

An interview with Film Artist Lawrence Brose by Christine Sevilla, April 12, 2004.

In his film and video portrait of composer John Cage, film artist Lawrence Brose and composer Douglas Cohen combine more than seventy compositions and performance works by forty-five composers. Originally presented in 1993 as a performance work in Los Angeles at LACE and LACMA, and in New York City at Experimental Intermedia Loft, the USA premiere of the gallery installation version (commissioned by the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, Ireland) was on view at the Visual Studies Workshop Gallery in Rochester, New York until May 15. The work was part of a two-person exhibition of media art that included Brose's new series of large-format, film-based Iris prints from his film, *De Profundis*, and VSW Executive Director Chris Burnett's *Messages to Extinct Places in the Present Tense*.

Christine Sevilla: How did your interest in John Cage, the musical revolutionist / composer / artist / philosopher, begin? What was your first collaboration and what led you to honor him with this film portrait?

Lawrence Brose: I first worked with John Cage on a film that I made to his score. *Ryoanji*. That was the beginning of my series of films called *Films for Music for Film*. Before working with Cage, and before developing this film series, I started out making the film *Hyacinth Fire*, a collaboration with the composer Douglas Cohen, who also worked on the Cage project with me. That led me to make six films for the North American New Music Festival--it was an evening of live music and film in which one of the films was *Ryoanji*. My lover at the time. Yvar Mikhashoff, was founder of the North American New Music Festival, a virtuoso pianist, and artistic director of a number of new music festivals throughout the world. He worked with Virgil Thomson and John Cage. At this time Cage had just completed the *Europerras*; numbers five and six were created for Yvar. Through that association I began to know John, although I had met him many times because he frequently came to Buffalo as part of the Creative Associates who were bringing in composers in residence. Notable composers were here as full professors, such as Morton Feldman. That was the time of Black Mountain College II here, and the time when Artpark was the real thing, and Cage often came here with his partner. Merce Cunningham, to premiere his new works. Cage had a strong influence on the new music scene in Buffalo at the time.

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When I finished making *Ryoanji* and showed it in New York--it was a rare thing for John to come out to see a film--he came to see it at the Maya Deren Theatre. That was a relief to me. I wanted to do a portrait piece of John, and I had just finished doing a portrait of Virgil Thomson set to his second piano sonata written in 1920.

So the Cage piece is your second film portrait of a musician?

Yes. Virgil had done hundreds of musical pieces that were portrait pieces. At first, he composed them at the piano, but he began to sketch you in music sitting at his table while you were present, initially. He would then send you away and bring you back after working on it weeks later, look at the score and check that he had captured your essence, your energy. So, I thought why not return the favor? He pointed to the second piano sonata, that it was a portrait piece--of someone, possibly a self-portrait--and suggested I use that. I shot images of him in the Chelsea Hotel. I work on the optical printer, a machine that slaves a camera and projector and

synchs them to allow you to re-photograph a film-strip frame by frame, or repeat frames--any number of things. That was my first film for music where the score truly came first, so I did a translation of the score into film frames. All of the notation, all of the guiding principles within the score were translated to a different kind of a score for film. I worked on the optical printer with all of the footage I had shot of him, layering, doing multiple exposures and setting the mages to the music itself.

Douglas Cohen and I discussed how one could use Cage's procedures to compose a film. He first introduced me to Cage's Circus On and Roaratorio. We talked about how the Circus On instructions for sound might be translated to image, and thus began our collaboration on the project John suggested that the Roaratorio would be good for making a portrait of him because it sets out a series of instructions, as opposed to a written musical score. He created Roaratorio as a radio piece and he wrote the steps he had taken to make it. He called this resulting score Circus On. I took that and followed all the instructions, working with Douglas Cohen who was doing the music component of it. It was always intended to be a live performance piece.

When was this portrait of Cage first performed?

A short version was first performed in Buffalo in March on St. Patrick's Day of 1993 at the University of Buffalo music department. Guggenheim Soho and LACMA were requesting City Circus event proposals to accompany the large John Cage exhibition called Rolyholyover, a Circus. That was mounted first in LA in November of 1993. John never saw it performed; he passed away just before that opening. It then went to the Guggenheim Soho in April of 1994.

INSTALLATION

To give readers a context--the installation uses five video monitors, each with a one-hour tape, and three audio recordings from the performance of IMUSICIRCUS, the live performance version of this work. Would you describe what comprises the audio component and tell about how you defined the structure of the installation?

The audio includes recitations of John Cage's Empty Words, of mesostics created by "writing through" Empty Words (which was itself a set of mesostics Cage created by writing through Thoreau's Journals), the text Metaphors on Vision by Stan Brakhage, and a number of other readings. The audio also includes over seventy musical compositions by forty-five composers.

When we originally performed it, we did so in the spirit of the Cage Circuses. We wrapped the environment in projection material and two of the videos were projected into the space along with my film, Ryoanji. Three large monitors were on the stage throughout the performance space. The Triskel Arts Centre in Ireland wanted me to reconceive it as a gallery installation.

What led to the commission of the work by the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, Ireland?

While screening my film De Profundis at the Cork International Film Festival I met the Artistic Director of the Triskel Arts Centre who was interested in my work with composers. I was invited to participate in a festival of new music and was asked to screen my Films for Music for Film and to reconfigure IMUSICIRCUS into a gallery installation. This was one of the center-pieces of the Rhizome Festival in Cork, through the Triskel Arts Centre. We did the opening night with a live presentation, with traditional Celtic musicians, with other Cage performers. These performers were kind of like rock stars, but they knew Cage and had performed in Cage ensembles. So there was an interesting combination of musics. The original Roaratorio also used Celtic musicians so I thought it was a nice homage to Cage. However, it was intended as a gallery installation with five monitors and the sound from the major live performances.

INTENTION

Much of Cage's work explores non-intention, for example employing the I Ching in the chance selection of sounds. Your work begins with intention of creating a portrait of Cage and his ideas. How did you define chance procedures or criteria that determined the appearances and disappearances of different images? How random were they meant to be? If they were meant to be essentially random, what chance procedures did you define for their appearance and disappearance? Were the five one-hour videos distinctly different from one another--based on different texts or ideas?

In his work. John often looked for numbers so he could enact chance procedures. For example there is Imaginary Landscape No. 4 for 12 radios and 24 players. There were two players on each radio, one adjusting the dial and one adjusting the volume; they were all on stopwatches. Interestingly, that piece is still performed and of course, where it is performed and the era of the performance creates a completely different landscape. That is the brilliance of Cage; even though it's chance, things seemed to work out in a pretty remarkable way. He was not using truly random procedures, but a set of methods or ways to put things into action or to create sound. He was less interested in tonality or harmony, emanating from his frustration with not "getting" the idea of being a composer and working with harmony.

When Cage did a film he gave instructions for the camera--aperture settings and so on. For example, in his film Chesspiece in which he was playing chess with Teeny Duchamp with a camera mounted above them, ninety-five percent of the film is over or underexposed, in pure white or pure black. Film has a narrow latitude--a couple of stops--in which you can see an image. I thought he wouldn't do that in music. He would start with a good recording and then enact chance procedures on its presence; the music might be present only ten percent or one hundred percent, but there would always be a quality sound. So, I thought it important to start with an image first, and deal with percentages of presence. In the videos images get masked and revealed and there are lots of things running beneath all the time that you are not seeing. What gets masked over is analogous to Cage's idea that what is not heard is just as important as what is heard. So I used chance procedures on images that had the ability to be present or not.

In Cirrus On Metaphors on Vision choices of images were based upon the mesostics--places named in the text. I had been traveling all over the world and always carried my camera with me and it turned out I had shot film in every place Stan Brakhage spoke of in his text. So I created a library of images of those places and also of the types of images or concepts spoken of in Metaphors on Vision. I took this inventory of images to the Experimental Television Center and worked on transferring them to video, slowing the images down using variable speed projectors, using rear screen projections, and created a live camera feed off the rear screen into a matrix used to mix and layer video. There are a lot of electronic and hand made early video devices, many created by Nam June Paik at the Experimental Television Center. During a residency there I learned to use the tools available, such as luminous keyers, frame buffers and so on. This was my first foray into video so this was experimental machinery that was used to alter the look of the video and to layer it. Finally, I found tools in video that mirrored my film esthetic. It's different now with use of a computer, but these tools were unavailable to video previously.

It was exciting to set things in motion in this way, always using John Cage's image as a filter or a mask. That, to me, was parallel to writing through a text. When I distilled the entire Metaphors on Vision, I used John Cage's name. Writing a mesostic employs some strict rules: using John Cage's name, you go to the first word in the text containing a j that does not begin or end with the letter. But there is an arbitrary aspect where you can choose words on either side of the word, allowing you some input. It's not just a simple distillation method, but you can have your own presence and your own involvement. The poetic aspect of your endeavor is then allowed to speak a bit. Cage's distillation of Finnegans Wake, using the mesostic, is considered one of the best, capturing the spirit more than any other distillation.

So then one goes back to the question, what is chance? We are so attuned to the idea that everything must be original in creation, but here the artist's hand is creating a different set of structures.

So once I set up everything, worked with all the layers, determined what made sense, using John's image and the other footage, I ended up making seventeen different 40-minute tapes. Each one has a different tonality, different presence. Then, using the I Ching, we did the editing. For example, to create the first of the five videotapes used in the piece, the I Ching told me to use 0 minutes: 0 seconds to 1 minute: 32 seconds of tape 14 beginning at 30 minutes: 10 seconds, so that becomes the first cut. So the whole compilation edit of the five tapes used comes from all the 17 tapes.

That method sounds random, but the resulting tapes do not look random.

No, it's seamless. In Cork, a reviewer came to me and said he had come with great skepticism. He said, "After a few minutes I thought, OK, I've seen it. I get it, it's all these bright colors. And then I got transfixed. At the end I was crying. Somehow you managed to capture the essence of Cage and his ideas, and presented a kind of life to us." That was quite a beautiful thing for him to say ... to be moved in that way. I'm all for moving people. Cage was not necessarily about that, but it was my portrait of him. I'm interested in developing a real collaboration with the subject matter and the methods. I try to be very faithful to the musical scores, to the composer, to the musical form. The project is about trying to create and explore what an equal and parallel space could be between music and image; music is not in a supporting role here, as it is in a typical narrative or experimental movie. That's been my struggle and my intention for all of the Film for Music for Film series. And the IMUSICIRCUS tapes are part of that series. With the film Ryoanji I use a different approach--the score is for an ensemble of soloists and the film is another soloist.

TRANSLATION

You use the word "translation" to describe the work, the translation of a score for music to a filmic score and of Cage's ideas and aesthetics in sound to the visual realm. Tell more about your interest in this translation, in contrast with the usual role of music in film.

It's always about translation, but the initial impetus for doing Film for Music for Film was that I constantly saw composers' works get chopped up and used in support of some other narrative device. I've even seen experimental filmmakers use music in a supportive role. This goes back to Eisenstein, who thought about it and didn't know if it could really be done. Some of the films in the series succeed more than others. Some scores don't leave much room for me and the making of it was a struggle, as it was in *De Profundis*. Trying to fit to that very dynamic piece, very present piece by Frederic Rzewski, and create the translation was the challenge of Part II. (a 32-minute scored piece for vocalizing pianist, which is a setting of excerpts from Oscar Wilde's prison letter.)

The entirety of it is sensory overload, more than one can absorb in any one viewing. Say a few words about the use of the word 'circus'--on the surface, analogous to circus rings, where the viewer places his or her attention or allows it to drift or to become transfixed, as that reviewer had--and the sensory experience. In this piece, what were the issues, contradictions or overlaps in the media?

The gallery installation becomes yet another translation. The original presentation included live music, in fact, a whole arena filled with musicians and performers, we even built a pool on the stage for *Pool Piece*, there was a naked opera singer, along with live saxophone and banjo ... There was a lot vying for the audience member's attention. So, I wanted a pull towards the visual that had an equal presence with the performer. So now we're translating into this austere space--where you are not distracted by performers moving around, and by other actions happening--putting together all of the sound from the various performances. It's a kind of winnowing down, a kind of distillation. You might say it's now so concentrated it needs to be diluted, but I don't think so--just a different focus. I think it works, but I wanted to present this to the world as a simplistic presentation where people could experience the sound and the images. People have commented very positively, saying that it really honors Cage and his ideas. Ten years later it still feels incredibly faithful to his ideas.

As in, for example, the setting of the videos and audiotapes to begin and end at any time, in no particular synchronization with one another?

Yes, that's another random element. That's why the audio is not on the video track, so they can have a freedom all their own.

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AUDIENCE

Do you have a particular audience in mind that you want to reach?

It straddles two audiences--people very interested in Cage's music (he had a strong presence here in Buffalo) and the visual arts where Cage also had a strong influence. I also wanted to bring the Avantgarde film image into the New Music world. The new music world includes the Club Foot Orchestra and the Alloy Orchestra that perform music to films. Some make sense, like Ballet Mecanique, but if you just do Metropolis over and over, it reduces film to one of its original elements, that of entertainment. Coming from a serious engagement with film as its own art practice distinct from movies. I wanted to go into the new music world with these visual ideas, and be a player in that world.

What responses do you expect from your audience?

First of all. I've learned that you can't expect anything. With De Profundis, at the Eastman House, there were 500 people in the audience and I had just finished it the week before. It was double, billed with a short, lesbian comedy. Half the people were there for the maker of the short film, Chris Russo, and clearly they were not there for my film. Within twenty minutes of the beginning of my film I had completely cleared the house. They fled in droves. So I thought this is either a complete work of genius, or I'm totally screwed. I had literally worked on this thing for four years and had come out of the darkroom finally with this magnum opus, and they all left. Maybe 80 people were left at the end. But it led to a new way of dealing with audiences; I figured the best thing at a moment like that is to do some stand-up comedy. Some people were really into it, and others stayed out of sheer angst and hostility. Some were screaming at me.

I don't know. Once a piece of art is put out into the world, it has a life of its own. No matter what your intentions as a filmmaker, there is a certain degree where audience response isn't relevant any more, you just have to let people have their own experience with it. Working in the visual medium with Cage, and his distrust of that. I wanted to come through with something that was, on the first level, faithful. Secondly, I wanted to create an esthetic work that felt like my own. So I wasn't even thinking audience. I know with Cage the audience can go either way. People walked out on his stuff all the time, even today when he is part of the canon. But if I intended to please anyone, it would have been John or myself. Even when we did it in New York, we had such trouble in the beginning because even the musicians who were expert musicians; very familiar with Cage's work, came to the piece with great skepticism. During rehearsal it was pandemonium. Douglas Cohen had to convince them that we had our own expertise and were not just coming out of nowhere. It helped the musicians' mood that there was a full house for the performance, it got a good review, and the audience was totally with it. That's the great thing about New York--there's a knowledgeable audience. So, they got it; they loved it! The musicians turned around and said. "This may be the best Cage event we've ever done."

How long do you wish people would experience the work?

It was always intended in live performance to be a 70-minute piece. The videos in live performance were staggered.

WORK

How does this piece fit with your previous work, and how does it shape your current and future work?

It gave me permission on one level, and on another level it taught me to trust my instincts and to trust the images. The images all have something to reveal. There are so many variations on how to put something together, and we anguish over is this the right connection or not. There are different approaches. Music composition is like film editing for me, where you are developing a crescendo or a movement, connecting one shot to the next, deciding whether to cut on a dominant or recessive theme, color or image. I think very musically, since that is my training. (I used to play the piano and once was a master craftsman of piano restoration.) That's how I approach film.

That led me to other areas, in which I worked with Cage on special preparations for the piano to perform Ryoanji live, in which I would be the percussionist, using one end of a piano with solenoids stuck into the strings. So, I've been around composers. I used to read scores, just to read them, especially the beautiful scores of George Crumb. Those are very visual pieces.

Where might this installation piece travel?

Now that the Cage piece has been transferred from tape and digitized, it can travel in the form of DVDs. It may become part of the repertoire through the Cage Foundation.

What is coming up for you?

Well, I'm the Executive Director of CEPA Gallery in Buffalo, so I'm working on grants, Development issues and we have a major exhibit opening this week that will be part of an auction next month and then a big Queer art show. The work for this event can be seen at www.cepagallery.com. So that keeps me quite busy. But I am working on another film titled Crossing with Douglas Cohen that explores the erotic politics of Sailor hazing rituals, which will be very interesting Also, I have an exhibition of prints from the series De Profundis coming up at St. Lawrence University in Canton, NY (dates are August 19-September 30, 2004).

Where can people learn more about your work?

www.lawrencebrose.com or a Google search are two ways to read about my work. The latest Millennium Film Journal is dedicated to Brakhage and Lesbian and Gay Experimental Cinema. Scott McDonald has written his interviews, called Critical Cinemas, of experimental filmmakers, and the next issue will have an interview with me. NYFA has just published a cover story about my work in the April issue of their quarterly FYI that can be seen on the NYFA web site.

AN INTERVIEW BY CHRISTINE SEVILLA

CHRISTINE SEVILLA is an author, photographer, teacher, information designer and is a regular contributor to Afterimage.