Tourist d'horizon

Peter Maber

John Cage: Every Day is a Good Day (Kettle's Yard and touring).

In 1933 Arnold Schoenberg accepted John Cage's request for lessons in composition; the honour came with just one proviso: that he devote his creative life solely to music. It was with some reluctance, then, that Cage was persuaded to embark upon purely visual art projects late on in his career. Yet the spirit of collaboration and experimentation was always so strong in Cage's music, taking him into previously uncharted territories, that his pictures could truly be said to arise organically out of his music, marking a logical extension of his wilfully-illogical thought.

Printmaking, with its mediated techniques and possibilities of repetition with variation, was central to his art, and the majority of Cage's projects took place at the Crown Point Press, a California printing studio specialising in intaglio. Mass-production was never the intention; the importance of repetition lies principally in the transformations of the component parts over series. Beginning in 1978, Cage would assemble complex scores for the printers to follow; but he would involve himself in the processes of printing too, and he enjoyed both the experience and the results so much that he would return most years up until his death in 1992.

Cage would speak of eliminating personal preference from the creative process, and of disconnecting art 'from both feeling and sense'. As in his music, his use of the *I Ching*, which in time he reduced to computerised random number generation, offered such an escape from the self in some measure; but Cage's use of indeterminacy, as an indefinite range of possible answers, throws the decision-making process onto the questions being posed. Cage in fact favours a delicate impersonality that never becomes wholly mechanistic; and this rare opportunity to see his pictures together reveals not so much the autonomous systems at work, as the sensitivity with which Cage formulated his questions and chose his materials.

Every Day is a Good Day is a magnificent show, conceived by artist Jeremy Millar, and arranged wholly according to Cage's principles, with a specific debt to *Rolywholyover*, the 'composition for a museum' planned by Cage just before his death. True to Cage's notion of a 'travelling exhibition', the present show is moving both around the country (it is currently at Kettle's Yard), and in and of itself: within each gallery's possible parameters there are a randomly-chosen number of rehangs taking place, each determining the position of the pictures according to random number generation; in addition a random number of works is gradually taken away or added, so that it is possible to revisit and have an entirely fresh spatial experience. The processes that made the individual artworks are magnified to preside over the whole show.

The overwhelming impression is of naturalness: an abundance of soft-edged forms, or hard-edges softened by free-flowing lines, a wide variety of textures and techniques, and muted palettes with a dominance of earth tones. Colour, though also subjected to chance operations, is one of Cage's most expressive domains: he told his printers he wanted his colours 'to look like they went to graduate school'. Above all these works are responsive to the surrounding world; their disparate and decentered material floats across blank or residually-printed textured paper, charging the surrounding open spaces that are to his artworks what silence is to his music.

It is fitting, then, that Thoreau, who was central to Cage's thought in general, should become the indirect subject a major series, *Déreau* (derived from 'décor' and 'Thoreau'), in which drawings from Thoreau's *Journal*, which had originally generated sound in being copied into a musical score, provide a fixed stage set around which other shapes, lines generated by dropping pieces of string, and a horizon line, shift between prints.

Changes and Disappearances, which took three years to complete, also had a musical counterpart in the *Freeman Etudes*; in both works Cage opened the parameters for selection wide, resulting in sixty-six small curvy plates, each with many intricate lines, and the first print alone required forty-five colours. He wanted, as he said of the *Etudes*, to 'show that the impossible is not impossible.' Sometimes he would sail perilously close to the limits, as when he built fires with newspaper sheets on the press bed, passing a damp sheet through to extinguish the fire and capture the smoke marks. The first results were disastrous, after his system determined fires which were too large; but adjustments would lead to the extraordinary meditation on destruction and creation of the *Eninka* monotypes, with their implausibly thin *gampi* paper smoked, charred, and branded.

It is telling that when Jasper Johns was offered a print from the early *Signals* series, he chose one in which Cage's hand has slipped while engraving a straight line. Cage became increasingly sensitive to the innate indeterminacy of his materials and his techniques. Even in the *HV* series, in which foam, felt, cotton batting and other untamed materials are pressed into roughly geometric service, our attention is held as much by the stray fibres and irregularities as it is by the vertical and horizontal symmetries.

Most expressive of all are the late watercolours, in which Cage was finally persuaded to take up the brush as part of a painting workshop at Mountain Lake, Virginia. Inspired by the moveable arrangements of stones in Japanese gardens, which had already given rise to the *R=Ryoanji: (R^3)* and *Ryoku* print series, these *New River Watercolors* combine the tracing of stones with delicate washes, the counterpointing of slow and quick brushmarks reflecting the Zen practice of rapid drawing after lengthy periods of meditation. Here Cage independently coincides with many of the great intuitive abstract painters of the twentieth-century, reaching similar conclusions by different means.

Cage sought to reflect on ordinariness, and held up Duchamp, to whom his first prints are dedicated, as his original artistic influence. He made no secret of his complex processes, and his working papers demonstrate precisely how each image came into being; but the fitting way to truly see this work is to place our knowledge of Cage to one side, and adopt what he called 'the tourist attitude': after all, 'if you really get down to brass tacks, we have never been *anywhere* before.'