

## Digging In John Cage's Garden: Cage and Ryōanji

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### Abstract

*John Cage's interest in Japanese gardens came to the fore in the series of instrumental works Ryoanji (1983-1985), and the related visual art works Where R=Ryoanji (1983-1992). In this paper the author proposes that the aesthetics of Japanese traditional gardens can provide insights into Cage's work as a whole. Traditional Japanese aesthetics, which permeate garden design, tea culture, poetry and the other arts, had a significant impact on Western modernism. The 'Zen boom' in the West, in which Cage played an important part, furthered the perceived relationship between Japanese aesthetics, Zen Buddhism and modernism. The dry stone garden at Ryōanji came to exemplify the spirit of Zen in garden design. In relationship to the work of Cage, many aspects of traditional gardens are relevant: the preference for asymmetry, the importance of empty space, the borrowed view, the use of re-purposed materials, and the acceptance of limitations either imposed by available space and resources or as a result of aesthetic preference. Cage's interpretation of the garden at Ryōanji was made in the light of his own preoccupations with chance procedures and non-intention; it thus became part of what the author describes as Cage's 'genealogy' – a non-linear constellation of influences and ideas interpreted by Cage and incorporated into his thought and work. In 2012, with the assistance of a grant from the Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi, the author recently spent several months in Kyoto, Japan, studying traditional Japanese garden design and its relationship to music.*

**Keywords** John Cage, Japanese gardens, Zen Buddhism, aesthetics

There is something very appealing about likening composition to gardening; both activities are part art, part science, and part manual labour. Busoni's gardening analogy seems particularly appropriate for John Cage, who was a keen gardener himself; tending plants was part of his daily routine.

My work is what I do and always involves writing materials, chairs, and tables. Before I get to it, I do some exercises for my back and I water the plants, of which I have around two hundred (Cage, 1991).

If we think of Cage's work as a garden, then it is more than a musical garden: It includes a substantial body of visual art and writing. In his writings and numerous interviews, Cage provided a detailed map of his 'garden', drawing on many sources: Aesthetic ideas – art as 'the imitation of nature in her manner of operation'; methods – 'composition using chance procedures'; Zen Buddhism; and a 'lineage' that includes

Arnold Schoenberg, D.T. Suzuki, Erik Satie, Henry David Thoreau and James Joyce, among others. Rather than letting ‘sounds be themselves’, to be heard and appreciated for their intrinsic qualities as experiential phenomena, Cage surrounded the sounds with an extensive literary and philosophical discourse, albeit unconventional in form. The sounds cannot ‘be themselves’ without context; a context is needed even for the removal of context.

In *Silence* Cage talks of making music that is “free of individual taste and memory (psychology) and also of the literature and traditions of the art” (Cage, 1961, p.59). In spite of this, Cage felt impelled to place himself in a tradition of his own making. Lineages, like those found in Zen that trace the transmission of *dharma*, are generally used to convey legitimacy and authenticity to personal experience. Other composers have engaged in lineage creation: Wagner’s portrayal of himself as Beethoven’s only true spiritual and musical heir, or Schoenberg’s tracing of his musical lineage from Bach through to Mahler. The writings of composers often exhibit a mixture of theorising, philosophical speculation, aesthetic posturing, polemics and self-justificatory rhetoric. However Cage’s ‘lineage’ is non-linear, unlike the unbroken lineages of *dharma* transmission from one enlightened Zen master to another, or the succession of great composers from Bach through Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven to Schoenberg. It presents a constellation of historically unrelated influences (for example, Schoenberg, Satie and Thoreau) that meet as if by chance in the person of John Cage; for that reason it might better be called, following Nietzsche and Foucault, a ‘genealogy’.

Cage’s interest in Japanese gardens became manifest in the *Ryoanji* works, a series of compositions and visual art works. It is not surprising that he found a strong resonance with his own ideas in Japanese gardens. Japanese aesthetics played an important role in the emergence of modernism and in the formation of artists of Cage’s generation; furthermore, Cage developed a personal interest in Japanese culture through his engagement with Zen, his friendships with Japanese artists, and his visits to Japan. The art of garden design was formed by the same historical and cultural forces that shaped the other traditional arts of Japan, with which it shares underlying aesthetic principles. Parallels between garden design and Cage’s work are consequently not difficult to find.

‘Empty’ space is important in gardens; one might say that in a garden the stones and plants are there to articulate or energise the space, rather than the space being merely a blank canvas for the arrangement of objects. A careful balance is maintained between ‘empty’ space and the things that (often sparsely) occupy that space. For Cage, ‘empty’ space equalled silence, a relative rather than an absolute concept, a field in which sounds could occur. A figure-ground shift can occur in a garden if one contemplates the space between the rocks, rather than the rocks themselves; in a similar way, Cage’s music invites contemplation of the ‘silence’ between sounds as much as the sounds themselves.

Space in a garden is not simply physical space, but space-time (*ma*): A garden changes with the passage of the seasons. Working with tape composition, Cage discovered “...that time equals space. You could do graphic things in space that would have effects in time” (Cage & Retallack, 1996, p.91). Cage spoke of his scores as creating space-time on the musical page. His increasing involvement with making visual art in his later years led to a productive cross-fertilisation between art and music,

“getting ideas from one field that work in a different field” (Cage, 1996, p.91). One effect of this was the increasing use of space in his music: “I think if you’re doing things graphically, to leave space seems so much more reasonable” (Cage, 1996, p.91).

Another principle that resonates with the work of Cage is the preference for employing limited means to achieve the maximum effect. Japanese gardens typically use rocks of similar colour and texture, and plants in similar shades of green. A single flower may be more evocative than an impressive massed display; the power of suggestion is used to stimulate the imagination. What is felt within the viewer is more powerful than what is perceived without. Speaking of the dry stone garden, art historian Yoshinobu Yoshinaga writes, “The garden is an attempt to represent the innermost essence of water, without actually using water, and to represent it at that even more profoundly than would be possible with real water” (Slawson, 1987, p.74).

The repurposing of materials (*mitate*) - in which, for example, a millstone might become a stepping stone or part of a wall, or a bridge pier might be transformed into a water lily – reminds one of Cage’s adaptation of materials as varied as turntable cartridge pickups and cacti as musical ‘instruments.’ *Mitate* can be translated as “seeing anew”, meaning “discovering a new use for them or observing a beauty in them that was not noticed before” (Keane 1996, p.80). Cage also ‘repurposed’ sounds, by noticing the beauty in sounds hitherto considered unmusical.

The technique of borrowed landscape (*shakkei*) – opening the frame of the garden to include an external view – suggests a parallel with Cage’s acceptance of any sound that occurs during a performance as part of that performance. The sounds that occur during a performance of *4’33”* could be described as a ‘borrowed soundscape.’ “The sounds that had accidentally occurred while it was being played were in no sense an interruption” (Cage, 1961, pp.157-158). The performance frames the sounds as a garden frames the view that it borrows. The view is placed there by nature and selected by the garden designer; sounds might be placed within the performance by nature (e.g. rain on the roof, or wind) but, whatever their source, are ‘accidental occurrences.’

At the intersection between his interests in Zen, gardening, composition and visual art are works bearing the name of Ryōanji, a temple in north-western Kyoto that is the site of the most famous of all ‘Zen gardens.’ *Ryoanji* is the title of a group of superimposable instrumental works or ‘gardens’ of sound (this is the term Cage uses) composed between September 1983 and August 1985, the first being for oboe, followed by works for flute, double bass, voice, and trombone. Later Cage planned a version for cello that remained unfinished. These works are all intended to be accompanied by percussion, or by an orchestra in which the 20 instrumentalists use their instruments as percussion. *Where R=Ryoanji* is the collective title of a series of 170 visual art works which were begun in January 1983. The series was initiated by a pencil drawing that served as the cover design for a French edition of Cage’s *Mushroom Book*, published as *Le livre des champignons* by Editions Ryōanji (Marseille, 1983). A series of etchings (begun in January 1983) was followed (after June 1983) by drawings which continued to occupy Cage until his death, with the final drawing remaining unfinished (Thierolf, 2013).

In its present form, the garden at Ryōanji consists of 15 rocks, set in white, raked sand, with no plants other than moss surrounding some of the rocks. The rocks are in five groups, from left to right: (5 – 2) – (3 – 2) – 3; based on proximity, they are

often described as in three groups: 7 – 5 – 3, although the perception of the grouping is dependent on the viewing angle. Cage refers to them as being “in three groups” (Cage 1996, p.243). It is a garden of the type commonly referred to as ‘dry stone garden’ (*karesansui*). The identity of the creator or creators of the Ryōanji garden is unknown, although there is no shortage of theories.<sup>2</sup> It is possible that it was created by professional gardeners who were of too lowly a social status to have their names recorded (Kuitert, 2002, p.117). The age of the present form of the garden is also uncertain, as early descriptions of it only mention nine rocks; the garden may also originally have had trees, one being a weeping cherry tree admired by Hideyoshi at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Yamada, 2009, p.139). The wall surrounding the garden is not original. The garden was in its present shape at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is illustrated in a garden treatise of that era<sup>3</sup>, but the sand does not appear to have been raked as we see it today. For much of its history the Ryōanji garden, along with the temple buildings, was neglected. There are reports of the temple and its gardens being overgrown with weeds even in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

For much of its history the garden was said to depict tiger cubs crossing a river, an interpretation which could both be taken literally and also understood as a poetic metaphor. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the garden had come to be considered the epitome of Zen sensibility. Shoji Yamada has argued that the fame of the Ryōanji garden rose with the ‘Zen boom’ in the West, and it was largely Western writers including Loraine Kuck, Bruno Taut and the Japanese-American artist Isamu Noguchi who were responsible for the garden’s renown (Yamada, 2003, pp.194-197). The idea that the garden is a pure expression of Zen must be considered problematic (Kuitert, 2002, pp.130-134), but it has been uncritically accepted in the literature about Cage. In *The Music of John Cage* James Pritchett quotes Henri Dumoulin’s *Zen Buddhism: A History*:

Void of all animal life and nearly all vegetation, this stone garden is a symbol of the pure mind purged of all forms – of nothingness or of what Meister Eckhart calls the “desert of godhead.”...When the silver moon glides over the white sand, the mind of the contemplative pilgrim is carried to the world beyond, where there are no opposites and the nothingness of pure divinity dwells in impenetrable light. (Pritchett, 1993, pp.189-190)

This passage is representative of Western writing about the Ryōanji garden and Zen in general. The reference to the German Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (who figures in Cage’s ‘genealogy’) reflects a widely held belief that the core experience at the heart of all religions (especially their esoteric and mystical forms) is essentially the same; by extension, the distinction between Western and Asian cultures is becoming irrelevant. Cage put aside his initial hesitation about immersing himself in what he usually called ‘Oriental philosophy’:

People are always saying that the East is the East and the West is the West and you have to keep from mixing them up. When I first began to study Oriental philosophy, I also worried about whether it was mine to study. I don’t worry any more about that. At Darmstadt I was talking about the reason back of pulverization

and fragmentation: for instance, using syllables instead of words in a vocal text, letters instead of syllables. I said, “We take things apart in order that they may become the Buddha.” And if that seems too Oriental an idea for you, “I said, “Remember the early Christian Gnostic statement, ‘Split the stick and there is Jesus!’” (Cage, 1967, p.136)

Buddhism and Gnosticism are linked here in a way that is characteristic of the writings of D.T. Suzuki, Aldous Huxley, R.H. Blyth, Alan Watts and other proselytisers of Zen to Western audiences.

And then again if any of you are troubled still about Orient and Occident you can read Eckhart, or Blyth’s book on Zen in English literature, or Joe Campbell’s books on mythology and philosophy, or the books by Alan Watts (Cage, 1961, p.143).

Cage did not consider Zen to be a ‘fixed tangible’, and did not wish his work to be ‘blamed on Zen.’ Rhetorically he asks: “What nowadays, America mid-twentieth century, is Zen?” (Cage, 1961, p. xi)

John Cage had a role to play in the rise of Ryōanji as the quintessential Zen garden. He visited it for the first time in 1962; the following anecdote appears in *A Year from Monday*:

Now and then I come across an article on that rock garden in Japan where there’s just a space of sand and a few rocks in it. The author, no matter who he is, sets out either to suggest that the position of the rocks in the space follows some geometrical plan productive of the beauty one observes, or not satisfied with mere suggestion, he makes diagrams and detailed analyses. So when I met Ashihara, the Japanese music and dance critic (his first name escapes me), I told him that I thought those stones could have been anywhere in that space, that I doubted whether their relationship was a planned one, that the emptiness of the sand was such that it could support stones at any points in it. Ashihara had already given me a present (some table mats), but then he asked me to wait a moment while he went into his hotel. He came out and gave me the tie I am now wearing (Cage, 1967, p.137).

Cage’s reference to Ryōanji is casual – he doesn’t mention it by name - like his reference to the critic Ashihara, whose first name he can’t remember, though he surely could have found out if he had tried. Zen is not mentioned, but the context strongly implies a Zen association. In spite of the casual tone, there is little doubt that this is a carefully crafted literary construction. Moreover, it is certain that the Ryōanji garden made a strong impression on Cage.

The art works in the *Where R=Ryoanji* series were made by drawing around the edges of 15 stones selected from Cage’s collection; the choice of stones was dictated by personal preference, with due consideration given that they were in ‘appropriate proportion’ to the size of the paper. Two sets of stones were used, for large and small

drawings respectively. The nearly circular shape of many of the rocks suggests an affinity with the *ensō*, a traditional Zen calligraphic figure (Stevens, 1995, p.190 ff.). Chance procedures, executed using Andrew Culver's *ic* (I Ching) program initially, and, from 1987, the specially created *yRoverx*, were used to answer questions about how many stones, which pencils (of 17 different degrees of hardness<sup>5</sup> from 9H to 6B), and which stones were to be used, and to determine the horizontal and vertical positions of the stones. Nonetheless there still remained a degree of indeterminacy, as some decisions could only be made in the process of making the art (Thierolf, 2013, p.15). How these decisions were made is a matter of conjecture. The resulting artworks are not literal transcriptions of the temple garden. Cage did not encircle 15 stones for each work and the size of the paper or the frame does not exactly match the proportions of the garden (Thierolf, 2013, p.16).

The scores of the *Ryoanji* compositions were made by drawing around paper templates of the stones placed at chance-determined points in the total garden, using four different kinds of line (straight, dash, dotted and dash-dot), drawing from left to right across the staves.

I think of *Ryoanji* as being fifteen stones, hmmm? And I think of the garden or the space for the fifteen stones as being four staves, or two pages – each page having two staves. And the staves are actually the area of the garden. (Cage, 1996, p.242)

Cage does not directly answer the question of whether listening to *Ryoanji* creates a similar experience to viewing the temple garden. But he does suggest that the visual appearance of the score relates to the listening experience: “I think they do relate to one another. I think that with proportional notation, you automatically produce a picture of what you hear. Perhaps more so in *Ryoanji*” (Cage, 1996, p.242). The solo instruments correspond to the rocks, while the percussion parts “are the ‘raked sand’ of the garden” (*Ryoanji*).

The *Ryoanji* works reflect Cage's personal view of the garden as a space in which the stones were placed in an ‘unplanned’ manner. Chance was central to Cage's often repeated idea of art ‘imitating nature in her manner of operation’, a definition adapted, with a significant shift in meaning, from Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (who had taken it from St. Thomas Aquinas). Cage's interpretation of the Ryōanji garden suggests that the placement of the rocks was not planned; that it was in some sense the result of chance. Hypothetically, the stones *could* have been placed anywhere; but they could not have been placed anywhere *with the same effect* (Miura & Sukemiya, 2007; Van Tonder & Lyons, 2005). Fifteen rocks placed in one corner, or arranged in an evenly spaced symmetrical pattern, would clearly create an entirely different impression. The placement of rocks is physically difficult work; careful preparation must be made to avoid unnecessary labour. There is no doubt that the placement of the stones references nature, but it also abstracts from nature according to well-established design principles, to make the unnatural seem natural. Cage, however, interprets the garden in the light of his own artistic preoccupations, in which chance plays a central role.

Japanese art is not unaware of the artistic value of chance; this is evident in the highly sophisticated ceramic arts of Japan, in which chance frequently intervenes in

the outcome of the process of kiln firing. Nonetheless, in this complex and somewhat fraught process there is a clear objective in view even if the outcome is in part beyond the direct control of the creator. It is interesting to note that mishaps in the kiln may result in art works highly prized for their individuality and imperfection (Yanagi, 1972, p.120 ff.). This is reminiscent of Cage's statement in *Silence*: "A 'mistake' is beside the point, for once anything happens it authentically is" (Cage, 1961, p.59).

The trajectory of Cage's life suggests an acute awareness of the possibilities stemming from chance encounters; he possessed a remarkable ability to relate whatever he encountered to his own life and preoccupations, apparently from an early age.

I was shocked at college to see one hundred of my classmates in the library all reading copies of the same book. Instead of doing as they did, I went into the stacks and read the first book written by an author whose name began with Z. I received the highest grade in the class. That convinced me that the institution was not being run correctly. I left (Cage, 1991).

This episode recalls an observation in Kenkō's 14<sup>th</sup> century classic *Essays in Idleness*:

Even a perfunctory glance at one verse of some holy writing will somehow make us notice also the text precedes and follows; it may happen then, quite suddenly, that we mend our errors of many years. Supposing that we had not at that moment opened the sacred text, would we have realized our mistakes? This is a case of accidental contact producing a beneficial result (Kenkō, 1967, p.139).

Traditional methods of divination make use of a similar technique. A text chosen by chance from the *I Ching* offers an answer to a question, but the questioner must discover the relevance of the answer within him or herself. The key to the success of such a method, if success is understood to mean getting the 'right' answer, is to ask the right question. The outcome of Cage's method of composition using chance procedures is also dependent on the questions asked; Cage knew how to get a certain kind of answer by asking the 'right' questions.

Cage's understanding of chance procedures as a method of imitating nature is also closely connected with the ideas of non-intention and silence.

In the late forties I found out by experiment (I went into the anechoic chamber at Harvard University) that silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around. I devoted my music to it. My work became an exploration of non-intention. To carry it out faithfully I have developed a complicated composing means using *I Ching* chance operations, making my responsibility that of asking questions instead of making choices (Cage, 1991).

Inherent silence is equivalent to denial of the will (Cage, 1961, p.53).

Cage's interpretation of the Ryōanji garden shifts the emphasis away from the finished form of the garden; if the rocks could have been 'placed anywhere' then the final result is less important than the process of making it, which is dependent on those making it being in an appropriate state of mind: that of 'non-intention', the activity

of an egoless mind, free from taste and history. It is reminiscent of the description of archery (*kyūdō*) in Eugen Herrigel's *Zen and the Art of Archery*, in which the individual does not shoot the arrow by an act of will; instead a mysterious 'It' shoots. And hitting the target is not the point of the activity.

Four years ago or maybe five, I was talking to Hidekazu Yoshida. We were on the train from Donaueschingen to Cologne. I mentioned the book by Herrigel called *Zen in the Art of Archery*; the melodramatic climax of this book concerns an archer's hitting the bull's eye though he did so in total darkness. Yoshida told me there was one thing the author failed to point out, that is, there lives in Japan a highly esteemed archer who has never yet been able to hit the bull's eye even in broad daylight (Cage, 1967, p.137).

Cage's reference to the book's 'melodramatic climax' suggests a lingering doubt about the tone of the book, if not the accuracy of its contents. Herrigel's book played an important part in the Western 'Zen boom' and is still widely read. It has been argued that Herrigel's description of *kyūdō* is far from accurate, and that the climactic episode described in the book is probably fictional (Yamada, 2009, pp.29-41). *Kyūdō* involves intensive training with the objective of mastering a skill and ultimately of hitting the target. That requires a state of mind that is better described as focused attention rather than 'non-intention.' In that respect it is similar to other traditional arts of Japan, including the 'art of setting stones', as gardening is called in the 11<sup>th</sup> century gardening treatise *Sakuteiki* (Takei & Keane, 2008, p.152, n.1). Focused attention requires respect for the quality and nature of the materials and tools being used; the artist must defer to the materials of the art.

The *Sakuteiki* refers to the process of placing stones in the garden as 'making a request of the stones' (Takei & Keane, 2008), in effect asking the stones where they want to be placed. In the medieval Japanese context, the idea that the stones have a will of their own appeared quite reasonable. If not taken literally, it implies highly attuned sensibility to the materials that are worked with, acting in concert with careful attention to local conditions (topology, climate, surroundings). This does not seem so far removed from Cage's working methods, which he had honed over decades to the point that they were completely natural to him, just as any other skilled artist, artisan or gardener does. It suggests that Cage's approach to his art is better understood as focused attention rather than, as Cage describes it, 'denial of the artist's will' or 'non-intention.' The use of chance procedures does not preclude intention on the part of the artist.

Japanese gardens exist within an intricate network of poetic, literary, artistic and cultural associations and meanings, developed over more than a 1000 years. In contrast, Cage was a member of a modernist avant-garde that largely rejected culture and history. He created his own network of associations and meanings and in the process, he made highly personal interpretations. Cage's genealogy is as notable for its exclusions (e.g. Beethoven, Stravinsky) as it is for its inclusions. It presents history (including Cage's personal history) as personal perspective. 'Cage's Satie' and 'Cage's Thoreau' are exactly that - historical figures subsumed into Cage's genealogy

and interpreted accordingly; owing to his widespread influence, Cage's interpretations have themselves become part of history. Similarly 'Cage's Ryōanji' is an interpretation which has become part of the history of the garden, and exerts an influence on the way it is perceived, even in Japan. Satie and Thoreau, like Zen, and like the Ryōanji garden, are not 'fixed tangibles' to Cage; their identities are unstable and therefore subject to endless re-interpretation. They happen to meet, as if by chance, in John Cage's garden, where they intersected with the trajectory of Cage's life and work. When Cage saw the Ryōanji garden for the first time he responded to it in accord with his own artistic inclinations. It became part of his garden, from which two decades later the *Ryoanji* works grew.

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**Figure 1** The dry rock garden at Ryōanji in spring (photograph by the author).

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> When the temple is being referred to, it will be written Ryōanji; *Ryoanji* will be used in the title of works by Cage, consistent with Cage's practice.
- <sup>2</sup> Kuitert (2002, p.236), note 7, mentions 16 different attributions.
- <sup>3</sup> Akisata (1799), *Miyako rinsen meisho zue*, Vol. 4, reproduced in Yamada, (2009, p.109).
- <sup>4</sup> There are detailed discussions of the history of the garden in Kuitert (2002), and Yamada (2009).
- <sup>5</sup> Seventeen is also the number of syllables in a haiku.
- <sup>6</sup> The following author's note precedes the text: "*An Autobiographical Statement*" was written for the Inamori Foundation and delivered in Kyoto as a commemorative lecture in response to having received the Kyoto Prize in November 1989. It is a work in progress.

## Biography

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