyday.

Fluxus artists also created "Fluxkits" which were basically boxes in which were contained objects that could be looked at or manipulated or instructions that could be followed either in one's imagination or in reality. Higgins describes one such work by Fluxus artist Laurie Reinsteint that breaks down our conception of art as separate from life. Reinsteint had been adamant that this piece was not an artwork:

Her sort-of Fluxkit was, instead, a box of little things special to her but undistinguished by monetary value, rarity, or artisanal skill. By putting these items in a special place all together, she nonetheless claimed, to anyone who looked in her box that they were significant. The claim makes possible certain conversations about her life and interests.<sup>179</sup>

Work such as this brings significance to the ordinary and the everyday. It begins to break down the symbolic order that has pervaded art, and writing and speaking about art for centuries in the West, the claim that art bears some kind of special place above or beyond ordinary experience. What Fluxkits and Events took from Cage was the idea that everything in experience is equally significant and insignificant and that artistic creation can bear the same sorts of emphasis on the seemingly incidental, the overlooked aspects of ordinary life that Zen also sees as deep and meaningful.

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<sup>178</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 22.

<sup>179</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 63.

## Nam June Paik: Transcending Dualities

“In cinema, however, every member of the audience, no matter how sophisticated, is essentially the same level; we all believe that the camera cannot lie. As the film actor and his role are identical, so the image cannot be dissociated from what is imaged. Cinema, therefore gives us what is experienced as the truth of life.”<sup>180</sup> – Susan Sontag

Nam June Paik never claimed to be a Buddhist, stating instead that “No, I am an artist.” At the same time he was influenced by Zen and used it in an even more specific ways than Cage.<sup>181</sup> He avoided Zen as a label despite the fact that many of his early works bore Zen in their titles and also embodied Zen within their conceptual framework. This contradiction and rejection of labels is very consistent with Zen. Artist Earl Brown described Paik as a Zen master because his use of teaching by example, by action not by explanation. In Asia he explained it was “very traditional in the East for master to give directly to pupil (a whack on the head) a sound, or the experience rather than a lecture or an indirect (notational) directive... Paik doesn’t tell somebody, he up and does it.”<sup>182</sup> Even his method of talking was like a Zen master’s. In a 1975 television special on the artist called *Edited for Television*, Paik and Calvin Tompkins, who had arrived as a kind of translator of Paik for the incredulous host of the show, artist Russell Connor, tried to explain Paik’s particular way of explaining things:

**CT:** Nam June never answers the question.

**RC:** He takes an oblique approach?

**CT:** He takes an oblique approach and [brings] up another point entirely.

**NJP:** Yeah. That’s what I learned from Zen koan[s]. I learned from John Cage, and John Cage learned from China.<sup>183</sup>

Paik developed out of performance. Much of this early performance-based work, as well as the later television, film, and video works, correspond directly to Zen. While we have mostly been focusing on the more meditative side of Zen, there is another, more radically violent aspect of the religion as it is practiced and has been for hundreds of years in Japan, Korea, and China. Baas highlights the similarities between Paik’s own

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<sup>180</sup> Sontag, Susan. "Film and Theater." *Tulane Drama Review* 11, no. 1 (1966): 26.

<sup>181</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 179

<sup>182</sup> Brown, Earle. “Planned Panichood.” In “To the Symphony for 20 Rooms.” *An Anthology*, ed. Young, La Monte and Mac Low, Jackson (New York: La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low), 1963. n.p.

<sup>183</sup> "Nam June Paik in EDITED FOR TELEVISION."

anarchic violence and that of Zen practitioners, which can be seen in many Zen stories. While 4'33" is meditation on the "serenity" of the moment, Paik's performances were aggressive and were a way of shocking the audience into the moment.<sup>184</sup>

Zen Buddhism originated in China where it was known as Ch'an. Legend has it that it was brought there by an Indian monk named Bodhidharma. One of the most famous Ch'an masters was Lin-chi who lived during the ninth century. The style of Ch'an that he practiced, later known as Rinzai after the Japanese form of his name, was focused on immediate attainment of satori. One of the ways to do this was through shock, which often took the form of violence. There are countless stories, recounted in the chronicles of Lin-chi, showing moments of outburst or hitting with sticks. These instances happened during a process known as "dharma combat," the point of which was to awaken the student to satori through instantaneous realization. The strikes were a kind of smacking sense into the student, so to speak. Here is an example of such a story:

A Monk named Ting came to the master from the interview and asked about the basic meaning of Buddhism. The Master got down from his chair, grabbed hold of him and gave him a slap. Then he let him go. Ting stood in a daze. Monk standing nearby: "Mr. Ting, why don't you take a bow?" As Ting took the bow he suddenly had enlightenment.<sup>185</sup>

Events such as this and even more aggressive examples were common. Lin-chi's rhetoric also used violent imagery. One of the most famous parts of the chronicles of Lin-chi is an explanation of the elimination of ideas. Since Buddhism is all about experience unfiltered by thought or language, even ideas about Buddhism must be eliminated. Lin-chi therefore gives the metaphor of "killing the Buddha" to illustrate the idea of destroying pre-conceptions:

Whether you're facing inward or facing outward whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha. If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch. If you meet an arhat, kill the arhat. If you meet your parents, kill your parents. If you meet your kinfolk, kill your kinfolk. Then for the first time you will gain emancipation, will not be entangled with things, will pass freely anywhere you wish to go.<sup>186</sup>

This idea of a violent act, which leads to a sudden realization of reality, was practiced by Paik as a major strategy of his early performance and work. Cage also had a

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<sup>184</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 179.

<sup>185</sup> Watson, Burton, transl., *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 97.

<sup>186</sup> Zen Patriarchs are founders of particular sects of Zen. Arhats are Zen practitioners who have reached a certain state high of enlightenment. The particular definition of Arhat differs from school to school. Watson, transl., *Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi*, 52.

particular influence. Gann claims that Cage's book *Silence* would become a "bible" for the artists in the Fluxus movement, along with having an impact on the larger culture.<sup>187</sup> Just as important was Cage's interest in bringing the sound of the world into music in such works as *4'33"*. Cage and Paik met at a special event for composers. Since the end of World War II, the International Summer Courses for New Music had been held in Darmstadt Germany. It was a place for young composers to practice their craft. Hannah Higgins emphasizes that Darmstadt, along with Cage's New School class were important in that they allowed ideas to flow from various ethnicities, disciplines, and age ranges, creating a wider and more well-rounded kind of experimental interchange.<sup>188</sup> In late 1958, Cage went with Tudor to Darmstadt and presented lectures that would later be published in *Silence*. Paik explained that he had at first been skeptical about the prospect of an American composer whose work was crucially based off of Eastern principles, but was soon awakened to new possibilities:

I went there to see the music with a very cynical mind to see what Americans [would] do with Oriental heritage . . . In the middle of [the] concert slowly, slowly I got turned on and by the end of the concert I was a completely different man.<sup>189</sup>

He also explained the influence of *4'33"*:

What was completely new and also really revealing was his piano piece . . . which was consciously very boring. . . At first I thought this is ridiculous . . . but then I thought, actually Zen is boring too, so maybe there is something, and then I [changed] my mind . . . and that was very profound.<sup>190</sup>

This idea of the spirituality of boredom was something Cage took very seriously:

If we are in a state where we are being. . . bored, then we are neither interested nor not interested. We are . . . approaching a state of mind where we could be interested. In other words at the point of being bored, if we truly went through it we would come out in the state of the opposite of boredom, intense awareness.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence*, 194.

<sup>188</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 11.

<sup>189</sup> "Nam June Paik in EDITED FOR TELEVISION."

<sup>190</sup> "Nam June Paik in EDITED FOR TELEVISION."

<sup>191</sup> "Nam June Paik in EDITED FOR TELEVISION."

Paik saw the importance of the unfolding and experience of time as crucial to understanding his musical pieces. Simultaneously Paik was interested, much like Cage, in providing a technological artistic means for the viewer experience the world:

It is high time to let sounds issue in time independent of a beat in order to show a musical recognition of the necessity of time which has already been recognized on the part of broadcast communications, radio, television, not to mention magnetic tape, not to mention travel by air . . . no matter what point at not matter what time, not to mention telephony.<sup>192</sup>

Many of Paik's early works were participatory and therefore also were about play, chance, and impermanence. Paik combined his interest in Buddhism and Western philosophy with one in science, investigating the way particles worked and throwing out all of his books except those he kept on the workings of TV sets. He thought of particles as the very basis of everything, and even called electrons, "*essence AND existence, essentia AND existensia.*"<sup>193</sup> He was always deeply invested in emerging technology and in the cutting edge of what could be created in video and animation especially. In Paik's pieces, the manipulation of equipment became a visual aspect of his works. Just like Cage, Paik always was tinkering with machines. Although the works were often simple to create them took much technical ability to create them. Paik had wanted to mix nature and technology into a synergized whole. He was also interested in contemporary theories of cybernetics, which he compared to Zen. Paik said that cybernetics, which had been precipitated by German discoveries:

came to the world in the last war to shoot down German planes from the English sky.

The Buddhists also say

Karma is samsara  
Relationship is metaphycosis  
We are in open circuits.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Cage, *Silence*, 40.

<sup>193</sup> Kellein, Thomas. "The World of Art of the World: Nam June Paik as Philosopher," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 33.

<sup>194</sup> Samsara is the Buddhist cycle of suffering. Since, in Buddhist thought, existence is suffering, and suffering is caused by desire, the only way to free oneself from the endless cycle of suffering is through eliminating desire. In Zen this is accomplished by realizing that there is no such thing as one thing separate from anything else. If someone does not exist as separate from what they desire then they have nothing to desire. Self-realization of this is therefore an elimination of desire and thus freedom from suffering. Paik, Nam June. "Cyberated Art (1966)." In *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artist's Writings*. Peter Seltz and Christine Stiles. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. 434.

Openness is something that is traditionally found in those who view the world in an immediate and sensorial fashion. This can be seen in many Zen figures throughout the century but also in the childlike curiosity, jovial nature and directness that were central to Paik's personality. Calvin Tompkins noted what could be described as his Zen-like simplicity, "No doctrinal statements, no manifestos, no fuss."<sup>195</sup> Paik created several Zen inspired pieces including *Zen for Head*, *Zen for touching*, *Zen for Walking*, *Zen for Film*, and *Zen for TV*. Much like Cage, Rauschenberg, and Kaprow, Paik created works that exist outside of the genres conventionally used to classify art. He was often called the father of video art, however he was also a sculptor and composer, a performer in Happening-like Events, and a prolific writer. His compositional strategies were much influenced by the contemporary thinkers such as R. Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan, who both saw technology as universalizing human understanding. He also looked to Western thought for a theoretical basis; he took courses in German philosophy, and read works by Jean-Paul Sartre. Paik's music, much like Cage's, defies the need for tradition in the interest of sound. As Paik says, "If this word *music* is sacred and reserved for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments, we can substitute a more meaningful term: *organization of sound*."<sup>196</sup>

At the same time Paik linked what was Happening in American art world in the 1960s to Buddhism, while highlighting the contradiction that can be found in the kind of self-oriented existentialism inherent in American thinking.

If there was any spirituality in it at all, then Pop Art and Fluxus were sort of like Mahayana Buddhism, where the only way you can become enlightened is if you're enlightened yourself. No individual has the responsibility or capability to enlighten another, just to recognize his or her own enlightenment. There's a Calvinist thread that runs through a lot of American philosophy that is very individualistic and denies responsibility for collective transcendence.<sup>197</sup>

For him, it was universal spiritual salvation that would lead to the end of suffering, which is also the goal of all forms of Buddhism.

It seems that the art of the sixties that was so attractive to counterculture, college students, and young people spoke out of both sides of its mouth: It preached a kind of universal transcendence as a group, but only if everyone tried hard and wanted it badly enough. It's like Peter Pan wishing for Tinker

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<sup>195</sup> "Nam June Paik in EDITED FOR TELEVISION."

<sup>196</sup> Drescheler, Wolfgang. "Sonatine for Goldfish," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 42.

<sup>197</sup> Ross, David. "A Conversation with Nam June Paik," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 62.

Bell to be alive. If everyone just wished for transcendence together, then it would happen for everyone.<sup>198</sup>

John G. Hanhardt described Paik's method of performing. He was "moving with mercurial grace and shifting his actions with a concentration and intensity that gave the pieces an edgy and other-worldly quality amid the ensemble performance of Fluxus-staged Events."<sup>199</sup> In 1959 Paik performed *Homage à John Cage*, a combination of taped sound and performance that attacked both methods of composition and of instrumentation.<sup>200</sup> It used recorded elements that combined pianos, sound effects, screaming, and recordings of classical music, a collection of noises not unlike some of Cage's chance-based compositions of found sound. Cage attended the performance of Paik's *Etude for Pianoforte* at Darmstadt and the forcefulness of it shocked him. Paik destroyed a piano and then jumped out at the audience, cut off Cage's necktie, rubbed his head and that of David Tudor in shampoo and then stormed out. The whole audience sat in fear for ten minutes after Paik left until he called on a telephone to announce that the performance was over. Cage explained that he had decided, "to think twice before attending another performance by Nam June Paik."<sup>201</sup> The violence and immediate impact of such a work echoes the practices of Chan masters who struck their students with sticks, or even cut off parts of the student's body in order to awaken them to the moment.

The action of destroying meaning through cutting off a body part comes from the Zen story of Gutei who points at the moon as an expression of true reality:

Gutei raised his finger whenever he was asked a question about Zen. A boy attendant began to imitate him in this way. When anyone asked the boy what his master had preached about, the boy would raise his finger.

Gutei heard about the boy's mischief. He seized him and cut off his finger. The boy cried and ran away. Gutei called and stopped him. When the boy turned his head to Gutei, Gutei raised up his own finger. In that instant the boy was enlightened.<sup>202</sup>

In this story the boy becomes attached to the idea that the finger represents true reality. When the teacher had heard that he was copying his method and therefore

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<sup>198</sup> Ross, "A Conversation," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 62.

<sup>199</sup> Hanhardt, John G. *The World of Nam June Paik*. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2000), 30.

<sup>200</sup> Harnhardt, *Nam June Paik*, 24.

<sup>201</sup> Cage, John. "On the Work of Nam June Paik," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 22.

<sup>202</sup> Internet Sacred Text Archive. "The Gateless Gate." Accessed February 15, 2011. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/glg/glg03.htm>.

symbolizing what he heard, he cut off his finger.<sup>203</sup> This pure act of violence was so powerful, in that it woke him up to the truth that through copying the master he was creating symbols out of what he said, that the boy experienced immediate enlightenment. Stories like this are common in Zen literature, and Paik's act of cutting off Cage's tie, therefore, a kind of killing the Buddha in a certain sense, as well as his other violent actions both carry similar connotations. I believe that Paik wished to shock the audience into a place where they become totally aware, involved in a totally direct and unmediated experience, a kind of satori.

Composer Karlheinz Stockhausen described another similar Paik performance, *Étude Platonique No. 3*:

Paik came onto the stage and silence and shocked most of the audience by his actions as quick as lighting. For example, he threw beans against the ceiling which was above the audience and into the audience. He then hid his face behind a roll of paper, which he unrolled infinitely slowly in breathless silence. Then, sobbing softly, he pressed the paper every now and then against his eyes so it became wet with tears. He screamed as he suddenly threw the roll of paper into the audience, and at the same moment he switched on two tape recorders with what was a sound montage typical of him, consisting of women's screams, radio news, children's noise, fragments of classical music and electronic sounds. Sometimes he also switched on an old gramophone of a record of Haydn's string quartet version of the *Deutschlandlied*. Immediately back at the stage ramp he emptied a tube of shaving cream into his hair and smeared its content over his face, over his dark suit and down to his feet. Then he slowly shook a bag of flour or rice over his head. Finally he jumped into a bathtub filled with water and dived completely under water, jumped soaking wet to the piano and began a sentimental salon piece. He then fell forward and hit the piano keyboard several times with his head.<sup>204</sup>

Performances such as this were complex series of actions that resemble elaborate ceremonies. These complex procedures are similar to the meditative practices performed

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<sup>203</sup> Spontaneity is very important in Zen. Zen students are encouraged to answer questions or find solutions to koans in an unpremeditated way as this lack of mental effort also means a lack of symbolization. Answers that are too premeditated and seem too close to the stereotype of Zen answers, too consciously religious "are said to stink of Zen." Watts, Alan. *Eastern Wisdom, Modern Life: Collected Talks: 1960-1969*. (Novato: New World Library, 2006), 155. At the same time enlightenment may be attained through an instant of clarity, a kind of shocking of oneself into consciousness. This may happen from a strike from the master or during a simple task such as slicing bamboo or pouring water, anything really. It is this idea of immediate enlightenment versus the long slow attainment achieved through meditation that is the cause of the main split between Buddhist schools.

<sup>204</sup> Harnhardt, *Nam June Paik*, 30.

by Zen monks as they do particular tasks or arts. For instance, in Zen it is common for monks in a monastery to sweep up and wipe down the building. This is not merely done out of necessity but as a meditative act. Activities such as sweeping, if done correctly, since they are by their nature purely physical and take very little or no mental activity to perform, are perfect for meditation. One can become aware of the act of sweeping and in so move into an appreciation of the moment. Zen monks also rake sand gardens, perform particular religious rituals, or participate in arts such as gardening or painting with precision. Paik takes his particularly violent expressions and puts them into a similar form. He is still concentrating on the moment; he just turns up its intensity creating the opposite extreme of the calm Buddhist meditative actions. In Zen both extremes are expressions of reality as neither one exists as separate from the other.

Paik's work combines all levels of emotion, from high happiness, to anger, and sorrow. He not only commits violence against the audience but also against himself, and therefore shows that neither he nor the audience bears any greater level of importance.<sup>205</sup> At the same time he becomes a prop in the performance, no more crucial to it than the piano, gramophone record, or rolls of paper. Through violating his body through his newfound position as performative object, he denies his own ego as separate from that of the objects he manipulates; subject and object disappear, and we are left with the performance as thing in itself. The actions are not symbolic of anything but merely exist in and of themselves, and their meaninglessness is thus their meaning. In both etudes, he denies the importance of the human being; he kills the Buddha (John Cage), and he cuts of the student's finger.

Violence as a method of destroying the barrier between self and other can also be seen in a video work, *TV Bra* from 1970, where cellist Charlotte Moorman screams at the camera for several seconds, her image reflected on the bra that she wears composed of tiny television sets. The immediacy and pureness of this action, its expression of the purity of the moment is deeply Zen. There is no mediation in a scream; it is a form of direct communication and like an answer to a koan, it is a spontaneous expression of reality without the filter of words or concepts. At the same time her scream reaches into our space and eliminates the distance created by the barrier of the television on which it is seen. For a moment, she closes the gap between herself and us.

In another meditation on the transcendence of duality, *Concerto for TV Cello and Videotapes* from 1971, Paik became a cello with a string placed over him while Moorman played the string. The result was a meditation on moving beyond the illusion of the ego-self. In this work two become one through Paik gave up his ego in order to become a mock musical instrument, and Moorman and he united in the way musicians seem to unite with their instruments.

Paik performed his work *Zen for Head*, another meditation on transcending self and other, which was an adaptation of a piece by Lamonte Young, at the "Fluxus International Festival of Very New Music", the first official festival of the group. Young's only direction for the piece was "Draw a straight line and follow it." The work consisted of Paik wetting his hair in a mixture of tomato juice and ink and drawing a line down a paper scroll. The result was similar to Rauschenburg and Cage's tire track

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<sup>205</sup> Paik's violence was also a rejection of the narrow constraints of performance, of its passivity.

painting and also derivative of Zen brush painting.<sup>206</sup> Through smearing the paint down the scroll of paper with his head Paik creates an act of violence against himself and the paper while eliminating the distance, both in reality and metaphorically, between himself and what he creates. Several Fluxus artists created similar works including Shigeo Kubota, whose *Vagina Painting*, involved the artist strapping a paintbrush to herself, squatting, and painting on sheets of paper on the floor. The result is an expression of a spontaneous moment of creativity, and the elimination of mediation between the work and the body, something also found contemporaneously in the Gutai movement in Japan.

Paik's work was also controversial. It was often sexual as well as violent and even ended once in citations and an arrest because of nudity.<sup>207</sup> Sensory assault and acts of spontaneous violence were not only practiced by Paik but by other Fluxus artists who used similar strategies. John Cavanaugh, for instance, created a film work called *Flicker* where alternating black and clear film attacks the viewer's visual sense. In the end this tires the eyes and leads to difficulty in viewing the work.<sup>208</sup> *Flicker* represents an experience of seeing that is beyond anything ordinary and allows for an experience of elimination of the ego as separate from the world outside since the body finds it difficult to think when it is over-stimulated in such a fashion. On other extreme from *Flicker* was Yoko Ono's *Eyeblink* from 1966. The film consists of an eye blinking in slow motion and forces the viewer to become aware of every mechanical bit of the eye in its physical process.<sup>209</sup> It therefore slows down our understanding of the moment and collapses time as we concentrate on this simple physical action. Paul Sharits' many film works were either silent or had looped sound and almost nausea-inducing flickering visuals. The overstimulation of the senses created by a work like *T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G.* from 1969, which consists of several images of a man being violated in different ways along with other less discernable images which alternate with full color frames and an audio loop which says the word "destroy" slowly over and over, breaks down our ability to recognize the film as code embodying a symbolic meaning. The work forces the viewer into the moment,

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<sup>206</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 181.

<sup>207</sup> According to Charlotte Moorman during a performance of Stockhausen's *The Originale* in 1964 in New York, which included direction by Allan Kaprow, and performance by Allen Ginsberg, Paik, and Charlotte Moorman, Paik was handcuffed to the scaffolding where the performance was taking place. Those performing thought it was part of the work but Moorman claims it was in fact "sabotage." She called the police. The whole performance was cited for multiple criminal infractions including those by Moorman herself, who was mostly nude and for the presence of a chimpanzee who was wandering around the site without a trainer. They were cited for multiple infractions. "'The Originale' Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik by Fred Stern." Youtube.com. Accessed March 31, 2011.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wiEJdOlgcDE>. During a performance of *Opera Sextronique* in 1964, Moorman was arrested for performing topless. She was convicted for exposing herself. She claims that her trial led to the loosening of exposure laws relating to public art performances in New York State. The story became front-page news. "Opera Sextronic', Charlotte Morman and Nam June Paik by Fred Stern." *Youtube*. Web. 31 Mar 2011.

<sup>208</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 17.

<sup>209</sup> Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 21.

hypnotizing them and creating a confrontation between them and pure experience. Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, a performance from 1964 consisted of members of the audience coming up and cutting off pieces of her clothing until she was almost completely exposed. In what was nearly an act of puppeteering, Ono forced the viewer into a participatory role, something common in her work. Unlike many of her more whimsical instructional pieces, however, this one makes the audience to participate in an act of violation against the artist, reversing the role we saw in Paik's performance work or in Sharits' or Cavanaugh's films. In so doing it still enables a similar forceful location of the audience to the moment.

Cage noted that Paik had created works at both extremes of reality, however he explained that as Suzuki had mentioned, "in Zen there's not much difference between the two."<sup>210</sup> On the other end of the spectrum from Paik's aggressive performance pieces were his more meditative ones that also contained a Zen spirit. Cage was invited to see Paik's *Zen for Film* a few years after the performance at Darmstadt. The work reminded him of a couple of quotes by Zen masters. "The mind is like a mirror; it collects dust; the problem is to remove the dust." "Where is the mirror? Where is the dust?"<sup>211</sup> Cage himself compared *4'33"* to *Zen for Film*. The appropriately titled film, which was twenty-three minutes in length, consisted of a completely blank film leader. As the film passed its way through the projector every once in a while a fleck of dust or a scratch that had accumulated on it, in the projector, and in the air, would be perceptible from time to time over the course of the film's duration.

Viewing Paik's film becomes a meditative experience and a kind of Rauschenberg *White Painting* in motion. By concentrating on the dust and scratches that appear on the blank film one comes into contact with an unmediated experience. There need be no images on the film as in a Cagean sense: the emptiness of the reel is as interesting as a film filled with imagery and narrative. This also is a meditation on presence and absence where one cannot notice the dust without coming into contact with its opposite, the film reel.

It is also the opposite of Cavanaugh's *Flicker* or Sharits' *T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G.*, and similar to Ono's *Eyblink*, slowing down the experience of viewership as opposed to speeding it up. The end result, if you can get past either the nausea of *Flicker* or *T.O.U.C.H.I.N.G.* or the boredom of *Eyblink* or *Zen for Film* is the same: a recognition and direct experience of the moment. Time, which is the main element that separates film from the other visual arts, becomes placed within the realm of a totally different kind of experience.

Typically film is constructed either through narrative or through a series of images with or without sound. Here, however, we have no images, at least not in the conventional sense. The emptiness of the reel with its occasional dirt and structural imperfections may become as interesting to a concentrating viewer as a film filled with abstract images or narrative elements. Therefore the experience of viewership has changed completely. The linear nature of most film has been totally destroyed and has

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<sup>210</sup> Cage, "On the Work of Nam June Paik," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 22.

<sup>211</sup> Cage, "Nam June Paik," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 22.

been replaced by the immediacy of a moment that is constantly changing. There is also, of course, no sound except for the whirring of the projector, which may act as a kind of focusing agent on the piece itself, something that is also monotonous but which through its monotony has a kind of rhythmic beauty.

Zen for Film can also be seen, through this Zen-oriented lens, as a work of “expanded cinema.” In his *An Introduction to American Underground Film* Sheldon Renan defined the term, expanded cinema:

*Expanded cinema* is not the name of a particular style of film-making. It is a name for a spirit of inquiry that is leading in many different directions. It is cinema expanded to include many different projectors in the showing of one work. It is cinema expanded to include computer-generated images and the electronic manipulation of images on television. It is cinema expanded to the point at which the effect of film may be produced without the use of film at all.<sup>212</sup>

The work is therefore part of an opening up of the field in much the same way as Cage opened up the musical field. It finds itself aligned with one specific goal of film throughout its existence: the attempt to create a reflection of life. The experience of watching a film, for someone like Roland Barthes, should be an immersive one. “The image captivates me, captures me: I am *glued* to the representation, and it is this glue which established the *naturalness* (the pseudo-nature) of the filmed scene...”<sup>213</sup>

The achievement in *Zen for Film*, if it is successful in its attempt, is exactly this. It is the total immersion of the viewer into the moment. The visual noise upon the blank film’s surface marks an awareness of temporal unfolding from moment to moment. This immersion can also easily become fascination in Barthes’ model and an appreciation of the moment removed from intellectual criticality can become, in Barthes’ language, an “amorous” sight, since we may become captivated by the image on screen well past the point of mere disinterested pleasure.<sup>214</sup> In her description of the difference between theater and film Susan Sontag argues that the purpose of film is exactly this projection of the real. “Theatre deploys artifice while cinema is committed to reality, indeed to an ultimately physical reality which is ‘redeemed’ to use Siegfried Kracauer’s striking word, by the camera.”<sup>215</sup> In *Zen for Film* we are not seeing an image of reality but reality itself projected. In this case reality is not redeemed by the camera but by the projection itself and therefore ultimately by the entire film apparatus.

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<sup>212</sup> Renan, Sheldon. *An Introduction to the American Underground Film*. (New York: E.P. and Co., Inc., 288), 1967.

<sup>213</sup> Barthes, Roland. *The Rustle of Language*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 348.

<sup>214</sup> Barthes, *Rustle of Language*, 349.

<sup>215</sup> Sontag, "Film and Theater." 26.

According to Sontag:

From the beginning of film history, there were painters and sculptors who claimed that cinema's true future resided in artifice, construction. It lay not in figurative narration or story-telling of any kind (either in a relatively realistic or in a surrealist vein), but in abstraction.<sup>216</sup>

But here the very abstraction of the image, that is its move away from imagery is in fact a move towards reality in that it is the world that is found upon the film reel. The direct experience of the work that we have in *Zen for Film* is common in general for works of expanded cinema. As Liz Kotz explains, "In more painterly, expressionist manifestations, expanded media tends to rely on notions of sensory impact and visual presence that imply an ahistorical subject, a viewer whose physiology can be accessed directly through sensation."<sup>217</sup> And that is exactly what happens in the direct confrontation between the work and the viewer in *Zen for Film*, as the impact of the work is its simplicity and directness, its lack of any unnecessary elements, just like *Zen* itself.

In expanded cinema in general and *Zen for Film* in particular it is not only the work itself, contained within the actual projection, that is part of the experience but also the room in which it is contained, the audience who views it, and the mechanical aspects of its projection, what is referred to in film theory as the "apparatus." The entrance of the work into the space means that all aspects of its projection and reception become part of that work.

As Barthes puts it:

. . . by letting oneself be fascinated *twice over*, by the image and by its surroundings—as if I had two at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishize not the image but precisely what exudes it: the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theater, leaving the hall, in short, in order to distance, in order to "take off," I complicate a "relation" by a "situation."<sup>218</sup>

In one showing of *Zen for Film* there was a performance element. Paik stood in front of the projection "meditating or performing some simple act" and in the process directly engage the conditions of projection as well as the 'content' of the work itself.<sup>219</sup> This meditative interaction served to enliven the work, as well as closing the gap between

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<sup>216</sup> Sontag, "Film and Theater." 26.

<sup>217</sup> Kotz, Liz. "Post-Cagean Aesthetics and the Event Score." *October* 95 (2011): 45.

<sup>218</sup> Barthes, *Rustle of Language*, 349.

<sup>219</sup> Renan, *American Underground Film*, 241.

art and life. A pantomime of meditation on a blank film reel could easily be seen as ironic. This may be (Paik was always a jokester), however I believe this was also a deeply reverential nod to Zen meditation, to the sensory perception of existence unfolding, removed from symbolism, which is the heart of Zen tradition. When all conditions of the film's showing are recognized and concentrated upon, viewership then becomes a total experience where all barriers are broken down much as they are in Zen meditation.

This is also an expression of the Zen concept of transcendence of dualities through the expansion of the image beyond the confines of the screen onto which it is projected. Since the reel is blank and there are no 'images' to see, we are forced to confront its tactility as material as well as it as a representation upon a screen. We realize that it is an object in the world and that any image that lies upon it cannot be separated from that materiality. The film is also covered by dust and scratches and is therefore directly impacted by the larger world, which is then transformed into an image that we view.

Since the dust and scratches are contained upon a reel, which goes through a projector and is therefore a product of time the constant change allows for a constantly unfolding of the viewership experience, in other words, for constantly new moments of awareness. Sontag wrote, ". . . both cinema and theatre are temporal acts. Like music (and unlike painting), everything is *not* present all at once." But here everything is present both all at once as the image is merely on blank film reel that moves like a painted hand scroll as a single object, and also like a hand scroll unfolds over time with each section a new reality like a scroll is unrolled section by section. Change in the amount of scratches on the film used and the amount of dust in the room, in the projector, and on the film, as well as changes in the performance element (if there is a performance element), shows us that part of Paik's intention was that the work is never the same twice. Just like perceptual reality it is constantly shifting and changing. As Zen teaches, transience is a crucial aspect of life. Nothing is ever quite the same.

Paik continued his technological meditations into the realm of television. He was a pioneer in using televisions for artworks. He also thought it was the premier new art As Renan describes it:

Television is like film, but it is not film. When a viewer sees a film he is seeing an image made up of light moderated by shadow, and the texture of its thousands and thousands of tiny grains, usually imperceptible. When he watches television he is seeing an image made up of a florescent light, and the texture of hundreds of visible horizontal lines. The quality of the image is different. The quality of the television image is of immediacy and never of spectacle (film); of flow and never of stability (film). Films are frequently run on television, but then their effect is not film, but of television.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Renan, *American Underground Film*, 241.

From Paik's point of view the television allowed for an increased level of complexity in that through the alteration of electrons what could be seen on screen could itself be altered. Renan described what exactly Paik was up to:

Paik works with television in several ways. He may adjust the interior mechanism of a set so that it shows a garbled, but aesthetically pleasing image. Or he may interfere with the cathode ray beam of the television tube via a powerful electromagnet, making its electrons trace force-field patterns across the picture tube. And working with a videotape recorder, Paik may record from many different television channels to make a television collage on tape. He also, of course, can perform electromagnetic manipulations on the video recorder.<sup>221</sup>

*Zen for TV* from 1963, part of Paik's larger *Exposition of Music- Electronic Television* exhibition, was one such work. He took a television set and altered it in such a way that it appeared, at first, to be broken. All that is left of any kind of image is a single white line, which fluctuates slightly atop the dark background of the screen. Here, however, through its absence of content, the work once again becomes a focus of concentration, once again a meditation on emptiness. While one could argue that this time the emptiness really is empty, that the absence of content means this is a nihilistic vision, the truth is that the flicker of the TV set as the white bar only barely perceptually vibrates is an expression of the presence inherent in emptiness. As Cage learned in the anechoic chamber and demonstrated in *4'33*," there is no such thing as silence, no such thing as emptiness, but there is always sound, always something there. Here Paik illustrates there is always some form of energy present even if it is just molecules or electrons. The fluctuation of the waves could even act as a kind of meditative aid, allowing one to concentrate on the pulsating line as one may stare at a mandala or Zen garden and in so doing become lost in the intricacies of the vibrations of light and dark, pure sensory perception, as well as in the corresponding relationship between presence and absence.

While it would probably ordinarily be conceived of as broken, the television in *Zen for TV* from 1963 takes on the demonstrably functional task of fascinating a viewer, who, if concentrating for long enough, can become transfixed by the ebb and flow of electrons across the monitor's surface. It also works on different level from that which television usually does. TV, which is often viewed as a kind of distraction and whose viewership typically operates through short-term attention, is now transformed, allowing for this new meditative function. As we see throughout Paik's work, he has turned the purpose of television on its head, changing its role and the method of activation of its audience. Finally the work becomes about those electrons themselves, the very force that makes any action possible. The light particles fly across the screen at an incredible rate, appearing to our eyes as a single line, and therefore embodying presence and energy, while, behind them, the blank screen embodies absence and stasis, the two opposites of being held in harmony. Substance and absence exist once again together as they do in the Zen void.

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<sup>221</sup> Renan, *American Underground Film*, 244.

Much of Paik's work dealt directly with television as both subject and medium. As Paik said, "I was a social thinker. TV was so prevalent, so we had to think about it. I was going to make TV high art, like Johann Sebastian Bach." He also explained "I react to Zen in the same way as I react to Johann Sebastian Bach."<sup>222</sup> Some of Paik's first television pieces dealt directly with chance and indeterminacy as well as with participation and play. In this way his work used the same Zen-based principles that Cage used as compositional methods. At the same time he brought in visual elements, which created an added complexity.<sup>223</sup> He began developing participatory pieces even before his television work. *In Random Access* from 1963, the participant played with a radio, a record player, and a stack of records. This person could manipulate the work by turning the radio's volume knobs or choosing certain records that hung from a string and switching them on and off. His early television works took this idea further by creating situations that allowed for manipulation of both picture and sound. The *Exposition of Music- Electronic Television* in 1963, which included some of these works. *Participation TV* featured a television hooked up to a microphone. As the participant spoke into the microphone patterns of light would move around the television in a random fashion. *Point of Light* was a simpler piece where turning a volume knob on and off would lead to a pin prick of light in the middle of the screen increasing and decreasing in size. Finally *Kuba TV* consisted of an image on the screen growing and shrinking in size after the viewer turns up and down the volume knobs. The effect of these works was, like Kaprow's Happenings, to open up the creative process to the viewers and in so doing allow for a greater range of elements from the outside world to come into the work. While *Point of Light* and *Kuba TV* were fairly limited in this goal, they still were groundbreaking in their acceptance of the viewer as a part of the work. In this way they broke down the distance between the viewer and the work, between subject and object. *Participation TV* pushed these ideas even further by allowing the very sound of the viewer's voice to change the work itself. In this way indeterminacy and chance become powerful groundings for the piece. The work also is a kind of play with light and sound, reminiscent of Alan Watts' explanation of how play, in Zen, is an expression of existence itself:

In the jungles and on the terraces in mountain communities for as long as anyone can remember people have gotten together to do a thing I call "digging sound." Some people still play with this sonic energy of the universe, in just the same way as I described somebody playing with the water while swimming. When these people do this, they don't worry about where they

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<sup>222</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 185.

<sup>223</sup> Cage would also explore visual elements in much of his work. Apart from creating some visual art he also participated in events that included projected visuals. He had a longtime partnership with the choreographer Merce Cunningham whose dance pieces also explored concepts of indeterminacy and chance. Cage's scores were visual pieces in and of themselves. Finally, certain works such as *Water Music* involved extremely visual elements as part of the performance, including, in that case, a performer blowing a kazoo into water creating a rippling effect on its surface.

are going, or what their destiny is, or any such nonsense. Instead, they are completely alive.<sup>224</sup>

D.T. Suzuki also explained the importance of returning to a childlike worldview:

Man is a thinking reed but his great works are done when he is not calculating and thinking. 'Childlikeness' has to be restored with long years of training in the art of self-forgetfulness. When this is attained, man thinks yet he does not think. He thinks like showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like the waves rolling on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage.<sup>225</sup>

Indeterminacy too was investigated in these and similar works. In 1965 Paik created several works that moved television further into the realm of art through further experiments in manipulation. In *Magnet TV*, participation has been taken out and replaced by the interference of natural laws. A magnet sitting atop a television creates waves, which move and flow according to the movement of electrons, as the magnet prevents cathode rays from filling the screen. If the magnet is put in one place the image did not move, but if its position altered the image begins to move around the screen in different patterns. *TV Buddha* dates from later on, 1974, but it relates directly to similar ideas about viewership and Zen concentration. This work is about raising us as viewers up to the level of the Buddha with technology as a catalyst.<sup>226</sup> The work consists of a Buddha statue, which sits in zazen in front of a camera and a TV set. The video camera projects the Buddha into the set. Therefore the Buddha is in effect contemplating an image of himself. The camera was a later edition, as originally the work was meant to be merely the Buddha watching television.<sup>227</sup>

As usual Paik is playing with us and with our pre-conceptions in both a comical and serious way. Thus his gesture was not only an ironic one. I contend that it could also be read as a powerful comment on the Zen concept of the disintegration of the ego upon the realization of existence. The destruction of duality can also be seen in the difference between the stone Buddha and the Buddha made of light. Walter Smith has compared the two Buddhas: the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and Prabhuratnama, known as the Buddha of the distant past. Baas argues that Paik's piece conflates the past, present, and

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<sup>224</sup> Watts, Alan. *Still the Mind: An Introduction to Meditation*, (Novato, CA: New World Library), 2000. 69.

<sup>225</sup> Suzuki, Daisetz. T., Introduction in Eugen, Herrigel. *Zen and the Art of Archery*. (New York: Pantheon, 1953), Vii.

<sup>226</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 186.

<sup>227</sup> Decker, Edith. "Hardware," in *Video Time, Video Space*, ed., Kellein and Stoos, 68.

future, just as Buddhists believe there is only the present moment.<sup>228</sup> Also the work highlights the stress given by Zen practitioners to the idea that we have an inherent “Buddha nature” that can be realized when one forgets the self and focuses on the moment. The work could be read as the Buddha, representing a human being who through his meditation practice realizes that he or she is a Buddha, recognizing themselves as of existence itself, as opposed to a independent ego within a larger distant reality.<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Baas, *Smile of the Buddha*, 186.

<sup>229</sup> Paik also made a version closer to the realm of western existentialism in the form of Rodin’s *The Thinker* watching himself on television.

## Epilogue

The Zen boom of the 1950s and 1960s had a strong influence on the art of that time. The elimination of the ego from the creation of art, the bringing together of art and life, and the idea that, as Sargent Winthrop put it, that “‘emptiness’ is the thing”<sup>230</sup> was a major development that figures like Cage, Tobey, Reinhardt, Rauschenberg, Kaprow, and the Fluxus artists such as Brecht and Nam June Paik found to be essential to their creative process. These artists investigated Zen concepts such as the place of the beauty of the everyday within art and ‘void’ or emptiness, where the absence that exists everywhere cannot be defined except in relationship with presence, its opposite. They also were interested in a phenomenological art, one that was direct in its presentation, unfiltered by language or ideas, and both meditative and violent in nature. The theoretical underpinnings of Zen allowed for new expanding and deep manifestations of artistic methodology and artworks.

D.T. Suzuki died in 1966 and Allan Watts in 1973. With their deaths died a certain type of interest in Zen. Both had opened up the field for thinkers, writers, musicians, and artists to move in and find a theoretical basis for much of their work. Despite Watts' criticism of what he saw as a superficial approach to Zen Buddhism, he had, by the late 1960s, become a kind of a hippie guru himself, living on a houseboat and in a cabin in the mountains of California. He died around the same time the hippie subculture had declined, ripped apart because of Vietnam, political infighting, and changing cultural tastes. Suzuki himself moved away from an interest in Zen in his later years, preferring to investigate Shin Buddhism, a more esoteric and transcendental form of the religion. While beat Zen may have been on the decline, square Zen had a flowering in the United States during the 1960s with Zen centers being opened in Rochester, New York City, and Los Angeles by the end of the decade. But this renaissance seems to have not had much effect on these less than doctrinaire artists.

Unlike many of the artists of the 1960s and 1970s, who were not especially interested in a Zen-like aesthetic, the artists discussed in this thesis continued in a similar vein, often building on earlier work. They often broadened out their scope to include new emphases on technology and medium. Cage continued to compose using chance operations until his death. He moved more decidedly into the realm of electronic music during the 1960s, combining elements of visual art, dance, found sound, and music into elaborate Happenings. In the 1970s he even began to include natural elements such plants and animal material (water sloshing around the interior of conch shells for instance) in his compositions, bringing the world in even more directly to his performance, and continuing to explore indeterminacy through the unpredictability of the sounds created by these objects from nature. In this way he also did not only focus on the work of culture but also on the world of nature. He continued to work in the visual art as a medium unto itself, exploring the themes of emptiness, chance, indeterminacy, and Zen aesthetics.

Reinhardt and Tobey continued to work with similar issues of emptiness until their deaths. Rauschenberg concentrated on his silk-screens and combines, occasionally

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<sup>230</sup> Winthrop, “Profiles: Great Simplicity,” 34.

moving into multimedia performance and dance. In 1966, he, along with John Cage, participated in *9 Evenings*, an event put on by E.A.T (Experiments in Art and Technology). His newer work, however, while moving away from a minimalistic aesthetic, continued to be interested in direct confrontation and communication with the world, especially with that of media, taking on a maximalist aesthetic quite apart from that of the 1950s. Kaprow continued to create Happenings, although the style of them changed and he began to experiment with technology such as video. His interest became increasingly on a confluence between art and life, an increased intimacy and emphasis on the moment, and even on an influence from Zen, which he began to practice. Paik would go on to become a prolific video artist working with video collage, live broadcast, and more TV installation pieces. Although he continued to create works in the vein of his *TV Buddha* piece, the emphasis changed and, influenced by the thought of R. Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan (who were actually falling out of fashion by the 1970s), became more about the possibilities of technology as a medium and a tool for educating the world and bringing together people, and nature, although the Zen-like focus on the wonder of the everyday and of spirituality of the moment never left his work.

Several factors created a move away from the Zen zeitgeist. I see three main deviations away from an interest in this kind of religious thought. The first was political, including protests against the Vietnam War, Civil Rights struggles, and art commodification, as well as the changes these socio-political causes instigated in art production. The second was religious and social, the development of the “hippie” sub-culture and its interest in transcendental escape. The third was a resurgence of an interest in language and the theoretical above the perceptual.

The Vietnam War had a huge and devastating impact upon the culture of America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Suddenly the idea that art could be used as some kind of spiritual tool or to benefit society (as was the feeling of many artists of the 1960s) seemed by some to be unrealistic and even dangerous. As Julia Bryan-Wilson has illustrated, art took on a greater level of politicization during the late 1960s in reaction to the Vietnam War, the commercialization of art, and identity politics such as those dealing with civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation.<sup>231</sup> Artists like Robert Morris, Lucy Lippard, The Guerrilla Art Action Group, Ed Kienholtz, and Hans Haacke took on politics both directly through political art and protest, and indirectly through certain artistic practices, in order to re-define the place of politics in art and even reshape policy itself.

The goal of art seemed once again to be tied to a materialist aesthetic divorced from the spiritual and the universal. Perhaps the idea of meditating on emptiness seemed nihilistic to the idealistic counterculture of the times. Perhaps the us-against-them mentality of the late 1960's seemed more desirable to some than the elimination of the perceived illusion of difference celebrated in Zen. Or perhaps spirituality, especially an anti-political and anti-intellectual one like Zen, seemed to the untrained ear to sound suspiciously like pro-war rhetoric of the time. “Don’t get involved in the debate. Don’t trust the intellectuals. Don’t over-think anything.” The effect of Vietnam led to a turn

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<sup>231</sup> Wilson-Bryan, Juliet. *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

inwards away from an interest in the universal and towards both self and society. Some art became interested, not in universal harmony, or ideas of emptiness or a lack of ego, but in language, social politics, and then later in personal expression. Asian art and culture would then have to be seen as just another identity in the realm of identity politics.

But this was not the only deviation away from Zen's emphasis on the here and now, apart from symbolism. In California and New York many artists also involved in the hippie counter-culture ranging from Paul Sharits, to USCO, to La Monte Young, even Allen Ginsberg, turned to more transcendental religions such as Hinduism or Tibetan Buddhism as their basis, religions whose meditation practices and imagery matched the drug-fueled LSD culture of the time quite congruently. Eastern religion took on the mysterious and amorphous quality that it had in the worst elements of the Zen boom, being used by all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons, often having very little to do with these traditions' actual beliefs. The Beatles mediating with a yogi in India was just another aspect of the groovy consciousness-expanding sixties, an element of pop culture just like any other.

There was also a renewed interest in text and language that began to take over the art world starting in the late 1960s and moving into the 1970s. This interest in signs and language as sign and signifier was quite indirect and abstract and thus incompatible with the directness of Zen, which rejects language as illusory, since it exists only in so far as we use it as a tool to make sense of the world logically. When we confuse the sign with the signifier, Zen thought states, that is when we are led astray by language. However in conceptual art the emphasis and often the subject of the art was language itself often separate from what it was meant to signify. The work of Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, or John Baldessari for instance took text as subject matter as well as its meaning and what it could imply to the imagination of a viewer. This is quite a departure from the emphasis the Zen-inspired artists had on inexpressible reality, on the thing without description. When John Baldessari paints "PURE BEAUTY" on an all white canvas he wants the text to create an image in the viewer's head and for the viewer to notice the distinction between what the viewer sees in his mind and what he reads. Robert Rauschenberg (famous for creating his fair share of conceptualistic works) who painted an all white canvas and in the process wanted the viewer to experience the beauty in something ordinary, the surprise is in seeing one's own shadow projected onto a painting, a direct sensory experience untarnished by the imagination.

When Nam June Paik projected a blank film strip on a wall, or Ad Reinhardt painted a completely black canvas with slight deviations in tone, or when John Cage composed a piece of music that was made up completely from the ambient noise of its place of performance, the effect was to eliminate the distance between the art itself and the experiencer of that art. Above and beyond the concept of emptiness or of moving beyond dualities, Zen and this Zen-inspired art of this time was seeking to create this direct interaction between viewer and work without mediation. Minimalism was direct and was concerned with the importance of both the object itself, in and of itself, and with the experience of perceiving such and object. While this came from a different place than Zen, its similarities with what the Zen-inspired artists were attempting to accomplish is striking. Pop Art was extremely indirect as it was all about referencing popular culture, a world that was a symbolic conception to begin with. Conceptual art and the art of the

1980s, which both followed in the footsteps of the conceptual or moved back towards the hand of the artist had new philosophical, political, or financial concerns, had very different goals in mind from the directness of Zen. Postmodernism became about copies and facsimiles not the thing in itself.

What I see as being the gift of these Zen-inspired artists was this directness, this interest in ordinary experience, without the need for language or conceptualization or even the hand of the artist as a mediator. During the next two decades as art began to move into post-modern irony, self-referentiality, identity politics, the possibility of a return to an emphasis of the personal hand of the artist, the art boom, and privileging of the textual and the conceptual over the perceptual, that directness, regrettably, began to be lost. Zen-influenced art wanted to present experience itself, unmediated by thought or symbols, and that was its great gift to the history of Western art.

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