

7 Visual art

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John Cage's visual art, done in the last section of his life, is a collection of forms whose purpose, he often said, is "to sober and quiet the mind." Cage developed his art with sustained attention, and it became original on its own terms. In a purely visual way it gives a sense of the direction and meaning of his mature thought.

Cage was sixty-five years old when, in 1977, I invited him to come to Oakland, California, to work with our printers at Crown Point Press to make etchings. In reply to my invitation, he told me that he had promised the composer Arnold Schoenberg (in 1934), as a condition of studying with him, to devote his life to music. And then he added another story. He had once received an invitation from a friend to walk with her in the Himalayas, and he had not accepted. "I have always regretted this," he added.

Because of that regret, he accepted my invitation, and beginning in January 1978, he worked with us for a week or two almost every year, fifteen times before his death fifteen years later. At Crown Point Press, which is now located in San Francisco, Cage produced twenty-seven groups of prints, mainly etchings, and these groups contain all together 667 individually composed works of art. Cage had begun his work as a visual artist in 1969 in New York with a print project, but it was nine years later, with his first Crown Point visit, that his sustained art activity began. After his introduction to etching on that first visit, he spent five years on four complex projects. Then, in 1983 he simplified his printmaking approach, and also began drawing. In the nine years after that until he died, he produced about 150 drawings at home in New York, in between regular work periods at Crown Point Press. In that period he also made 114 watercolors in two sessions at the Mountain Lake Workshop in Virginia. That is the bulk of Cage's visual art.

But there is more. He worked with others to produce several limited-edition books. He worked at the Rugg Road Mill in Boston to make three suites of handmade paper using edible materials. He designed complex room-sized works of installation art on several occasions, including an installation for the Carnegie International Art Exhibition in Pittsburgh (installed in 1991 and shown in early 1992). Finally, he created *Rolywholyover*, a traveling exhibition of his own art, along with works by other artists and a sampling of odd things from local museums. *Rolywholyover* was initiated by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and planned by Cage

but realized after his death. In 1992, the last year of his life, Cage made a film, as well as completing his final etching project at Crown Point Press.

Cage worked with visual art in almost the same way he worked with music. His printers or assistants were something like musicians – he developed scores for them to execute. The printers were indispensable, but (cf. Chapter 9) this was not collaborative work – the vision was his; he was the artist. You could say, however, that the circumstances of accepting invitations to work were an integral part of Cage’s art production: only his pencil drawings were made independently and they fit within a concept previously developed in his prints.

In a print studio, an artist can make art that would be impossible without techniques the printers have mastered. Many composers of music cannot play the violin but use violins in their work, and many artists who make prints cannot lay an aquatint. The composers know what a violin sounds like; the artists know what an aquatint looks like. In the course of his work, Cage grew to understand the print processes and he developed excellent skills in engraving, and in drawing with pencils and brushes. Because he worked with others, he was able to borrow some additional necessary skills.

There is one type of skill that he could not borrow or quickly learn, however, and that is skill in understanding the important issues of the art field. In this, Cage was not a novice when he began his visual work. In his youth, during the Depression years, he sold lectures on the history of music and art door to door, and studied those subjects to keep abreast of his students. Before his commitment to Schoenberg, he both painted and composed music. His friend David Sylvester has written that Cage recalled those early paintings as having been inspired by images reflected in curved surfaces; he quotes Cage as saying he used “not a brush, but steel wool, so that I was rubbing the paint onto the surface of the canvas” (Sylvester 1989, p. 50).

After Cage gave up painting, his contact with artists influenced his music. Although his approach to chance came from Asian philosophy, he was aware that Marcel Duchamp, whom he met in 1942 and greatly admired, used elements of chance in making sculpture. Duchamp’s first use of chance was in 1912, the year Cage was born. Mark Tobey, whom Cage met in 1939, was a long-term influence. A favorite story of Cage’s involved Tobey asking students to draw with their noses and toes pressed against a wall.

One of the reasons Cage adopted chance operations for his music in 1951 was his desire to step away from the philosophy of the Abstract Expressionist artists. He edited a one-issue art and literary magazine with Robert Motherwell in 1950, and was part of the Artists’ Club where the Abstract Expressionists met. “I was with de Kooning once in a restaurant,”

Cage recalled in a 1978 interview. “He said, ‘If I put a frame around these breadcrumbs, that isn’t art.’ And what I’m saying is that it is. He was saying that it wasn’t, because he connects art with his activity – he connects with himself as an artist, whereas I would want art to slip out of us into the world in which we live” (White 1978, p. 15).

The idea that framing breadcrumbs might make them art was a sacrilege in the early to mid-1950s, but Cage had a conviction that art and life are close together. Merce Cunningham, Jasper Johns, and Robert Rauschenberg shared his conviction, and in that period, the four saw each other almost every day. “The four-way exchanges were quite marvelous,” Cage remembered. “It was the *climate* of being together that would suggest work to be done for each of us” (Kotz 1990, p. 89).

In 1952 – with Rauschenberg, Cunningham, and others – Cage created the first happening (see Chapter 9). In 1958 the highly visual score for *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* was exhibited at the Stable Gallery in New York. David Sylvester, in a catalog for a 1989 exhibition that included the same score, points out the visual character of Cage’s manuscripts in general, but adds that “however beautiful [a score] may be to look at, it was not made as something to be looked at” (Sylvester 1989, p. 47).

Cage’s visual art, by contrast to his scores, has no purpose but the visual. In developing it, the new forms he discovered were not a product of his will – he didn’t invent them. Instead, he discovered them by opening an area of inquiry, as a scientist might do, and pushing that inquiry dispassionately to an extreme. “I always go to extremes,” he once said to me, laughing.

“If you work with chance operations,” he explained to Joan Retallack, who interviewed him in the last months of his life, “you’re basically shifting from the responsibility to choose to the responsibility to ask. People frequently ask me if I’m faithful to the answers, or if I change them because I want to. I don’t change them because I want to. When I find myself in the position of someone who *would* change something – at that point I don’t change it. I change myself. It’s for that reason I have said that instead of self-expression, I’m involved in self-alteration” (Retallack 1996, p. 139).

I watched Cage at work many times over many years, and I can testify that he was telling Retallack the truth. I saw him occasionally modify an approach to make it more practical to a situation, and usually he would accept an honestly made mistake, but I never saw him reject a chance-derived outcome once he had settled on a sequence of chance operations and set it in motion. Good science, also, does not modify results because of the wishes of the scientist.

Cage worked with individual units that he formed into an expanding space not limited by the traditional picture plane, and recently I discovered an article in the science section of the *New York Times* that seems

especially relevant to his approach. It explains that energy is “not smooth and continuous but comes in discrete packets, the quanta”; it goes on to report on the work of a young researcher, Dr. Fotini Kalamara, in London. Dr. Kalamara thinks that “if we could look really close, space and space-time would turn out to be not smooth and geometrical, as in Einstein’s theory, but ‘bumpy’ and made up of building blocks” (Johnson 2000, p. D6). “Bumpy” is a word I will use from time to time as I describe the development of Cage’s art.

I am going to use some other isolated descriptive words, too, as I continue. They are words that Cage himself put forward in *Composition in Retrospect*, which he wrote in 1981 (Cage 1982, pp. 39–57). He listed these ten words that he said characterized aspects of his work: *method, structure, intention, discipline, notation, indeterminacy, interpenetration, imitation, devotion, and circumstances*.

The Plexigrams, 1969

Cage’s first visual art project, done in 1969, was called *Not Wanting to Say Anything About Marcel*: two lithographs and a group of eight objects he called “Plexigrams,” silk screen printing on Plexiglas panels. Each object consists of eight panels, 36 × 51 cm (14 × 20”), in a wooden base. The panels can be reordered at will and are covered with words and dictionary-like pictures, mostly fragmented. Cage started his graphic work with *imitation*: the Plexigrams look a lot like a Rauschenberg edition called *Shades* (1964) and also relate to *Revolver*, a larger-scale mechanized work on plastic panels that Rauschenberg did in 1967. Cage’s Plexigrams are different in concept, however, in that he used his rigorous chance operations to compose them.

Altogether there are sixty-four panels, the number of hexagrams in the *I Ching*. To compose the Plexigrams, Cage used chance operations to determine whether words found in the Random House dictionary should be fragmented before appearing in the art, and whether they should change into images. If images were asked for, Cage used the dictionary illustration if there was one. Otherwise, he selected the picture by using chance operations on images from the New York Public Library Picture Collection of the World.

Every operation in Cage’s work process was discrete, with coin throwing for each tiny step. Carl Solway, who with Alice Weston published the Plexigrams, reports that among the receipts for bills paid is one to an assistant for throwing coins. Irwin Hollander at the Hollander Workshop in New York did the printing, and Calvin Sumsion, whom Cage invited to participate, did the paste-up of the images in preparation for photographically transferring them to silk screens. “I composed the graphic work and he executed it, just

as I would write a piece for a pianist and she would play it, or he would play it,” Cage explained. “In other words, in moving from music to graphic work, I took with me the social habits of musicians, hmm? The division of labor, so to speak” (Retallack 1996, p. 93).

We can see *intention* in the Plexigrams. Cage intended to make a work of visual art using procedures he had established for writing music. In fact, looking back on Cage’s visual art as a whole, it seems to me that he always started projects with intention. For the details, he would put the “intention of the mind out of operation” (Retallack 1996, p. 127) by using *indeterminacy*, or chance operations.

From my point of view, the most important aspect of the Plexigrams is the method Cage devised for placing images on a page. He laid a grid over the page, then asked the *I Ching* for coordinates on it. After locating an image on the grid at those coordinates, he would turn it against a protractor to the number of degrees specified by chance operations. He used this method, with or without the protractor, for most of his graphic works and some of his music over the rest of his life.

The first Crown Point prints, January, 1978

When Cage first arrived at Crown Point Press he brought with him a score that, as he said “was the door that opened from music, for me, back into the field of graphic – paying attention to how things are to look at” (Retallack 1996, p. 92; cf. Chapter 8 of the present volume). He had written *Score (40 Drawings by Thoreau) and 23 Parts: 12 Haiku* almost four years earlier. In composing it, he overlaid lines that control duration for the performers with images sketched by Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond. Each musician performing this work receives one of twenty-three parts into which the drawings are fragmented. Cage had brought us the conductor’s score in which the images appear whole, the score without parts. From this he made the etching *Score Without Parts (40 Drawings by Thoreau): 12 Haiku*. The plate size is 33 × 47 cm (13 × 18”), and it is printed on a 56 × 76 cm (22 × 30”) sheet. In his subsequent works on paper, Cage used the entire sheet so traditional distinctions between plate and sheet sizes do not apply.

To make *Score Without Parts*, Cage traced some of Thoreau’s drawings and copied some freehand onto the plates, using different chance-decided techniques. There are little pictures of a skunk, a squirrel, an eddy in a pond, and other natural things, and they were his introduction to our world: hard ground, soft ground, drypoint, and engraving.

“I had the sense that I was not an artist, that I couldn’t draw, really, anything; but that I had done this [score] and it would make an etching,

and did,” Cage said fourteen years later. “From now,” he added, “I would say not a very interesting one but, nevertheless, something. And then I made a rather interesting thing there, which was the *Seven Day Diary*. . . . Since I couldn’t draw, I decided to close my eyes and draw . . . and if I dropped my tool someone would put it back in my hand for me. I was surrounded by helpers” (Retallack 1996, p. 95).

As he did in most of his projects at Crown Point, Cage started *Seven Day Diary* with what he called “the first thing,” the paper. He chose one he liked from the ones we had. Each day, he chose a plate size by chance operations and oriented it on the paper using the method he had developed for the Plexigrams. The sheet size is 30 × 43 cm (12 × 17”).

The first day he used the first two techniques that we would teach any student, drypoint and hard ground etching. (He did a test with just one and found it too skimpy.) He numbered the different tools and asked which to use, then how many marks to make with each tool. Next he asked how many marks should be long, how many medium, how many short. He had with him a sheaf of pages showing *I Ching*-derived numbers, computer-printed and ready to use to get answers without the need to throw coins.

Each day we added a new technique. In this project, however, he couldn’t use engraving, a technique he had especially liked in *Score Without Parts*, because engraving requires full attention: you must push the tool through the copper rather than drawing in the normal way.

Cage began his work at Crown Point Press, as he had his work on the Plexigrams, with *intention*. This intention involved *notation*. *Score Without Parts* is his only graphic work that uses music notation. *Seven Day Diary*, which followed *Score Without Parts*, focused on *method*, and also on *interpenetration*: lines long, medium, and short piled up and mingled with one another.

Signals, Crown Point Press, 1978

During eleven days in September, 1978, we made thirty-five prints for a project Cage called *Signals*, and we pulled only one impression of each. The prints were dispersed along with their plates, maps, drawings, notes, etc. to individual purchasers.

Here is the structure: three elements – Thoreau drawings, circles, and straight lines on a 33 × 50 cm (13 × 20”) sheet. Although images can overlap, each one is an individual. Many of the Thoreau drawings partly fall off the plates, which Cage thought of as nets that probably would catch images, but might not.

Two prints in the series did not catch images of any kind and are blank. Cage asked us to ink them anyway, and he was delighted with the film of ink – the hand tone – and the few faint scratches that printed. “I’m producing a situation like what happens in nature,” he explained to us. “Certain things happen, and then because of the concatenation, sometimes nothing results.” This remark is preserved on videotape that I shot in the studio in 1979. Another remark on that tape, even more revealing, concerns Cage’s interest in learning the difficult technique of engraving. In the *Signals* project, Cage had allowed the possibility of many engraved lines, an ambitious set-up for a beginner. This type of line shows every tremor of the hand, every lapse of attention. “It seemed to me that to be able to engrave required a certain calmness,” he says on the tape. “And it’s that calmness that I’ve been, one way or another, approaching in my music and writing and so forth. And then, it became physical, you see, with the engraving tool.” In 1978, the first year of Cage’s work at Crown Point in visual art, I think he arrived at the most irrevocable aspect of his work: *devotion*.

The big sets of prints, Crown Point Press, 1979–1982

Devotion was required, both on Cage’s part and that of his printers, for the *Changes and Disappearances* project that came next. Cage was writing the *Freeman Etudes* at the time. In this work, he said, “I wanted to make the music as difficult as possible so that a performance would show that the impossible is not impossible” (Kostelanetz 1993, p. 245). The *Changes and Disappearances* prints, he remarked in another context “were as complicated as things could be. As complicated as, say, the *Freeman Etudes*. It was difficult for the printers to realize the work. I like them very much. They’re probably the most musical, the most detailed work with very subtle changes in the colors and shapes . . . Just as music is made with lots of little notes, so this is made with all those little pieces of color” (Retallack 1996, p. 96).

Changes and Disappearances is printed on rectangular sheets of pale gray-blue paper, 28 × 56 cm (11 × 22”). The prints have what look like translucent panes of glass drifting across them, the light catching on slender images imbedded in the panes. The images are on sixty-six small plates, each with a curvy side, the curves made by cutting with a jig saw over strings that Cage had dropped on the plate. (He mentioned that he was imitating Duchamp who had dropped strings to obtain curves in a work of sculpture, *Three Standard Stoppages*, in 1913.)

There are many curving lines, since Cage also dropped string to get marks over which he engraved, and many straight ones that he scratched into the plates. Cage added the engraving and drypoint lines one by one as he



Figure 7.1 John Cage, *Changes and Disappearances 31* (1979–82). One in a series of thirty-five engravings with drypoint and photoetching printed by Lilah Toland at Crown Point Press in two or three impressions each. 28 × 56 cm.

added new prints to the series. Sometimes after lines were drawn and colors specified, when the plates were set out on the press bed, a line would fall outside the paper borders. Cage called this a disappearance. Nevertheless, there were many more additional appearances, or changes, than there were disappearances as the series progressed.

The first *Changes and Disappearances* print has fifty-four colors. The last one, number 35, done four years later, has 298. We printed only two impressions of each of these prints (with a third in a few cases for artist's proofs). (See Fig. 7.1.)

By Cage's fifth work period on *Changes and Disappearances*, in September 1980, we had begun training two new printers, and Cage had an idea for a set of prints that he proposed could be done by them at the same time as the project in progress. He wanted to use the beautiful hand tone he had discovered in working on *Signals*, and he wanted to add the concept of a horizon line.

The *On the Surface* prints are 46 × 61 cm (18 × 24"). The small individual plates appear as shards floating, overlapping, nudging one another against an implied horizon line that lowers in each print in the series. At a glance the paper seems blank except for the shadows of the embossed edges of the plates, but pale colors soon come into focus, along with many fine dashes, peppered dots, and other lovely accidental marks.

Sixty-five plates taken from our scrap pile were individually shaped each with one curved side and located according to chance operations. As the

series progressed, whenever a plate poked up over the horizon it was cut from a point on the horizon line to a chance-determined point below. There was an exception, however. If a plate settled into a position where the portion below the line was too small to cut cleanly, it remained uncut and was lightly balanced above the others. We began the *On the Surface* project in 1980 and finished in 1982, with two impressions printed of each image.

Déreau, the last of the big sets and to me in some ways the most satisfying, was entirely done in 1982, the year we also finished both *Changes and Disappearances* and *On the Surface*. As I think back on *Déreau*, it is as if it somehow just grew up naturally as work on the other two enormous projects was coming to a close.

Cage made up the word “Déreau” using the first syllable of “décor” and the second of “Thoreau.” Fixed Thoreau drawings provide a décor, or stage-set for free-floating elements. The prints are on 36 × 46 cm (14 × 18”) off-white Japan paper. We see some animal and bird tracks, part of a flower, something that might be a water bug. There are bubbles near the top of the page, and a lovely swirl of waving lines in several colors at the bottom. A circle dances onto this stage, and some bars. There’s a little flag-like shape, and a large pale rectangle. The most active figures are the intricate engravings; they are taut with energy. There is a horizon line, but it doesn’t relate to the forms. It moves up and down in the different prints in the series, changing everything by implying the sea below, the sky above.

The colors in *Déreau* are from five distinct palettes: black, yellow, red, blue and earth. Cage once told me he wanted his colors “to look like they went to graduate school,” and they were always complex mixtures in chance-determined proportions. This is the only series, however, that sets out several distinct palettes; there are subtle but unmistakable passages of color change. (See Fig. 7.2.)

Changes and Disappearances (thirty-five prints), *On the Surface* (thirty-six prints), and *Déreau* (thirty-eight prints), are major works of Cage’s visual art. He saw these sets as large complex single works, the parts of which, to his great delight, could be dispersed independently without disturbing the whole. For each of these works, at his request, we printed a “posterity” set that is kept together, and also one or two individual prints of each image.

In Cage’s list of aspects of his work, it is the word *discipline* that most applies to the 1979–82 period of his art making. On that list, he said that he had originally included “form” but it was absorbed into “discipline.” “The form – in other words, what happens – comes about through chance, and is, so to speak, not connected as a concern” (Retallack 1996, p. 209). What happened in these large works, I believe, is a new form, not seen in art before. This form is something akin to birds flying or fish swimming. It is released

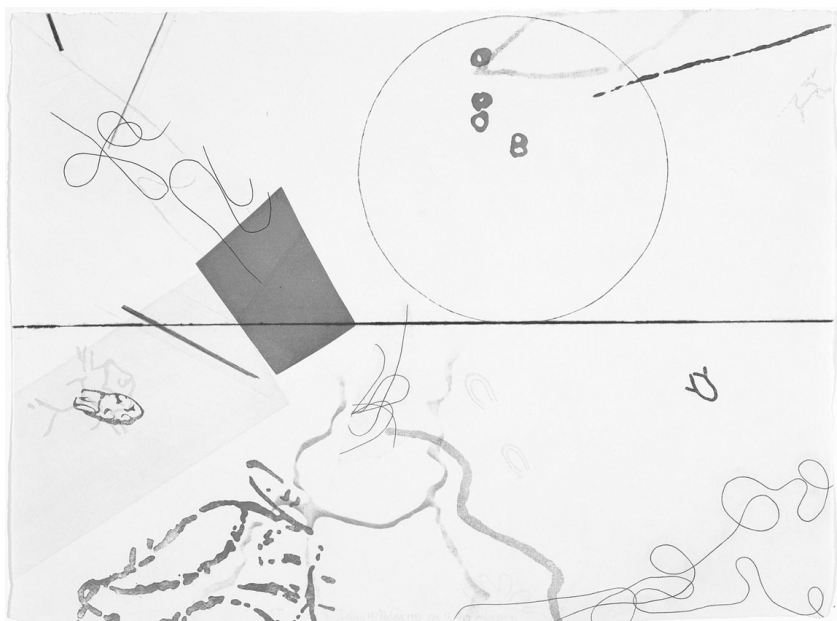


Figure 7.2 John Cage, *Déreau 19* (1982). One of thirty-eight engravings with drypoint, aquatint and photoetching printed by Lilah Toland at Crown Point Press in two impressions each. 36 × 46 cm.

from the picture plane, and doesn't pull people into it dramatically. When you first notice it, you wonder if it's really there.

After these works, Cage changed practically everything in his approach. He had learned to engrave with a skill few printmakers accomplish, but these are the last works in which he used engraving. They are also the last ones in which Thoreau drawings came into play. Finally, they are the last works he characterized as detailed in a way that he thought of as musical.

The first work with stones and fire, Crown Point Press, 1983–1987; and the *Ryoanji* drawings, New York City, 1983–1992

When Cage arrived at Crown Point Press on January 2, 1983, he brought with him a bag of stones, sixteen of them, each two to three inches across. He also brought an idea to buy some soft packing materials – cotton batting, jute pads, felt, and foam – and use those to make prints. This idea was realized as *HV*.

HV stands for Horizontal/Vertical, and these strange one-of-a-kind prints, in which irregular, unruly materials were asked to function geometrically, set the tone for all the work to come. Cage's intention in his January

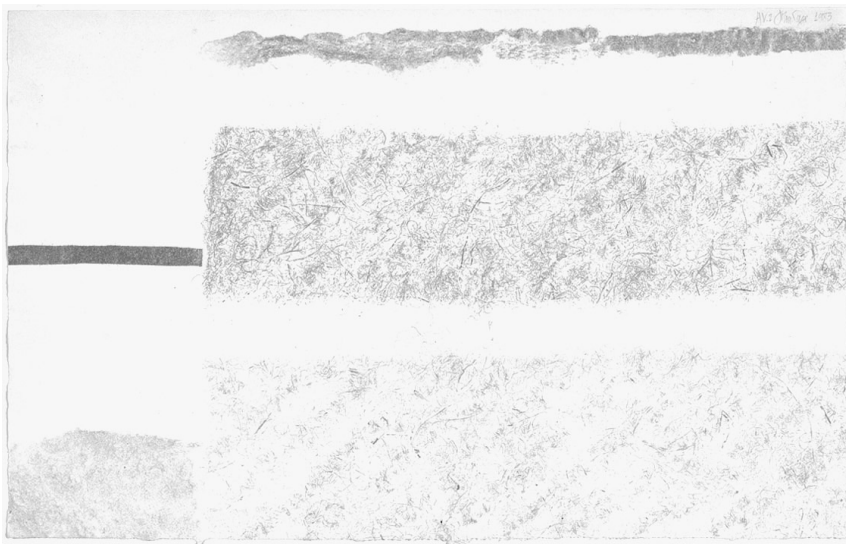


Figure 7.3 John Cage, *HV* (1983). Number 2 in a series of thirty-six monotype collagraphs, each one unique. Printed by Lilah Toland at Crown Point Press. 30 × 35 cm.

1983 work period at Crown Point, I believe, was to make something with a horizontal/vertical orientation that was also bumpy. (See Fig. 7.3.)

He used the stones he had brought with him to begin what turned out to be a large and absorbing body of work that he titled collectively *Ryoanji*. The *Ryoanji* prints are fairly small (23 × 59 cm, 9 × 23") and have the proportions of the Ryoanji Garden in Kyoto, Japan. From his sixteen stones, Cage selected fifteen (the number in the famous garden; it is just rocks, moss, and raked sand). Then he located each stone individually on a test plate using his system of coordinates on a grid, but keeping a horizontal/vertical axis that did not require use of the protractor that had figured so prominently in the earlier work. He drew around the stones with a sharp drypoint tool. The first test failed. He wasn't satisfied with the way it looked, so he moved to more complex questions.

Later, I learned that Cage had made a *Ryoanji* drawing of fifteen stones on paper in 1982 as a cover design for one of a series of books called *Editions Ryoan-ji*. When he tried the same thing on metal, he wrote, "The mystery produced by pencils disappeared, reappearing only on copper when the number of stones was multiplied" (Kostelanetz 1993, p. 135). In the *Where R = Ryoanji* prints (and also the later drawings), $R = 15$ stones. In the first print, $2R + 13-14$, he drew around two stones fifteen times each, then drew around thirteen stones fourteen times each. He continued with three prints in which he squared the number of stone tracings, at first drawing lightly, then increasing the pressure. Since drypoint lines are simply scratched into

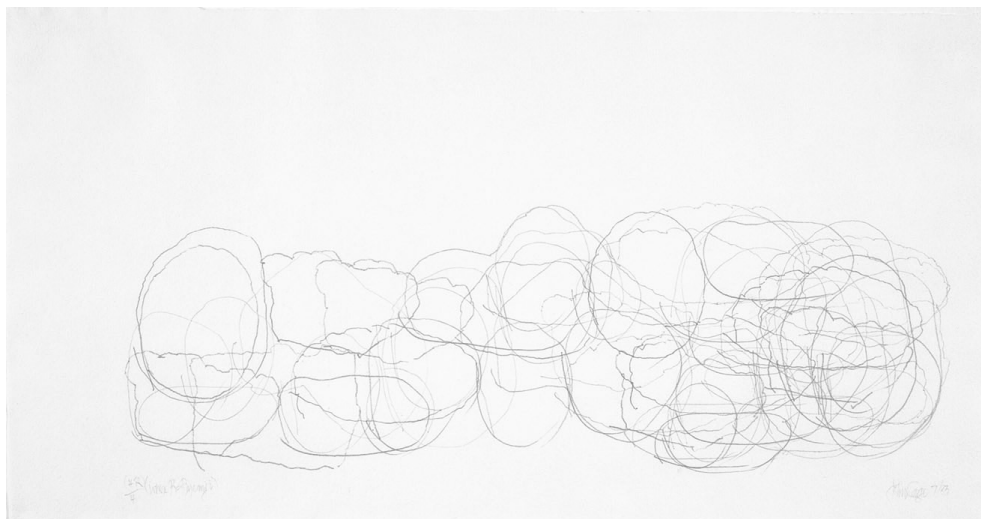


Figure 7.4 John Cage, *Where R = Ryoanji (4R)/4 7/83* (private collection). Pencil on paper. 25.4 × 48.3 cm.

the copper plate, the tool throws up a burr that collects ink against it. As Cage's tool traveled around each rock, it threw up a thicker burr wherever he tipped it at an angle, so the lines are irregular and lively.

He was just getting started on R^3 , which entailed 3,375 drawings around individually placed rocks, when it was time to leave. So he packed up his tool, the plate, and another plate and went back to New York.

Cage began drawing on paper after he finished work on the two plates he had with him in New York. Margarete Roeder, his friend and longtime art dealer, says that he used his drawing activity as a kind of meditation. He often spoke of writing music “instead of sitting cross-legged,” and by the time he began drawing in 1983 some of the labor-intensive part of writing music had been taken over by the computer.

So far as the actual drawing activity was concerned, he must have been surprised at how easily his pencils moved around the rocks after having done so much scratching into copper with a sharp point. The ease shows. The drawings are not as bumpy as the prints. Cage drew them with pencils of varying hardness, from 6B to 9H, and the number of pencils used is shown as the last number in the title. $R8/15$, for example, means there are fifteen times eight stone tracings done with fifteen different pencils. He never used any other approach for his drawings – they are all *Ryoanji*. (See Fig. 7.4.)

There is *Ryoanji* music too; it provides flights of glissandi for the instruments involved. Probably the prints came first (they were begun in January 1983 and the music called *Ryoanji* is dated 1983–84), but in any case Cage points out to Retallack that the two are composed differently. “There [in the

graphic work] I'm not dealing with time, so I can draw around the whole stone. Music is characterized by detail and by having to do things that work in time." He added that in drawing around the rocks for music he created curved lines that go "from left to right as music does. They don't go in a circle. Music doesn't go in a circle. The only way a circle could be expressed in music would be with two instruments, both of which went from left to right [one ascending, the other descending]" (Retallack 1996, p. 242).

Except for his drawing, music occupied Cage fully in 1984. In January 1985 he returned to Crown Point for a two-week period, bringing his stones. We used them for *Ryoku*, a set of thirteen lovely color drypoints that Cage associated with Haiku.

At the same time, he was looking for a direction that didn't include the stones. He thought it might be promising to try some experiments with earth, air, fire, and water. He cut up different papers and subjected them to the elements by burying them, burning them, soaking them in dirty water and tea, and driving over them with a car (he had done this long ago in helping Rauschenberg with a print of his). He also ran some through the press with damp teabags and branded some with heated iron teapots (he said he had brands all over the kitchen counter at home). We ended up with nine unique collages somewhat Rauschenbergian in feel, and two good ideas: using fire and using brands.

Right then, before he left, Cage made sixteen works called *Fire*, on narrow paper sheets approximately 50 × 30 cm (20 × 11") that were subjected to fires we built on the bed of the press. The paper was damp, and running it through the press put out the fire and trapped the swirling smoke marks, to which Cage added branding. Chance operations dictated which teapots from a group we had assembled made the brand marks and how many to use in each print. Cage really loved the way these smoked paper surfaces looked, and he used fire as a medium for the next seven years until he died.

The following year, 1986, we spent the first day of Cage's work period in a junkyard pulling on massive pieces of twisted iron. Eventually we managed to separate one link from a chain that had been on a hoist, and that gave us a branding tool in the form of a large circle, an "en" in Japanese. "Enso" paintings, which Cage had in mind, are circles drawn by monks. "Ka" means "fire" in Japanese. The prints we did in 1986 are called *Eninka*.

At first, I wondered if we would get any prints. We made many tests, counting newspaper balls as instructed by chance operations and timing burns and brands, but despite the beautiful circle we couldn't seem to do anything that advanced the *Fire* prints from the previous year.

Cage thought we should try lots of different kinds of paper and even though it seemed impractical we tested a sheet of *gampi*, a skin-like Japanese

paper so thin it can only be used for printing if it is mounted to something heavier. The big fire selected at first by chance demolished it, but Cage adjusted the parameters that controlled fire size and soon we were able to pull some large pieces out of the pile of ashes on the press. Cage was fascinated that the paper was so sensitive that it picked up occasional imprints from the newspapers used for the fire. Still, he was dejected. "It's just a mess," he said.

"Wait," said his printer. She tossed the crumpled and burned papers into a bath of water. Soon they straightened out, and after mounting ("It's what we would normally do with this paper," the printer explained) suddenly we had a map-like form, or a seaside landscape. Cage was suffused with joy. "Oh, it's beautiful! Don't you think it's beautiful? I can't believe it. I couldn't sleep all night. I thought my whole life had been a waste!" He was laughing, of course, but it made me think. Once he got started on a path, he might make adjustments but he wouldn't set out in a different direction until the path got somewhere. Each time something seemed to be a mess did he wonder, if only briefly, if his whole life had been a waste?

In this group of prints, Cage concentrated on *structure*. I think his underlying question was how soft or hard the structure needed to be. In the following year, 1987, when he did a series called *Déka*, it became clear that structure was somehow in his mind. As in *Déreau*, the first part of the title stands for "décor." The second part, "ka," is the Japanese word for "fire." Before and after 1987, Cage used fire simply by smoking the printing paper. Here, he etched into a plate the residue of soot and smoke from a fire. Then he combined that plate with another that contained a "stage," a chance-decided geometric shape running along the bottom of the sheet.

The watercolors, Mountain Lake Workshop, Virginia, 1988 and 1990

In 1983, the year Cage did the first prints and drawings in which he drew around stones, he was invited to Virginia to lecture at an exhibition of his etchings at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. At the last minute, Cage had asked that some of his new drawings be included. Ray Kass, an instructor at the Institute with a specialty in watercolor, was very taken with them, and invited Cage to do some similar work in watercolor.

During Cage's 1983 visit to Virginia, Kass did two things to lay the groundwork for the future watercolors. He took him to the nearby New River and showed him the large round rocks there, and he prepared what he called a "studio practice" with rocks, papers, brushes, and watercolors in place. He hoped Cage would locate the rocks using his chance operations

and then draw around them using the watercolors, and also he “suggested [Cage] apply some surface washes in order to experience the transparency of the medium and its layering effect” (Kass 1988, p. 2). Cage did some tests. Five years later he did a full-fledged workshop. He spent eight days in 1988 working with Kass and a few students. He drew around the rocks, which were so beautifully round the marks can be seen as circles, and he added washes using large flat brushes, several of which Kass designed and had constructed especially for him. He made fifty-two works, and he collectively titled them the *New River Watercolors*.

In 1990, in his second (seven-day) workshop at Mountain Lake, Cage produced sixty-one works titled *River Rocks and Smoke*. He used smoke instead of washes to give tone to the watercolors. “This work has a great sense of quietness, and the stone tracings are especially energetic and free,” commented Margarete Roeder, who placed many of the watercolors with clients of her gallery. Cage did some of the watercolors when he was seventy-six, some when he was seventy-eight. They range in size from 46 × 91 cm (18 × 36”) to almost two and a half meters (eight feet) tall and nine meters (thirty feet) long. I can almost hear him saying, “Isn’t it amazing?”

Cage did have some doubts about the watercolors at first (Kass 1988, p. 9) but after the second workshop, he told Retallack he had no more reservations. “Now my experience has changed,” he said, “so that I feel all right with watercolor and brushes. In fact, I wouldn’t be averse to working with them again. The reason is that in the workshop it’s quite impossible to see what you’re doing. It’s flat rather than vertical, and you’re not far away enough to see if it’s very big. But I was at an exhibition in Wisconsin where I was able to see that [large] watercolor from a distance. And I liked it, just as others did. I enjoyed it” (Retallack, 1996, p. 141).

Cage’s final prints, Crown Point Press, San Francisco, 1989–1992

Because of his experience at Mountain Lake, in 1989 Cage used brushes at Crown Point for the first time. In his work with us that year, he made eight *Stones* prints, two of them quite large as etchings go (137 × 104 cm, 54 × 41”). Like the watercolors that immediately preceded and followed them, the *Stones* prints are concerned with *method*. Cage was learning about brushmarks, and working them into his ideas about *structure*. But these prints and watercolors were a prelude to work that leaves structure largely behind. (See Fig. 7.5.)

Smoke Weather Stone Weather, a group of thirty-seven prints made in 1991, is a turning point between the structured watercolors and *Stones*



Figure 7.5 John Cage, *10 Stones 2* (1989). Aquatint printed on smoked paper by Pamela Paulson at Crown Point Press in an edition of twenty. 58 × 46 cm.

prints and the simple openness of Cage's last works. Like *Déreau*, *Smoke Weather Stone Weather* seemed just to happen, and anticipated a change. We used unusual handmade paper (38 × 63 cm, 15 × 25") and the number of sheets available determined the number of prints; we made only one impression of each image.

Cage combined brush drawings with a line that emphasizes the irregular quality of the stones. Eleven to fifteen stone tracings occupy each print and the images, without fragmenting, move around the paper and up to the edges. The colors are fragile and the paper smoked, so the figures both submerge into and emerge from the whole.

Cage's title, *Smoke Weather Stone Weather*, shows his thinking at the time. The stone-drawings normally would provide structure, but here most of them slip away from structure and, like the smoke, become parts of the weather. Just one or two drift into prominence in any single print. As Cage

said in 1992, “Weather remains the weather no matter what is going on . . . so that the structural elements that do appear don’t change the way we see weather.” He added that he was “having more and more the feeling of not being involved with structure” (Retallack 1996, p. 97).

After fifteen years of art-making, Cage’s attitudes had shifted. Here, again, are the ten words he listed in *Composition in Retrospect: method, structure, intention, discipline, notation, indeterminacy, interpenetration, imitation, devotion, and circumstances*. Over time, his art had become simpler as *method, structure, intention, notation, and imitation* waned in influence. *Discipline* had become less labored, but not less present. *Interpenetration* had become stronger as images integrated with “weather.” And *indeterminacy, circumstances, and devotion* had remained steady, always at the center of his work.

I read an interesting remark recently in a *New York Times* interview with a famous novelist. The novelist said, “If you’re writing, you’re not living, and if you’re living, you’re not writing” (Gussow 2000, p. E1). She neatly defined the way many artists make art. They retreat into a separate world of their own creation, and then – if they are good enough – entice us into that world through their work. Cage’s approach was exactly the opposite. His work was part of living. It was more concentrated in its detail and more refined in its discipline than everyday life, but nonetheless it was integral to it, as the spirit is integral to the body.

Cage was not the only contemporary artist to integrate art and life – think of the artists who most influenced him, Marcel Duchamp and Mark Tobey. Following them are others, some of whom are influenced by Cage. Their work does not manipulate the viewer. Nothing tells you how you are expected to react. Seduction by this type of art is gradual, and is likely to occur only after a person has taken some time with a first encounter. If it does occur, it can change the way you look at other things besides art by adding a spiritual, or out-of-the-ordinary, dimension that gives pleasure and quiets the mind’s chatter.

Cage often said that the music and art he most enjoyed encouraged paying attention as a way of being present in the world. He explained the idea to Joan Retallack like this: after leaving an exhibition of Mark Tobey’s work, he “happened to look at the pavement, and – literally – the pavement was as beautiful as the Tobey, hmm? So the experience of looking at the Tobey was instructive about looking at the pavement . . . Art became *identical* with life” (Retallack 1996, p. 101).

In Cage’s work period with us in January, 1992, he used his stones but (relaxing some structure) he did not use a grid to locate them. On the press bed, he centered each mark in the lower third of a defined space the size of the paper. Then, before printing, he moved the paper: up, down, left, or

right (or a combination) according to chance operations. Instead of drawing around the stones, he drew along their edges. He made a series of fifty-seven prints 18×20 cm (7×8 ") on handmade gray smoked paper printed with black and gray inks. The series is called *Without Horizon*. Each print has one, three, four, or five marks which move independently to create an enormous landscape-like form in a very small space.

Cage did another series that January, also. He worked with plates that had been marked accidentally and with them he made a set of prints called *HV2*. He returned to using plates from our scrap pile, as he had done for the large set called *On the Surface* ten years earlier. The two sets are very different. *HV2* does not have the "musical" intricacy and internal movement of *On the Surface*. *HV2* is, in fact, not intricate, and it is very still. Its movement is something like breathing and drifts out beyond the paper's boundaries, then pulls inward again. Of all Cage's prints, I think this series does the most perfect job of sobering and quieting the mind, placing it, as he said to me on my first meeting with him, "in accord with what happens."

Each 28×35 cm (11×14 ") sheet is filled completely with horizontal and vertical rectangles of varying sizes in transparent colors, all the colors essentially the same density. The plates were left uncleaned prior to etching,

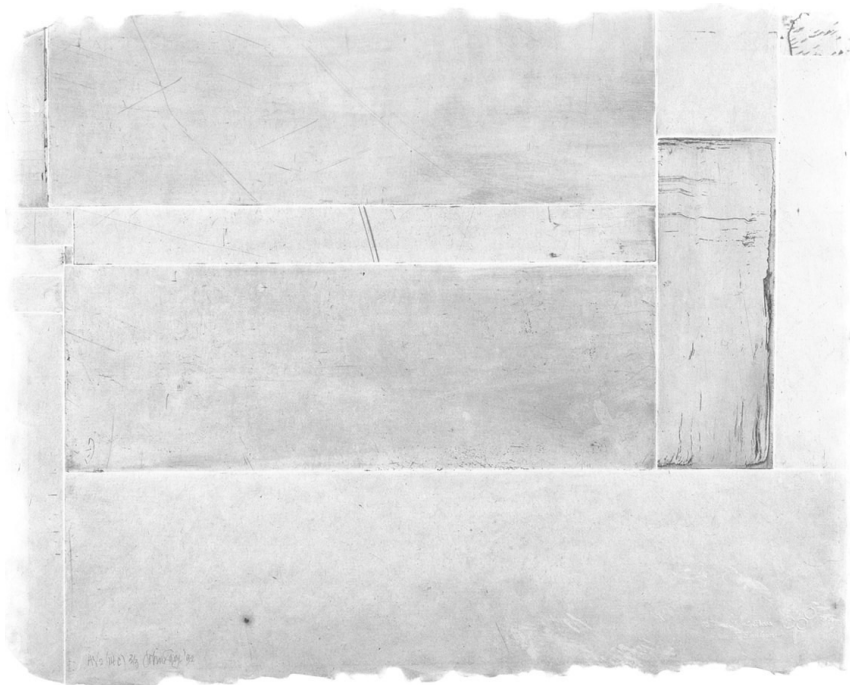


Figure 7.6 John Cage, *HV2*, 14c (1992). One of fifteen aquatints printed by Pamela Paulson at Crown Point Press in three impressions each. 30×35 cm.

and the accumulated oils from fingers and hands that touched them before and after they were taken from the scrap pile left permanent marks. The colors glow evenly except for these lighter smudges and fingermarks. Other marks, darker ones, are the nicks and scratches and occasional lines that Cage expected to come, as he said, “from existence.”

Cage had asked us that year, 1992, to plan the work so everything could be completed in the two weeks he was with us. That is why *HV2* is a small set, only fifteen prints. In constructing an image, Cage first pulled plates from the scrap pile, working quickly and not studying them, but not using his *I Ching* materials. He laid the plates out horizontally and vertically on paper the size of the sheet we would use for printing. If he picked up a plate that was unwieldy or obviously already marked, he put it on the plate cutter, jumped on the treadle to lower the blade, and cut off the part he could not use.

He subjected each plate to chance operations to obtain its color mixture, and recorded the mixtures in a score the printers could follow. Then he drew a map showing the positions of the plates. After the plates had been etched and inked by the printers, he used the map as a guide for reassembling the image on the press bed. We made three prints of each of the fifteen images. One set, at Cage’s request, has been kept together. (See Fig. 7.6.)

While work on *HV2* was going on, we were also working on *Without Horizon*, the small gray prints that resemble landscapes. We made as many of these as possible in the time we had, and printed only one of each. It turned out that these were the last etchings John Cage would do. He died later that year, on August 12, twenty-four days before his eightieth birthday.