

The Museum of Modern Art

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PROJECTS: JOHN CAGE'S "RENGA" WITH "APARTMENT HOUSE 1776"

"Renga" with "Apartment House 1776," two recent musical compositions by John Cage, one of America's foremost avant-garde composers, will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 28 through March 6, 1977. "Renga" refers to Japanese linked poetry with successive lines generally written by different poets. "Apartment House 1776" is a body of material of 64 pieces that can be performed in any sequence. The title refers to the fact that many things happen at the same time, because the parts may be played concurrently rather than consecutively, unlike usual musical performances. "Renga" and "Apartment House 1776" were written to be played either concurrently or independently.

"Apartment House 1776" uses conventional musical notation, whereas "Renga" is a system of graphic notation using tracings of the drawings in Henry David Thoreau's journals. It consists of twelve pages and 361 parts for 78 musicians. Donal Henahan of the New York Times described "Renga" as a "series of graphs based on the drawings that Mr. Cage traced from the journals of the 19th-century philosopher and amateur naturalist." These drawings are "disposed in space" according to Japanese poetic structure and appear on the page as an intricate design. Cage's music is usually described by critics as "Indeterminate": "Indeterminate" music requires constant experimentation with notation. A composer may offer directions for one element of the music--as rhythm or pitch contour--and leave the performer to improvise the remaining elements. Or he may simply describe the general character of a passage by resorting to a specially designed symbol, a verbal description, or even an impressionistic drawing....John Cage supplies "materials," in this case Thoreau's drawings, and leaves the performer to attach musical significance to them.

(more)

John Cage, like Thoreau, is fascinated by Oriental religion, as is shown by his use of Zen, quotes from Japanese Haiku poets, and the "I Ching." His work is dense and involves clusters of different ideas, sometimes superimposed upon one another. Cage is an expert on wild mushrooms and an amateur naturalist: he has a passion for the wilderness and tends to disregard dogma, which are traits similar to Thoreau's.

The exhibition illustrates parts of the two compositions, which were written on a joint commission by the orchestras of Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Philadelphia, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in honor of the Bicentennial. "Renga" with "Apartment House 1776" was performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra with Seiji Ozawa conducting in October 1976, and by the New York Philharmonic with Pierre Boulez conducting in November 1976; there have been other performances since then.

The exhibition is the most recent in the PROJECTS series, and is directed by Bernice Rose, Curator of Drawings. The continuing series is supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C., a Federal agency.

A book-object by R. Buckminster Fuller is on view simultaneously. (See separate press release.) This is the first time that extremely well-established creative figures of the mid-twentieth century have been included in this program. Both John Cage and Buckminster Fuller have developed radical theories within their chosen disciplines and have passed the moment when those theories have achieved acceptance. "That is not to say that more than specialized groups appreciate their work," Riva Castleman, coordinator of the PROJECTS series, writes in the exhibitions' wall label. "Each is eager to share his ideas and looks for new contexts. One characteristic of their audiences is youth, and neither, despite his senior creative position, is complacently repeating past triumphs."

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