

Final : C

24/50 ?

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Course: Art Criticism

Topic: **John Cage as a revolutionary composer in the modernist era**

'I produce sound that I called music.' John Cage once said that when he performed his composition *Water Walk* on a popular TV show *I've Got A Secret* in 1960. He was a composer, but his compositions were nothing like the traditional music form of the previous centuries. He was a pioneer of the contemporary sonic musician, and his works inspired lot of the music composers in the later decades. This short essay is to discuss the modernism features of some of his most remarkable works, they are *Prepared Piano*, *Water Walk* and *4'33"*.

As a student of Schoenberg, Cage didn't use the twelve-tone system to compose music, as he thought that this method is based on the original principles on pitch. As an experimentalist, he used piano as his medium, however, he put metal rod on piano strings. So when he played the piano, the sound is very unique and no one could ever expect how the piano might sound, intonation or the tone itself no longer as a concern of the music. That was such an innovative discover as in the past, composers were just trying to compose different melody or harmony so as to fit the criteria of piano-playing, but no one tried to challenge the instrument (piano, which is an important medium of the western classical music) at all. Even Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky's works contains elements like dissonance chord, atonality or short melodic line and composed with a very strong sense of impressionism, he was still working under the limitations/ standard of music compositions (with huge orchestration, tonality, representation) but Cage could really

unleash the traditions of music compositions and performance, he tend to be more rules-breaking and anti-institute which is the practice of modernist artist.

In the *Water Walk* which he performed on TV, Cage used different kind of materials as the instruments, such as electric mixer, a sprinkling can, a mechanical fish, five radios. No one would expect any music can be composed out of these materials. Cage intention on using these materials is not clearly stated, but it may related to the post II World War period in America, there were many industries manufacturing goods like household products. The use of ready-made art just like Duchamp's work *Fountain*, but Cage didn't elaborate much on this. Cage tried to challenge or to change the perception of 'proper music', which people are tend to appreciate more on the mainstream music which composed with melodic lines, rhythm, dynamics with all sort of accumulated aesthetics from the baroque period to the romantic period. But Cage's aesthetics towards music/sound is nothing likes that, he is searching for unknown from sound, to observe whatever happens without expectation, which is his expectation towards sound, so as a performer or composer, Cage was also the audience of his own work. In his manuscript, he didn't write anything on what sound he intended to produce, as he thought that everyone is different when playing the same instrument or even a note and he did not expect the performer to reproduce the same sound as he did, so whenever people perform his music, it will be the first time and the last time for that particular moment to happen in the history, and each of them are unique. He wanted to bring out his experiment itself is also a work of art and everyone is included in his work.

To John Cage, the characteristics of sound are pitch, loudness, timbre, and duration. And according to his study of silence, there is only duration. His famous piece "4'33"" contains nothing but silence. It was such a controversial piece until present time. Silence as an opposite of sound, but Cage suggested their coexistence is possible. He once mentioned in his "Lecture on Nothing" 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it'. His argument was that silence itself is not silence at all, we can notice silence apart from sound. In classical composition, the pause or rest in the music score is the silent part of the music, but there is still sound from that silence which is the ambient sound. Even everyone in the concert hall is told to be silent, there is something in the nature that cannot be stopped, such as the sound of breathing or the sound of your heart beat. So unless you are dead, there won't be a true silent. The classical composers never treat silence as a form in music. Pauses or rests are treated as nothing, but Cage treated them as Something. Cage's ability to reflect and study the reality is remarkable. He took 'duration' from the aspect of sound and to expand it in order to realize the time and space of silence. In the Documentary film(1992) by Miroslav Sebestik, Cage said 'people expect listening to be more than listening.....or the meaning of sound.' His works do not have any interpretation or representation of anything, just for the pure experience, his intention is the process, not the outcome.

Cage's music pieces are not easy to digest. His revolutionary way in processing sound is a challenging experience for audience, which is an expanded experience. One of my friend, who joined the summer music camp (organized by the Music Office of Hong Kong)last year, he said that he wanted to perform "4'33"" in the in-camp concert. But he

was turned down because the officers thought that my friend was just kidding and not worth performing such a piece. I doubt that as a musician of the 21st century, shouldn't be more open minded than those in the 50s and 60s?

Reference list:

- proper format please!*
- Christopher Shultis(1998)SILENCING THE SOUND SELF, John Cage and the American Experimental Tradition, Northeastern University Press, Boston
 - David W. Patterson (2002) JOHN CAGE, Music, Philosophy, and Intention, 1933-1950,Routledge Publishing, Inc, New York
 - Documentary film(1992) by Miroslav Sebestik
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcHnL7aS64Y>
 - Water Walk performed by John Cage on TV show I've Got A Secret in 1960
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSulycqZH-U>

This piece is so complete, but doesn't reflect your attempt in following the guidelines for the final essay. Further more, I doubt to what extent this is your original work. Especially when comparing with the English proficiency of the other essay.

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Title: Contextualization, the heat of preservation in Hong Kong

Recently, there are many news reports concerning the conservation of the old buildings or architectures in Hong Kong, such as the Blue House, Queen Pier and the former Marine Police Headquarter. The government and the public are playing an active role in this hot issue. People are protesting whenever there is an old building or architectures being pulled down, and some other people will go there with cameras and take photos for whole day. And the government is having tremendous programs on how to conserving and revitalize those historical or heritage sites. Why these are all happened in the previous year and still happening now?

For the past 30 years, Hong Kong claims herself as the financial centre of the world, but the open door policy and CEPA changes the world's attention toward China. Compare with Hong Kong, China is more favorable for people to locate their business. So Hong Kong has to subject into another form of economic system in order to survive. The government then introduces a series of rescue policies such as tourism economy. In the name of these policies, much historical architecture is being revitalized so that it can attract tourists to come to visit. But the way that they

revitalize the architecture is controversial. The government gave those projects to the real estate cooperation, and in their agreement, that cooperation will invest for the revitalization. But the fact is that in order to cover the cost of revitalizing, that historical architecture becomes a shopping mall where you can find Prada, LV or other international branded names flagship stores. It is happening to the Marine Police Headquarter now and it will soon be happening to Woo Chong Pawn Shop in Wan Chai. This action actually disconnecting the original history or cultural inherits from the architecture itself. Take Woo Chong Pawn Shop as an example, the other old buildings around that area will be pulled down, Woo Chong will be having a significant representation of the old Wan Chai but if it is socially disconnected with its origin, and becoming another concrete that holding a Pacific Place? These kinds of cultural art buildings is not only for the people from other countries to visit and shopping, this is the local cultural heritage. So the interest of the local people should be the first one to be entertained. Why can't there be any cultural related activity such as museum, art centre or community centre? I think they will be better than Western Kowloon Cultural District(WKCD), as WKCD is a place that intended to create certain artificial artistic and cultural environment.

For the people in Hong Kong, they are searching for an identity to represent themselves as Hong Kong Yan(Hong Kong People in Cantonese). Hong Kong was a

fishing village 160 years ago, and we can say that the civilization merely started when

British occupied Hong Kong. And it is not surprised that Hong Kong people find themselves as a British colonial other than a Chinese. So when the Chinese

government took back Hong Kong and the SAR government started a series of decolonization (for example the color of the post boxes before 1997 was red, but

within a month, nearly all of them turned into green, and the most significant the demolishing of Queen Pier), it will arise many voices upon this issue. Hong Kong is

said to be having the mixed cultural of oriental and western(in the sense of art, architecture), and most of the Hong Kong people are very proud of this uniqueness,

but when Hong Kong returned to China, this uniqueness is gradually being erased. And the local culture is not strong enough to stand on its feet as it is the duplicate of

Japan or America pop culture. This identity crisis takes time to resolve, as it takes time for a new culture to develop or evoke from the previous one.

It is important to preserve those architecture with high historical value, but indeed, it is our goal to keep the culture from vanishing, it may not in a physical form, but what

we need to do if to preserve its ideas and the spirits of it. It is a fact that concrete will decay from weathering, but as long as we still remember it, it will never die.

please read the expand's series on HK history and look at the debate on this discourse!

my
what is your position?

decolonization /
anticolonial /
nationalization?
you seems to
have mis-use
all these concepts.

↓
over-simplification



SM2273 Art Criticism

Final Essay

25/50

Part I: Criticism on Art Criticism

Before I ask myself what criticism means to me, I ask myself what dose I criticize most in my daily life. Movies and novels? It's not often for me to access to 'professional' art criticism but some for movies or novels. I admit that though I like art a lot, no matter painting, photography, sculpture or installation, I'm not very enthusiastic about visiting museum or gallery. I think I'm a bit lazy about that and I gave up a lot of chances to read art criticisms. I'm a casual person and I don't like to criticize the others, defining what is good or bad. A musician ever said that there is no good or bad music but only music you like or dislike. I believe that most artists have their personal reasons behind of doing such works and there is no exact definition of 'good' or 'bad' art work. Anyhow it's pleasant to discuss with others that they like the work or not. And certainly art criticism has its value even I don't feel good to criticize the others.

According to James Elkins's book 'What Happened to Art Criticism?' art criticism is metaphorically describe as a hydra (from Greek myth) and it has seven 'heads'. It is a clever metaphor since hydra's heads are known to have separate life and different characteristic. Personally I had often accessed to 'catalog essays' and I like the 'descriptive art criticism' most. Though catalog essays always show the nice side of the art work only, I don't think it is easy to write and less worth to read. It is not easy to write positively every time and satisfy the one who ask you to write. Especially writing catalog essay for an artist that you don't know well. Like Elkins's

case, the artist didn't like his wording and cut them off. Such dilemma may affect the mood of the writer. In case the writer is paid for writing the catalog essay, should he/she write for the sake of money or for the dignity as an art critic? In my opinion, as catalog essay is for promoting the art work as well as the artist, it should be written possibly and nicely, better without any depreciation. It sounds giving in to the reality but actually art can't exist without money support. Then it comes to another question. Can an art critic write different kinds of criticisms? Definitely yes, but how can he/she balance? What if a writer writes a catalog essay with all positive points and there are some negative things left? Should he/she write another criticism to discuss further? Up to this moment, what I want to say is, it's all about personal will. Art criticism should be free. If there is no right or wrong in art, of course there is no right or wrong in art criticism.

Descriptive art criticism is to 'provide an accurate, descriptive account'. Elkin mentioned 'Dialogues, evocations, motivations, introductions, bridges' that I like so much. It's the matter of why people making art. To me, why I draw, write and create is trying to share something and inspire but not to persuade the others. Therefore I think conversation is very important. Optimistically, the conversation between the artist and audience take part automatically through the art work. Otherwise, there is necessity to have art criticism. I believe that art criticism is not only for criticizing but a way for communication, starting a conversation between the artists, audience (including critics) and art itself. Sometimes criticism can bring more possibilities to the art work other than the meaning given by the artist.

I can say, through out human history, people have communicated through the arts since it can be spread to places and succeeded to another time. Art even appeared before a written language. Early in Stone Age, there were paintings on stones or tools,

for communication. That's why I believe that art belongs to every single human. Every person has the right to criticize (to me, it's the right to like or dislike). Relationship between artists and viewers (including critics) could be delicate. I think partially some art critics nowadays have sort of weird thinking towards their work, i.e. a good critic should be able to point out bad things of an art work. As a criticism reader, I would be pleased if the critic points out negative things which I cannot see. I think such thinking is weird but natural. Artists usually want to make something they like and show the others. If the critics usually want to find negative things, the relationships between artists and critics can be difficult. In my opinion, this is why there are chemical reactions on the interactions between artists and critics. Such interactions could bring more possibilities for art.

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Part II: Art and Public

When studying about the article "The Public as Sculpture", I found there are not much public art pieces in Hong Kong have great impact on people's thinking while many of them are just for visual appreciation. The sculptures in public areas mostly become photo shooting spots. Public art has to be accessible to the masses, and site specific. Such characteristic make public art possibly very powerful to give out messages and raise some discussions. So, what is the purpose of public art? To show the artist's perceptions/ ideas/ believes or let the audiences have their own? The best situation is balancing both sides.

Due to the coming of the 20th anniversary of the June Fourth Incident (know as the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 among western countries) I would like to use the Pillar of Shame in Hong Kong (now displayed in Haking Wong Podium of

the elite...
is not here
if you read
the article
carefully -
it's not about
the personal &
the collective.
but about
communist & the
authoritative
in a political
sense -

University of Hong Kong) by Danish artist Jens Galschiot, as an example. The Pillar of Shame is a collection of five sculptures, placed in Hong Kong, Italy, Mexico, Brazil and Germany. It is made to remind people of a "shameful event" which should never be forgotten. Obviously the Pillar of Shame is a politic propaganda other than an art work for visual appreciation. Torn and twisted bodies with painful faces are sculpted into an eight meters tall pillar, with black color, to memorialize the people who died in the event. The symbolic meaning of the sculpture is more important than the artistic value but at the same time, the visual impact of the realistic painful bodies and faces are able to draw audiences' attention and raise the awareness. The Pillar of Shame in Hong Kong was painted orange as part of the Color Orange on 30th April 2008. The Color Orange is a project started up by Jens Galschiot himself, trying to raise awareness about human rights in China. Jens Galschiot starts up the Color Orange because he thinks of art as nonverbal communication and he often uses his art to make international art happenings to place focus on defenders of humanism. He used a color, the eye-catching orange to shows his attention to human rights, request the attention from the masses. When he was coming to Hong Kong to attend the event of painting in University of Hong Kong, he was denied to enter Hong Kong. This shows the government is irritable to the project, especially when the Beijing Olympic Games was coming.

→ think the other way round: it is both.

is here but there!

The first time I saw the Pillar of Shame in Hong Kong with my own eyes was October 2008, right after the Beijing Olympic Games. I knew about people who are against the violations of the human rights in China wore orange outfits on some events but I did not quite understand the Color Orange Project behind. It was the day of Joint-University Mass Dance-HKU Station at the Haking Wong Podium. Since I'm always not interested in politic issues and unaware of the events about the June Fourth

Incident, I was shocked when I stood under the pillar. That was the first time I want to ask "Why?" about the June Fourth Incident. The sculpture brought the pain to me and made me started to think about the disputes over the incident in the past twenty years. I can see the power of public art here.

In the old time, before modernism, the "old school" arts of western mainly had religious background, with missionary message for Christianity or glorify the God. It is not new for art as a medium to draw focus to certain issue. Nowadays in some cases, the discussions or controversies bring by public art can be surprisingly great. The public art piece will be challenged and defended by different groups. In Hong Kong, the atmosphere of discussion is always enthusiastic. However, I found that part of general masses do not think critically but parroting. Many Hong Kong people like to blame especially on politic issues. In fact there are arts in Hong Kong but it seems not powerful enough. As a financial center of Asia, the cultural level of many Hong Kong people is not high enough too. I wish there will be more "real" and "functional" public art in Hong Kong. The government always talks about "Sustainability". Sometimes public art has to be sustainable as well.

Mi Rai, you've demonstrated your writing skill, and I'm quite satisfied that you can handle your own argument, especially in the second essay. However, I think you are able to do better and write not just by your common sense, if you've read the common readings and attend the class. You've missed the chance to learn this time, but don't miss the coming chances in your life.

LP

Reference:

-Michael Ingham(2007) Hong Kong A cultural and Literary History, Hong Kong

University Press

-Yudhishtir Raj Isar(1984)The Challenge to Our Cultural Heritage, Smithsonian

Institution Press

-Conserve and Revitalize Hong Kong Heritage

<http://www.heritage.gov.hk/tc/index.htm>

Katie.
I wish you could be more involved in class. We don't discuss much in cultural identity, nor did we talk about social music. That means you are using your common sense in writing these two essays, and they are failed to show me what you have learnt in this semester. Do try your best to learn in the rest of your time in the university.
Lp.