

**NOSOMETHING**

A COLLECTION  
OF WORDS  
ABOUT AND BY  
JOHN CAGE.

EDITED BY MELISSA BLENKHORN. A COLLEC-  
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## INTRODUCTION

Though it can seem like unthoughtful noise initially to some, the music of John Cage is methodically sporadic. Valuing naturally occurring noises especially, he combines the random sounds of life with a system based upon the ancient Chinese texts of I-Ching, or the Book of Changes. In many of his works he discusses his love for spontaneous noise, however his musical theories cross over into his philosophies on life in his essays entitled Lecture on Nothing and Lecture on Something. As he believes that all sound is music, and holds all sound at the same regard, he also holds all occurrences of life at the same regard: Nothing. John Cage takes an interestingly disinterested approach to daily happens, insisting that everything is nothing. He encourages his readers to find complacency within everything, and to find comfort in aimlessness. He truly believes that one has no control over his or her life; everything should just be accepted as is. While this could be perceived as grave news to some, Cage maintains encourages an optimistically careless outlook on the world. As a man who embodies contradiction, John Cage insists that everything is nothing, and nothing is something.

# nothing

## LECTURE ON NOTHING

I am here, and there is nothing to say. If among you are those who wish to get somewhere, let them leave at any moment. What we require is silence; but what silence requires is that I go on talking.

I have nothing to say and  
I am saying it and that is  
poetry as I need it.

Give any one thought a push: it falls down easily; but the pusher and the pushed produce that entertainment called a discussion.

In 1912, John Cage is born into an Episcopalian family on September 5th in Los Angeles, CA. His father is an inventor, and his mother is a house wife—whom Cage would later describe as having a “sense of society,” but “never happy.”

Shall we one, one later? Or, we could simply decide not to have a discussion. What ever you like. But now there are silences and the words make help make the silences. I have nothing

to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it. This space of time is organized. We need not fear these silences, we may love them. This is a composed talk, for I am making it just as I make a piece of music. It is like glass of milk. We need the glass and we need the milk. Or again it is like an empty glass into which at any moment anything may be poured. As we go along, (who knows?) an idea may occur in this talk.

I have no idea whether one will or not. If one does, let it. Regard it as something seen momentarily, as though from a window while traveling.

If across Kansas, then, of course, Kansas. Arizona is more interesting, almost too interesting, especially for a New-Yorker who is being interested in spite of himself in everything. Now he knows he needs the Kansas in

him. Kansas is like nothing on earth, and for a New Yorker very refreshing It is like an empty glass, nothing but wheat, or it is corn? Does it matter which? Kansas has this about it: at any instant, one may leave it, and whether one wishes one may return to it.

Or you may leave it forever and never return to it, for we possess nothing. Our poetry now is the realization that we possess nothing Anything therefore is a delight (since we do not possess it) and thus need not fear its loss We need not destroy the past: it is gone; at any moment it might reappear and seem to be and be the present. Would it be a repetition? Only if we thought we owned it, but since we don't, it is free.

In 1929 Disillusioned with college, Cage drops out and spends the next 18 months in Europe, working as an architect's apprentice and dabbling in music.

Most anybody knows about the future and how uncertain it is . What I a calling poetry is often called content. I myself have called it form. It is the continuity of a piece of music. Continuity today, when it is necessary, is a demonstration of disinterestedness. That is, it is proof that our delight lies in not possessing anything. Each moment presents what happens. How different this form sense is from that which is bound

up with memory: themes and secondary themes; their struggle; their development; the climax; the recapitulation (which is the belief that one may own one's own home). But actually, unlike the snail, we carry our homes within us, which enables us to fly or to stay to enjoy each. But beware of that which is breathtakingly beautiful, for at any moment the telephone may ring or the airplane come down in a vacant lot. A piece of string or a sunset, possessing neither, each acts and the continuity happens.

Nothing more than nothing can be said. Hearing or making this in music is not different—only simpler—than living this way. Simpler, that is, for me, because it happens that I write music.

That music is simple to make comes from one's willingness to accept the limitations of structure. Structures is simple because it can be thought out, figured out, measured. It is a discipline which, accepted, in return accepts whatever, even those rare moments of ecstasy, which, as sugar loaves train horses, train us to make what we make. How could I better tell what structure is than simply to tell about this, this talk which is contained within a space of time approximately forty minutes long? That forty minutes has been divided into five large parts, and each unit is divided likewise. Subdivision involving a square root is

the only possible subdivision which, permits this microcosmic rhythmic structure, which I find acceptable and accepting. As you see, I can say anything. It makes very little difference what I say or how I say it.

At this particular moment, we are passing through the fourth part of a unit which is the second unit in the second large part of this talk. It is a little like passing through Kansas. This, now, is the end of that second unit. Now begins the third unit of the second part. Now the second part of that third unit. Now its third part. Now its fourth part (which is just the same length as the third part). Now the fifth and last part.

You have just experienced the structure of this talk from a microcosmic point of view. From a macrocosmic point of view we are just passing the halfway point in the second large part. The first part was a rather rambling discussion of nothing, of form, and continuity.

I remember as a child loving all the sounds, even the unprepared ones. I liked them especially when there was one at a time.

Most speeches are full of ideas. This one doesn't have to have any. But at any moment an idea may come along. Then we may enjoy it. Structure without life is dead. But Life without structure is unseen. Pure life express itself within and through structure. Each moment is absolute, alive and significant. Blackbirds rise from a field making sound delicious beyond compare.

I heard them because I accepted the limitations of an arts conference in a Virginia girl's finishing school, which limitations allowed me quite by accident to hear the blackbirds as they flew up and overhead. There was a social calendars and hours for breakfast, but one day I saw a cardinal, and the same day heard a woodpecker.

I met America's youngest college president. She has resigned, and people say she is going into politics.

Let her. Why shouldn't she? I also had the pleasure of hearing an eminent music critic exclaim that he hoped he would live long enough to see the end of this craze for Bach. A pupil once said to me: I understand what you say about Beethoven and I think ask you: How do you feel about Bach? Now we have come to the end of the part about structure.

However, it occurs to me to say more about structure. Specifically this: We are now at the beginning of the third part and that part is not the part devoted to structure. It's the part about material. But I'm still talking about structure. It must be clear from that that structure has no point, and, as we have seen, form has no point either. Clearly we are beginning to get nowhere. Unless some other idea crops up about it that is all I have to say about structure.

Now about material: is it interesting? It is and it isn't. But one thing is certain. If one is making something which to be nothing, the one making must love and be patient with the material, which is precisely something, whereas it was nothing that was being made; or he calls attention to himself, nothing is anonymous.

The technique of handling materials is on the sense level what structure as a discipline is on the rational level: a means of experiencing nothing. I remember loving sound before I ever took a music lesson. And so we make our lives by what we love. (Last year when I talked here I made a short talk. That was because I was talking about something; but this year I am talking about nothing and of course will go on talking for along time.)

*and so we  
make our lives* by what we love.

The other day a pupil said, after trying to compose a melody using only three tones, "I felt limited." But quiet sounds were like loneliness, or love or friendship. Permanent, I thought, values, independent at least from Life, Time and Coca-Cola. I must say I still feel this way, but something else is happening: I begin to hear the old sounds—the ones I had thought worn out, worn out by intellectualization—I begin to hear the old sounds as though they are not worn out. Obviously, they are not worn out. They are just as audible as the new sounds. Thinking had worn them out.

In 1935, Cage began attending classes taught by Arnold Schoenberg. He formed a percussion ensemble and invited Schoenberg to one of his performances, but Schoenberg declined. Cage is later described as an "inventor of genius".

If there are no questions, there are no answers. If there are questions, of course, there are answers, but the final answer makes the question seem absurd, whereas the questions, up until then, seem more intelligent than the answers. Somebody asked Debussy how he wrote music. He said: I take all the tones there are, leave out the ones I don't want, and use all the others. Satie said: When I was young, people told me: You'll see when you're fifty years old. Now I'm fifty. I've seen nothing.

More and more I have the feeling that we are getting nowhere. Slowly, as the talk goes on, we are getting nowhere and that is a pleasure. It is not irritating to be where one is. It is only irritating to think one would like to be somewhere else. Here we are now, a little bit after the beginning of the fourth large part of this talk.

More and more we have the feeling that I am getting nowhere. Slowly, as the talk goes on, slowly, we have the feeling we getting nowhere. That is a pleasure which will continue. If irritated, it is not a pleasure.

Cage marries Xenia Andreyevna Kashevaroff in 1935.

Nothing is not a pleasure if one is irritated, but suddenly, it is pleasure and then more and more it is not irritating (and then more and more and slowly). Originally we were nowhere; and now again, we are having the pleasure of being slowly nowhere. If anybody is sleepy, let him go to sleep.

if anybody is sleepy let him go to SLEEP.

MORE AND MORE I HAVE THE FEELING THAT WE ARE GETTING NOWHERE.

SON

WE ARE GETTING NOWHERE. MORE

AND MORE WE HAVE THE FEELING THAT WE ARE GETTING NOWHERE.

FEELING THAT WE ARE GETTING NOWHERE.

WHERE MORE AND



# nothing

## LECTURE ON SOMETHING

To bring things up to date, let me say that I am as ever changing, while Feldman's music seems more to continue than to change. There never was and there is not now in my mind any doubt about its beauty. It is, in fact, sometimes too beautiful.

The flavor of that beauty, which formerly seemed to me to be heroic, strikes me now as erotic (an equal, by no means a lesser, flavor). This impression is due, I believe, to Feldman's tendency towards tenderness, a tenderness only briefly, and sometimes not at all, interrupted by violence. On paper, of course, the graph pieces are as heroic as ever; but in rehearsal Feldman does not permit the freedom he writes to become the occasion for license. He insists upon an action within the gamut of love, and this produces a sensuousness of sound or an atmosphere of devotion. As ever, I prefer concerts to records of instrumental music. Let no one imagine that in owning a recording he has the music. The very practice of music, is a celebration that we own nothing.

This is a talk about something and naturally also a talk about nothing. About how something and nothing and nothing are not opposed to each other but need each other to keep on going. It is difficult to talk

In 1940, Cage composes "Living Room Music" for percussion and speech quartet. Oddly enough, percussion instruments were not used for the piece; instead, it was written for common objects one would find in his or her living room.

when you have something to say precisely because of the words which keep making us say in the way which

the words need to stick to and not in the Way which we need for living. For instance: someone said, Arts should come from within; then it is profound." But it seems to me Art goes within, and don't see the need for "should" or "then" or "it" or "profound." When Art comes from within, which is what it was for so long doing, it became a thing which seemed to elevate the man who made it above those who observed it or heard

it and the artist was considered a genius or given a rating: first, second, no good, until finally riding on a bus or subway: so proudly he signs his work like a manufacturer. But

The first question I ask myself when something doesn't seem to be beautiful is why do I think it's not beautiful. And very shortly you discover that there is no reason.

since everything's changing, art's now going in and it is of the utmost importance not to make a thing but rather to make nothing. How is this done? Done by making something which then goes in and reminds us of nothing. It is important that this something be just something, finitely something; then very simply it goes in and becomes infinitely nothing. It seems we are living. Understanding of what is nourishing is changing. Of course, it is always changing, but now it is very clearly changing, so that the people either agree or they don't and the differences of opinion are clearer. Just a year or so ago everything seemed to be an individual matter. But now there are two sides. On one side it is that individual matter going on, and on the other side it is more not an individual but everyone which is not to say it's all the same, on the contrary there are more differences.

Facing a crossroads over his sexual identity, Cage divorces his wife Xenia in 1945. He meets the choreographer Merce Cunningham, and embarks on a personal and professional relationship that continues for the rest of his life.

That is: starting finitely everything's different but in going in it all becomes the same. Which is what Morton Feldman had in mind when he called the

*of course,*

it is always CHANGING.

music he's writing Intersection. Feldman speaks of no sounds, and takes within broad limits the first ones that come along. He has changed the responsibility of the composer from making to accepting. To accept whatever comes regardless of the consequences is to be unafraid to be full of that love which comes from a sense of at-one-ness. This goes to explain what Feldman means when he says that he is associated with all of the sounds, and so can foresee what will happen even though he has not written the particular notes down as other composers do. When a composer feels a responsibility to make, rather than accept, he eliminates from the area of possibility all those events that do not suggest the at that point in time vogue of profundity.

For he takes himself seriously, wishes to be considered great, and he thereby diminishes his love and increases his fear and concern about what people will

think. There are many serious problems confronting such an individual. He must do it better, more impressively, more beautifully, than anybody else. What, precisely, does this, this beautiful profound object, this masterpiece, have to do with Life? It has this to do with life: that it is separate from it. Now we see it and now we don't. When we see it we feel better, and when we are away from it, we don't feel so good. Life seems shabby and chaotic, disordered, ugly in contrast. Let me read a passage from I-Ching which discusses this point. "In human affairs aesthetic form comes into being when traditions exist that strong and abiding like mountains are made pleasing by a lucid beauty. By contemplating the forms existing in human society it becomes possible to shape the world." And the footnote goes on: "Tranquil beauty: clarity within, quiet without. This is the tranquility of pure contemplation. When desire is silenced and the will comes to rest, the world as idea becomes manifest. In this aspect the world is beautiful and removed from the struggle for existence. This is the world of Art. Contemplation alone will not put the will to rest absolutely. It will awaken again and then all the beauty of form will appear to have been only a brief moment of exaltation. Hence this is still not the true way of redemption. The fire whose light illuminates the mountain and makes it

ABOUT HOW  
SOMETHING AND NOTHING

ARE NOT  
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THING. THIS IS A TALK ABOUT NOTHING. AND NATURALLY AL  
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TALK ABOUT NOTHING AND*

pleasing, does not shine far. In the same way beautiful form suffices to brighten and throw light upon matters of lesser moment. But important questions cannot be decided in this way. They require greater earnestness.”

Perhaps this will make understandable a statement made by Blythe in his book *Haiku*: “The highest responsibility of the artist is to hide beauty.” Now for a moment let’s consider what are the important questions and what is that greater earnestness that is required. The important question is what is it that is not just beautiful but also ugly, not just good, but also evil, not just true, but also an illusion. I remember now that Feldman spoke of shadows.

He said that the sounds were not sounds but shadows. They are obviously sounds; that’s why they are

shadows. Every something is an echo of nothing. Life goes on very much like a piece by Morty Feldman.

Someone may object that the sounds that happened were not interesting.

Let him. Next time he hears the piece, it will

be different, perhaps less interesting, perhaps suddenly exciting. Perhaps disastrous. A disaster for whom? For him, not for Feldman. Life the same: always different, sometimes exciting, sometimes boring, sometimes gently pleasing and so on; and what other important questions are there? Than that we live and how to do it in a state of accord with Life.

Some people may now be indignant and insist on saying that they control Life. They are the same ones who insist on controlling and judging art. Why judge? ”Judge not lest ye be judged.”

Or we can say this: Judge and regardless of the consequences. What is meant by Judge and regardless of the consequences? Simply this: Judge in a state of disinterest as to the effects of the judging. A modern Cuban composer, Caturla, earned his living as a judge. A man he sentenced to life imprisonment escaped from prison and murdered Caturla. In that penultimate now-moment before being killed was Caturla

sounds are not sounds, but SHADOWS.

in hell or in heaven? Make judgments but accept the consequences. Otherwise no life: Hamlet, fear, guilt, concern, responsibility. The idea, consequences, suggests the musical term continuity and that produced a discussion last week for Feldman spoke of no-continuity, whereas it was argued from a rational point of view that no matter what there is continuity. This is again a matter of disinterest and acceptance. No-continuity simply means accepting that continuity that happens. Continuity means the opposite: making that particular continuity that excludes all others. This is, of course, possible but not any longer nourishing for we have found that by excluding we grow thin inside even though we may have an enormous bank account outside. For somethings one needs critics, connoisseurs, judgments, authoritative ones, otherwise one gets gypped; but for nothing one can dispense with all that fol-de-rol, no one loses nothing because nothing is securely possessed.

When nothing is securely possessed one is free to accept any of the somethings. How many are there? They roll up at your feet. How many doors and windows are there in it? There is no end to the number of somethings and all of them (without exception) are acceptable. If one gets suddenly proud and says for one

Cage joins Black Mountain College as faculty in 1948. It is there that he composes his most famous work, *4'33"*, which explores the ambient sounds of silence.

reason or another: I cannot accept this; then the whole freedom to accept any of the others vanishes. But if one maintains secure possession of nothing (what has been

called poverty of spirit), then there is no limit to what one may freely enjoy. In this free enjoyment there is no possession of things. There is only enjoyment. What is possessed is nothing. This is what is meant when one says: no continuity, no sounds, no harmony, no melody, no counterpoint, no rhythm. That is to say there is not one of the somethings that is not acceptable. When this is meant one is in accord with life, and paradoxically free to pick and choose again as at any moment Feldman does, will or may.

Cage begins experimenting with "chance" music, applying the ideas of Zen Buddhism to his work around 1950.

New picking and choosing is just like the old picking and choosing except that one takes as just another one of the somethings any consequences of having picked and chosen. When in the state nothing, one diminished the something in one: Character. At any moment one is free to take on character again, but then it is without fear, full of life and love. For one's been at the point of the nourishment that sustains in no matter what one of the something situations. High, middle, low; enter any time within the duration notated; this particular timbre. These are the somethings Feldman has chosen. They give him and his character. It is quite useless in this situation for anyone to say Feldman's work is good or not good. Because we are in the direct situation: it is. If you don't like it you may choose to avoid it. But if you avoid it that's a pity, because it resembles life very closely, and life and it are essentially a cause for joy. People say, sometimes, timidly:

I know nothing about music but I know what I like. But the important questions are answered by not liking only but disliking and accepting equally what one likes and dislikes. Otherwise there is no access to the dark night of the soul. At the present time, a twelve-tone time, it is not popular to allow the more common garden variety of tonal relations. These latter are discriminated against. Feldman allows them to be if they happen to come along.

The mythological and Oriental view of the hero is the one who accepts life. And so if one should object to calling Feldman a composer, one could call him a hero. But we are all heroes, if we accept what comes, our inner cheerfulness undisturbed. If we accept what comes, that is what Feldman means by intersection. Anyone may cross it. Here comes everybody. The light has turned. Walk on. The water is fine. Jump in. Some

will refuse, for they see that the water is thick with monsters ready to devour them. What they have in mind is self-preservation.

And what is that self-preservation but only a preservation from life? Whereas life without death is no longer life but only self-preservation. Which do we prefer is, practically speaking, an irrelevant question since life by exercising death settles the matter conclusively for something but without conclusion for nothing. It is nothing that goes on and on without beginning, middle or meaning or ending. Something is always starting and stopping, rising, and falling. The nothing that goes on is what Feldman speaks of when he speaks of being submerged in silence. The acceptance of death is the source of all life. So that listening to this music one takes as spring board the first sound that comes along. The first something spring us into nothing and out of that nothing arises the next something, like an alternating current. No sound fears the silence that extinguishes it. No silence exists that it is not pregnant with sound. Someone said the other day, in reference to the performance, there is no getting away from life. Now, going on

every something  
is an echo of  
**nothing**

no counterpoint

**NO**

**SOUNDS**

no continuity

melody

*no rhythm*

by going back to what that someone said: “That kind of music, if you call it music.” What difference? Words are only noises.

Which noise makes little difference. Essentially the question is: do you live, or do you insist on words? If before you live you go through a word then there is an indirection. Whereas we need not go around the barn, but may go directly in. And then to go on: “Paid to be entertained.” This brings us again to Life. If at any moment we approach that moment with a preconceived idea of what that moment will provide, and if, furthermore, we presume that having paid for it makes us safe about it, we simply start off on the wrong foot. Let’s say for ten years everything turns out as we imagined it would and ought. Sooner or later the table turns and it doesn’t work out as we wish it would. We buy something to keep and it is stolen. We bake a cake and it turns out that the sugar was not sugar but salt. I no sooner start to work than the telephone rings. But to continue: what is entertainment? And who is being entertained? Heroes are being entertained and their nature is that of nature: the accepting of what comes without preconceived ideas of what will happen and regardless of the consequences. This is, by the way, why it is so difficult to listen to music we are familiar with; memory has acted to keep us aware of what will happen next, and so it is almost impossible to remain a-live in the presence of a well-known masterpiece. Now and then it happens, and when it does, it par-takes of the

miraculous. Going on about what someone said: at the root of the desire to appreciate a piece of music, to call it this rather than, to hear it without the unavoidable extraneous sounds—at the root of all this is the idea that this work is a thing separate from the rest of life, which is not the case with Feldman’s music.

On August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1992, John Cage dies of a stroke in New York City at the age of 79. At the time of his death, plans were underway for an 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in Frankfurt. The celebration goes on as planned, featuring a performance of the “Concert for Piano and Orchestra” with David Tudor—the pianist who had given the premiere performance of Cage’s breakout work, 4’33”, 40 years before.

We are in the presence not of a work of art, which is a thing, but of an action, which is implicitly nothing. Nothing has been said. Nothing is communicated. There is no use of symbols or intellectual references. No thing in life requires a symbol since it is clearly what it is: a visible manifestation of an invisible nothing. But to go on again about someone said: “What?” And I forgot to mention it before. He said, “What about all those silences?”

How do I know when

how do i know WHEN

We never know when but being cheerful helps.

This book includes [John Cage's](#) original texts [Lecture on Nothing](#), written in 1959, and [Lecture on Something](#), written in 1951. Biographical information about Mr. Cage was obtained from a New York City radio station's website, [wNYC.org](#).

Designed by [Melissa Blenkhorn](#)  
Massachusetts College of Art & Design  
Typography III  
Jan Kubasiewicz

Created using the Univers and Adobe Caslon Pro typefamilies.  
Printed on classic laid antique gray 65# cover stock by Neenah Paper.



Translations in context of "Cage" in English-Russian from Reverso Context: rib cage, faraday cage, roll cage. Synonyms Arabic German English Spanish French Hebrew Italian Japanese Dutch Polish Portuguese Romanian Russian Turkish Chinese. Conjugate this verb. Suggestions: faraday cage. These examples may contain rude words based on your search. These examples may contain colloquial words based on your search. Translation of "Cage" in Russian. Noun. Verb. From Middle English cage, from Old French cage, from Latin cavea. Doublet of jail. IPA(key): /keɪdʒ/. Rhymes: -eɪdʒ. cage (plural cages). An enclosure made of bars, normally to hold animals. We keep a bird in a cage. The tigers are in a cage to protect the public. The most dangerous prisoners are locked away in a cage. c. 1596–1599, Shakespeare, William, Henry IV, Part 2, act 4, scene 2, lines 48–49: For his father had / never a house but the cage. A cage is an enclosure often made of mesh, bars, or wires, used to confine, contain or protect something or someone. A cage can serve many purposes, including keeping an animal or person in captivity, capturing an animal or person, and displaying an animal at a zoo. Since a cage is usually intended to hold living beings, at least some part of its structure must be such as to allow for the entry of light and air. Thus some cages may be made with bars spaced too closely together for the intended captive Define cage. cage synonyms, cage pronunciation, cage translation, English dictionary definition of cage. n. 1. A structure for confining birds or animals, enclosed on at least one side by a grating of wires or bars that lets in air and light. 2. A barred room... Cage - definition of cage by The Free Dictionary. <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/cage>. Printer Friendly. Dictionary, Encyclopedia and Thesaurus - The Free Dictionary 12,475,530,443 visitors served.