DEVALS

Biography

When you start working, everybody is in your studio—the past, your friends, enemies, the art world, and above all, your own ideas—all are there. But as you continue working, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave.

— John Cage[1]

John Cage devoted his life to a remarkably simple question: what becomes possible when the artist relinquishes the desire to control the work? Everything he produced over six decades: music, performance, lecture, book, drawing, print, watercolour, even his celebrated excursions in search of wild mushrooms — returns, in one form or another, to this enquiry. Chance, indeterminacy and silence are the terms most readily associated with his name, but they were never ends in themselves. They belonged to a broader discipline of attention through which artistic practice ceased to describe the world and began, instead, to participate in it. What Cage sought to change were the very conditions under which perception takes place.

Composition became the first field in which these convictions acquired tangible form, but Cage's imagination had never been confined to a single discipline. Travelling through Europe as a young man in 1930 and 1931, he divided his attention as readily between architecture and painting as between concert halls. The soaring spatial rhythms of Gothic cathedrals, the structural clarity of Renaissance painting, and the measured geometries of modern architecture stayed with him well after his return to California, resurfacing later, often unexpectedly, in his conception of musical time, in the organisation of space on the printed page, and eventually in the quiet constellations of lines and stones that define his mature visual work.

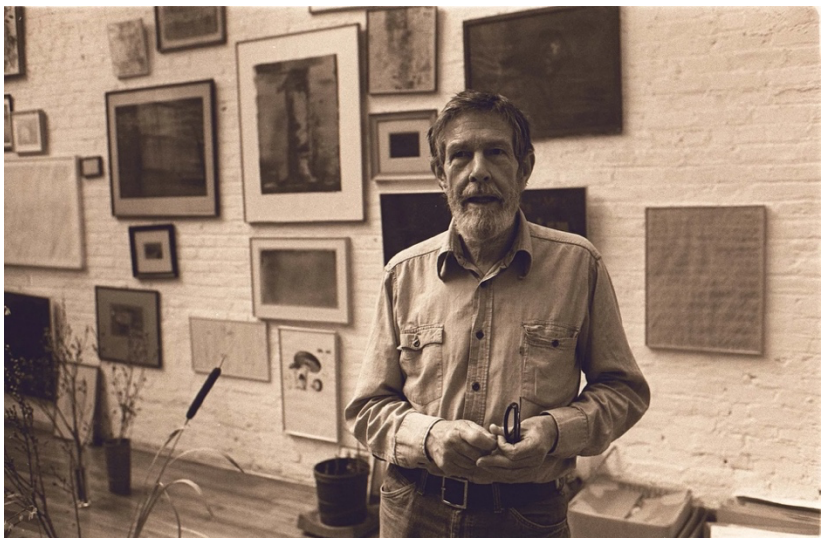


Fig 1. John Cage ©Getty - Steve Kagen / Gamma liaison

[1] Philip Guston, statement in It Is, No. 5, Spring 1960.

Born in Los Angeles in 1912, Cage grew up in a household in which invention carried its own authority. His father, John Milton Cage Sr., was an engineer given to unconventional pursuits, submarine design among them, alongside speculative theories of electromagnetic energy, while his mother, Lucretia Harvey Cage, worked as a journalist. Between them they cultivated a household attentive equally to mechanism and to language, a disposition their son would later extend into an entire aesthetic of observation.

Upon returning to Los Angeles in 1931 with composition as his declared vocation, Cage placed himself under the guidance of several figures whose influence would prove decisive, if not always convergent. Richard Buhlig introduced him to the European avant-garde; Henry Cowell broadened his understanding of rhythm, percussion, and non-Western musical traditions; Adolph Weiss inducted him into the twelve-tone discipline inherited from Arnold Schoenberg. Cage studied directly with Schoenberg between 1934 and 1936. The elder composer's uncompromising conception of musical structure left a permanent mark on his student, even as the aesthetic gulf between them widened.

Cage's attention increasingly gravitated toward sounds whose identity resisted classification within inherited musical categories: resonant sheets of metal, wooden surfaces, mechanically generated frequencies, the unpredictable decay of struck percussion, the acoustic behaviour of ordinary objects encountered outside the orchestra. These preoccupations crystallised in a sequence of works composed between 1938 and 1940. *First Construction (In Metal)* (1939) organised brake drums, anvils, water gongs, and sheets of metal into an intricate rhythmic architecture whose complexity derived as much from timbre as from duration. *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*, completed the same year, incorporated variable-speed turntables, frequency recordings, muted piano, and percussion — anticipating the technical possibilities of electronic music more than a decade before the medium gained wider currency. Cage had already sketched this trajectory in his manifesto *The Future of Music: Credo* (1937), which envisioned a musical culture in which electricity would dissolve the inherited distinction between noise and sound, composition and technology.
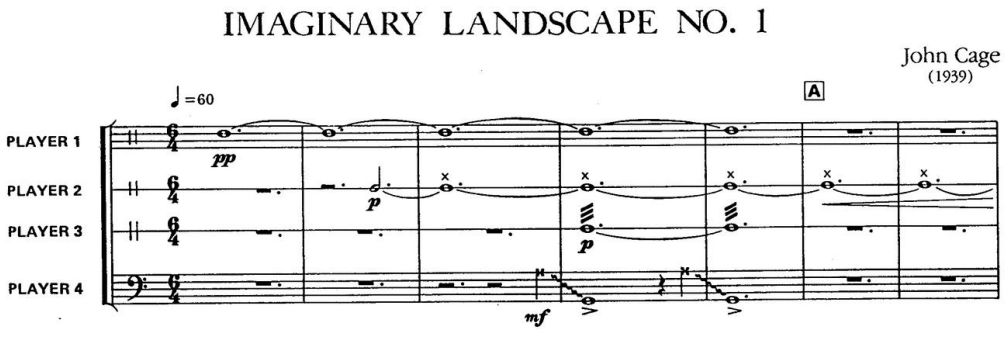


Fig 2. John Cage, *Imaginary Landscape N°1*, 1939 (Partition)
Courtesy of John Cage Trust & Editions Peters

This material understanding of composition found its most consequential early expression almost by accident. In 1940 the dancer Syvilla Fort commissioned music for *Bacchanale*, to be staged at the Cornish School in Seattle. The theatre proved too small to accommodate the percussion ensemble Cage had originally planned, and he turned instead to the piano itself, inserting screws, bolts, strips of rubber, weather stripping, and pieces of bamboo between its strings. The instrument's acoustic behaviour was transformed with remarkable precision: metallic resonance, muted attacks, dry wooden timbres, and bell-like overtones emerged from what remained, outwardly, an ordinary grand piano.



Fig 3. Cage preparing a piano, in 1947. Photograph by Irving Penn / © 1947 (Renewed 1975) Condé Nast Publications Inc.

The prepared piano occupied Cage for more than a decade, yielding close to two hundred works and culminating in *Sonatas and Interludes* (1946–48), still regarded as one of the defining achievements of twentieth-century keyboard literature. Composed during a period of sustained philosophical enquiry, the cycle bears the imprint of Cage's friendship with the Indian musician Gita Sarabhai, who introduced him to classical Indian aesthetics and to the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. In Sonatas and Interludes, every prepared note carries its own acoustic individuality; resonance assumes the structural weight once reserved for harmony; and silence becomes inseparable from sound.

By the end of the 1940s, the circle around Cage had extended well beyond the world of composers. Merce Cunningham, whom he had met at the Cornish School, had become his closest collaborator, developing a comparably radical conception of dance as an autonomous field of action independent of musical accompaniment. Around them gathered Robert Rauschenberg, Morton Feldman, Christian Wolff, and Earle Brown, joined before long by Jasper Johns and Marcel Duchamp.

Two further encounters, arriving almost simultaneously, proved equally formative. From 1948 Cage attended Daisetz T. Suzuki's lectures on Zen Buddhism at Columbia University, finding in Zen a vocabulary capable of clarifying intuitions already latent in his practice. At roughly the same time, the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, entered his working life, first as an object of philosophical curiosity, then as a compositional instrument. The coins used to consult the oracle gradually displaced aesthetic preference as a means of reaching decisions, and *Music of Changes* (1951) became the first work generated entirely through chance operations.

Cage's encounter with Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* (1951) proved equally significant. Their apparently blank surfaces register only ambient light, shadow, dust, and the presence of the viewer, disclosing emptiness as an active field of perception rather than an absence to be filled. Cage later described them as "airports for the lights, shadows and particles," recognising in them a conception of openness that would permanently reorient his own work. A subsequent visit to the anechoic chamber at Harvard University confirmed the same intuition from another direction: expecting total silence, Cage instead heard the sounds of his own nervous system and circulating blood. Silence, he concluded, did not exist as an acoustic condition — only as a cultural expectation. These convergent experiences found their fullest expression in 4′33″, premiered by David Tudor at the Maverick Concert Hall, Woodstock, on 29 August 1952. Structured in three silent movements, the piece frames whatever sounds are already present within a given environment, displacing music's centre of gravity from the production of sound to the act of listening.



Fig 4. John Cage and David Tudor, n.d (photograph unknown)

The implications of this shift unfolded rapidly across the decade. *Williams Mix* (1952) extended chance procedures to magnetic tape composition; *Music for Piano* (1952–56) derived its notation from accidental imperfections in paper; *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* (1957–58) replaced fixed ensemble relationships with independent parts unfolding within a shared but unsynchronised temporal field. Notation itself evolved into a genuinely visual language: in *Fontana Mix* and *Variations I* (both 1958), transparent overlays, points, and lines function less as scores to be executed than as graphic structures to be navigated by the performer.

Language followed a comparable trajectory. From *Lecture on Nothing* (1949) through *Silence* (1961), *A Year from Monday* (1967), M (1973), and the mesostic poems of his later years, writing became another domain in which chance, repetition, and spatial arrangement could operate. Cage's books move freely between poetry, philosophy, and performance script, treating the printed page not as a container for argument but as a space to be inhabited.

A comparable attentiveness shaped his lifelong engagement with mycology. Active within the New York Mycological Society from the late 1940s, and later serving as its president, Cage regarded mushroom collecting as a further discipline of observation, one grounded, like his compositional method, in patience, uncertainty, and sustained attention to conditions outside his control.

Although drawing had accompanied Cage since youth, the visual arts assumed an independent place within his practice only from the late 1960s onward. *Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel* (1969), conceived in homage to Duchamp, combined text, silkscreen, and Plexiglas through procedures that mirrored the openness of his musical scores, inaugurating a sustained body of graphic work. A further turn came in 1978, when Kathan Brown invited Cage to work at Crown Point Press; printmaking supplied fresh material for procedures refined over four decades.

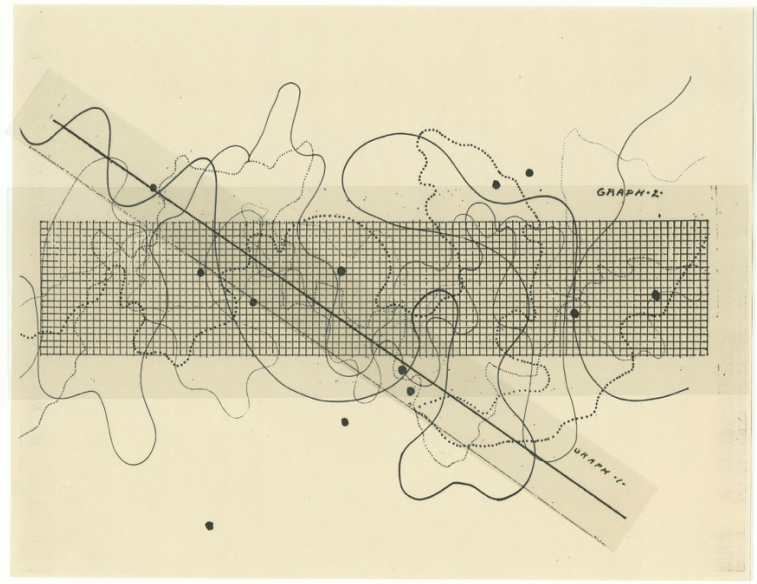


Fig 5. John Cage, *Fontana Mix*, 1960
Courtesy Walker Art Center Library

The visual work of the 1980s and early 1990s brought these lifelong investigations of chance, space, and perception to their fullest expression. The series initiated with *Where R = Ryoanji* (1983–92), inspired by the Zen rock garden at Ryōan-ji in Kyoto, comprises drawings, prints, and musical compositions generated from a single procedural logic: stones, selected and positioned through chance operations, were placed on handmade paper and traced repeatedly in graphite, producing delicate constellations of overlapping contours. Their true subject is not the stones themselves but the expansiveness of the space that surrounds them, a distinction Cage understood in explicitly compositional terms, observing that the garden itself could be read as a score, in which drawing and composition became parallel acts through which silence, duration, and emptiness acquired visible form. This logic persisted through later series : *On the Surface* (1980), *New River Watercolors* (1988), *River Rocks and Smoke* (1990), and *Changes and Disappearances* (1991), in which water, smoke, fire, stone, and paper were each permitted, within carefully structured procedures, to determine the resulting image.

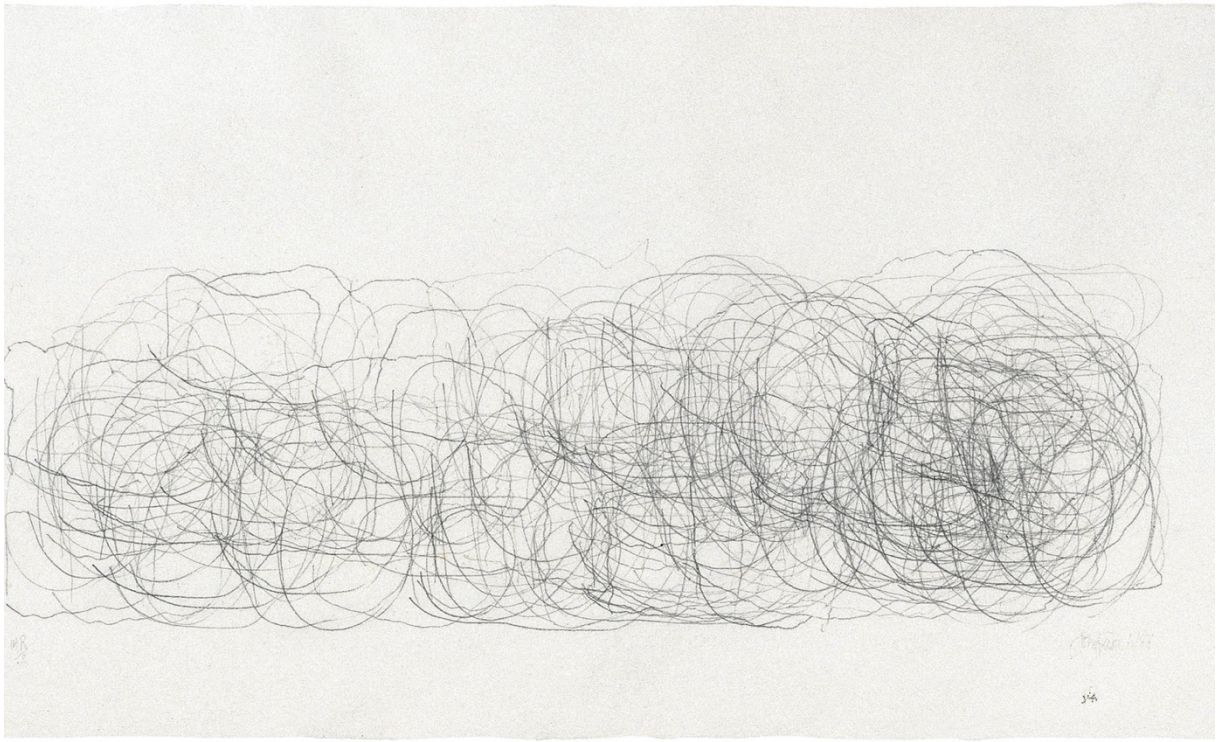


Fig 6. John Cage, *Where R = Ryoanji 14 R/2 - 6/87*, 1987
© John Cage; photo © ZKM | Center for Art and Media Karlsruhe, photo: ONUK

Today, Cage's works are held in the collections of leading international museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Walker Art Center, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Centre Pompidou, Tate, Museum Ludwig, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. His legacy is further preserved through the John Cage Trust, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Northwestern University, Wesleyan University and Crown Point Press.

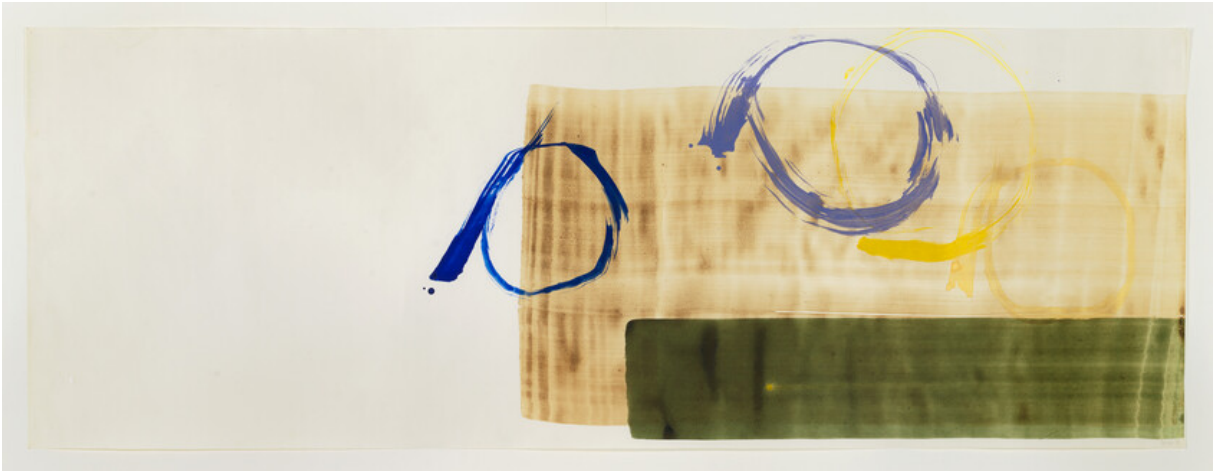


Fig 7. John Cage, *New River Watercolor, Series II, #11*, 1988
©1960 by Henmar Press, Inc. C.F. Peters
Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



Fig 8. *John Cage: New River*, installation view, DEVALS, 25 January – 15 March 2025. Courtesy of DEVALS. Photography by Fabrice Gousset.



Fig 9. *John Cage: New River*, installation view, DEVALS, 25 January – 15 March 2025. Courtesy of DEVALS. Photography by Fabrice Gousset.