

John Cage quotations

"I have nothing to say / and I am saying it / and that is poetry / as I needed it" --John Cage

"It was at Harvard not quite forty years ago that I went into an anechoic [totally silent] chamber not expecting in that silent room to hear two sounds: one high, my nervous system in operation, one low, my blood in circulation. The reason I did not expect to hear those two sounds was that they were set into vibration without any intention on my part. That experience gave my life direction, the exploration of nonintention. No one else was doing that. I would do it for us. I did not know immediately what I was doing, nor, after all these years, have I found out much. I compose music. Yes, but how? I gave up making choices. In their place I put the asking of questions. The answers come from the mechanism, not the wisdom of the I Ching, the most ancient of all books: tossing three coins six times yielding numbers between 1 and 64." --John Cage, 1990

"I certainly had no feeling for harmony, and Schoenberg thought that that would make it impossible for me to write music. He said, 'You'll come to a wall you won't be able to get through.' So I said, 'I'll beat my head against that wall.'" --John Cage

"Like acrostics, mesotics are written in the conventional way horizontally, but at the same time they follow a vertical rule, down the middle not down the edge as in an acrostic, a string spells a word or name, not necessarily connected with what is being written, though it may be. This vertical rule is lettristic and in my practice the letters are capitalized. Between two capitals in a perfect or 100% mesostic neither letter may appear in lower case. In the writing of the wing words, the horizontal text, the letters of the vertical string help me out of sentimentality. I have something to do, a puzzle to solve. This way of responding makes me feel in this respect one with the Japanese people, who formerly, I once learned, turned their letter writing into the writing of poems. In taking the next step in my work, the the exploration of nonintention, I don't solve the puzzle that the mesostic string presents. Instead I write or find a source text which is then used as an oracle. I ask it what word shall I use for this letter and what one for the next, etc. This frees me from memory, taste, likes, and dislikes, By means of Mesolist, a program by Jim Rosenberg, all words that satisfy the mesostic rule are listed. IC [a program that generates the I Ching numbers, available for downloading on the Net] then chooses which words in the lists are to be used and gives me all the central words, the position of each in the source material identified by page, line, and column. I then add all the wing words from the source text following of course the rule Mesolist does within the limit of fortyfive characters to the right and the same to the left. Then I take out the words I don't want. With respect to the source material, I am in a global situation. Words come first from here and then from there. The situation is not linear. It is as though I am in a forest hunting for ideas." --John Cage

Cage's most famous musical composition is entitled 4'33". It is played at the piano and is divided into three movements. All of the notes are silent. The composition takes its name from the fact that it requires four minutes and thirty-three seconds to perform. The pianist uses a stopwatch to control his tempo. For those interested, there are a couple of CD recordings available.

Added later: "The score calls for any number of people playing any number of instruments, not specifically piano, although it was performed many times at the piano. Also I thought it

might be beneficial to add something about his second version of the work entitled 0'00", a clear restatement of his original idea."

"If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all." --John Cage.

"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." --John Cage.

"Which is more musical: a truck passing by a factory or a truck passing by a music school?" --John Cage

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"Taking the name of the author and/or the title of the book as their subject (the row), write a series of mesostics beginning on the first page and continuing to the last. Mesostics means a row down the middle. In this circumstance a mesostic is written by finding the first word in the book that contains the first letter of the row that is not followed in the same word by the second letter of the row. The second letter belongs on the second line and is to be found in the next word that contains it that is not followed in the same word by the third letter of the row. Etc. If a shorter rather than longer text is desired, keep an index of the syllables used to represent a given letter. Do not permit for a single appearance of a given letter the repetition of a particular syllable. Distinguish between subsequent appearances of the same letter. Other adjacent words from the original text (before and/or after the middle word, the word including a letter of the row) may be used according to taste, limited, say to forty-three characters to the left and forty-three to the right, providing the appearance of the letters, of the row occurs in the way described above." --Cage

"I don't know when it began. But at Edwin Denby's loft on 21st Street, not at the time but about the place, I wrote my first mesostic. It was a regular paragraph with the letters of his name capitalized. Since then I have written them as poems, the capitals going down the middle, to celebrate whatever, to support whatever, to fulfill requests, to initiate my thinking or my nonthinking (Themes and Variations is the first of a series of mesostic works: to find a way of writing that, though coming from ideas, is not about them but produces them). I have found a variety of ways of writing mesostic[s]." --Cage

"As far as consistency of thought goes, I prefer inconsistency." --John Cage

Joe Williams, who sent me these Cageisms, writes: "My original source for the quotation was the 1990 PBS American Masters program on John Cage which I have on VHS tape. [Some of these occur] in a book called *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*, Wesleyan University Press, 1973."