

Unfinished Gesture #3

Various Artists

Darren Tofts

Side 1

11/12/93 [13:59]

I can only wonder if Keats, on first looking into Chapman's Homer, amid the severity of its Petrarchan lyricism, found such an innocuous, yet profound piece of ephemera. Completely unaware of its presence, I happened upon it in the pages of my copy of *The Real Frank Zappa Book*. It was a receipt for \$45, an anonymous expenditure purchased from a local department store. I have no recollection what it was for, but it was certainly not for the book in which it was found. But it uncannily invoked its subject in an oblique, slightly unnerving manner. The date of purchase, 11/12/93, was one week after the death of Frank Zappa. The exact time of the purchase, 13:59, was also conspicuously specific, as if announcing some arcane, indeterminate vigil, as one hour teetered expectantly on the cusp of another.

Its faded violet ink seems hollow and insignificant now, its yellowing paper a jaundiced reminder of a more robust integrity. Yet it stands as an improbable commentary on time, being the last of all possible minutes between one hour and the next. But it is also a cipher of time without duration. That minute, anticipated in December 1993, still ceases to pass now, an interval that remains, as Marcel Duchamp would have it, 'definitively unfinished' (ctd in Hulten, *Duchamp*). It is 'motionless and mute', like the drop of rain that inexplicably stops on the cheek of a condemned man before the firing squad, the 'unchanging shadow' he glimpses on a paving stone cast by a courtyard bee, the quiescent plume of smoke of his last cigarette. Such vagaries of time suspended are derived from Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinean Tiresias whose beguiling and rigorous fictions would not only have a camel pass through the eye of a needle, but all time and space converge in one simultaneous moment in a domestic cellar in Buenos Aires. Borges' remarkable erudition (he reputedly had read everything in world literature) found its corollary in the economic compression and conceptual density of his fictions, with very few exceeding a dozen pages. 'The Aleph' (1945) is one such exception, perhaps knowingly so in that its subject matter, announced in an epigram from Hobbes' *Leviathan*, concerns the human sensation of eternity, the *Nunc-stans* or 'Standing still of the Present Time', and the *Hic-stans*, the 'Infinite greatness of Place' ('Aleph', 274): 'The Aleph was probably two or three centimetres in diameter, but universal space was contained inside it, with no diminution in size' (283).

In 'The Secret Miracle' (1944) Borges elegantly explores the lived experience of this notion of a duration outside-time and beyond general relativity or quantum

singularity; a space-time described by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* as 'allspace in a nutshell', a dream-worked iteration of a line pruned from *Hamlet* that also turns up as the first epigram to 'The Aleph': 'O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a King of infinite space' (274). In 'The Secret Miracle' the writer Jaromir Hladik is arrested by the Gestapo during the occupation of Prague on the 14th March, 1943. He is condemned as a Jew and his execution set for March 29th at 9:00 am. At the moment the order is given to fire, time stops: 'The sergeant's arm eternized an unfinished gesture' (123). Borges presents us with the proposition that between the two minutes of diegetic time that remain in the story, between 9:00 and 9:02 am precisely, twelve months of phenomenological time elapse within the mind of its protagonist, Jaromir Hladik. This compressed time was Hladik's last earthly wish, a request for one year to complete his play *The Enemies*; a request made not of his tormentors, but of God in a dream he has during his long death-watch vigil between the 28th and 29th March (Hladik, occupying historical and fictional, as well as fabulatory, time is, unsurprisingly, the author of a book entitled *Vindication of Eternity*, an ironic self-reference frequently encountered in Borges' well-wrought fictions). God grants Hladik his year, his timeless calendar, in which he does indeed complete *The Enemies*. Hladik experiences a perversely elongated version of what Gilles Deleuze, in his study of Bergson, calls the 'cerebral interval', a concept that accounts for our ability to sense and understand duration (*Bergsonism*, passim). The *intervalle* is for Deleuze a virtual space, an indeterminate pause that precipitates a dislocated transition in the complex mechanism of perception and memory, sensation and recollection. It is of course for Borges a multivalent, unsettling notion, since the impression of a sustained period of lived time may be literal, the illusory compression of a dream, or the confusion of being awake in a dream. The coincidences of time are always strange, 'rigorously strange', as Borges would have it ('Death', 147). These coincidences form the basis of many of his fictions, not the least of which being 'The Garden of Forking Paths' (1941). With its post-Newtonian doctrine of a network of 'divergent, convergent and parallel times' (127), the story anticipates another network to come, a hypertextual 'allatonicness' prophesied by Marshall McLuhan and conceptualised by Theodor Holm Nelson.

Another decisive, temporal convergence occurred when, in the month prior to Zappa's death, Koch International released *A Chance Operation: The John Cage Tribute*. Amid the many splendours to be auditioned on this double CD set is Zappa's cover of John Cage's signature 4'33", a work contoured by three discrete framings of time, 33", 2'40", 1'20"; an infamous interval in which, like Hladik's two minutes, anything may potentially happen. Terminally ill at the time of its release, Zappa never actually heard the final recording that included his *tacet*. So the 20th century's greatest exponent of maximalism in music may have drawn his last breath, but not before paying his dues to the 20th century's greatest exponent of minimalism.

To perform 4'33" is one thing, a potentially memorable event circumscribed by the location and presence of the performer (such as David Tudor's premiere of the work at Woodstock, New York, in 1952). It's something else to cover it. What exactly is being covered? As an aleatoric work no two performances can ever be the same, since, like an Aeolian harp, it is susceptible to whatever punctuations of silence occur during each particular 4'33". The conceit here is replete with an incisive wit and ironic play, which is hardly surprising coming from an artist known for such drolly erudite song and album titles as 'Bob in Dacron' and *Does Humour Belong in Music?*

Gary Davis, one of the producers of *A Chance Operation*, was conscious of the significance of Zappa as the artist chosen to perform 4'33": 'I felt Eno was so well suited for the role that everyone would simply accept it. But Zappa had a reputation for outrageousness. While I felt he would approach the task seriously, I felt his performance of it would raise questions and cause controversy perhaps recreating some of the controversy of the original performance'. Just as Borges' Pierre Menard body-snatched his way into history as the author of the *Quixote* ('Menard', 88), we may consider Zappa's performance as a palimpsest of Tudor's inaugural invocation to the music world to 'be silent'. But if, as Borges suggests, all artists create their own precursors, then it is reasonable to suggest that Tudor's 'original' 1952 performance of 4'33" was in fact also a cover of a *posterior* Christian Wolff performance of one of his own pieces, the story of which is detailed on Cage's *Indeterminacy* LP recording of 1959:

One day when the windows were open, Christian Wolff played one of his pieces at the piano. Sounds of traffic, boat horns were heard not only during the silences in the music, but being louder were more easily heard than the piano sounds themselves. Afterward, someone asked Christian Wolff to play the piece again with the windows closed. Christian Wolff said that he'd be glad to, but that it wasn't really necessary, since the sounds of the environment were in no sense an interruption of those of the music.

To cover, appropriate or copy another's work is to reproduce it with a difference. But what, precisely, is copied and what is the difference (see Lucy, 'Source'; and Tofts, 'Squared')? We can certainly hear Zappa's presence on the Koch recording. Not, though, in the few sonic traces of his physical movement, the bumps and muffled sound of walking around his studio, the casual percussion of a drum with his fingers. Like Samuel Beckett's *Unnamable*, the third abject in his remarkable trilogy, it is in the silence that he is to be found, the restrained, satirical even cynical *avoidance* of sound in the enactment of an ambient work contoured by the punctuation of silence by impromptu perturbations of the airwaves. A similar knowing presence, or conscious withholding of sound, is felt between the tracks of *MacGowran Speaking Beckett*, a wonderful 1966 LP by Claddagh Records of readings from Beckett's texts by one of the Irish writer's favourite actors, Jack MacGowran. To differentiate between each reading there is a pause, signified by the phlegmatic chime of a gong, a measured instrumentation credited to Beckett on the album sleeve. But even this sombre tone is circumscribed by a palpable reticence, a wry presence that suggests that sound is merely a 'stain upon the silence' that is, if at all possible, to be avoided. If you read the text of *Waiting for Godot* carefully you will note that it also resonates with Cage's famous *tacet* 'for any instrument', in this instance the human voice. The tramps' dialogue is merely a series of unwanted interruptions between the play's most significant instructions:

I

TACET

Long Silence

II vladimir (in anguish). Say anything at all!

TACET

III estragon What do we do now?

TACET

estragon What do we do now?

vladimir Wait for Godot.

estragon Ah!

Silence.

Literary critics such as George Steiner and Ihab Hassan were no less fascinated by silence than the artists who courted it and of whom they wrote (Samuel Beckett, Henry Miller, William S. Burroughs). The aesthetics of silence embraced the plastic arts as well as the time-based practices of music, drama and film (Andy Warhol's static films, from the audition studies of artists and celebrities, to films such as *Sleep* (1963) and *Kiss* (1964), were as much marked by their *absence* of sound as their silence). Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 *White Paintings* series formed the conceptual bridge between Duchamp's 1916 *Hat Rack*, Pop Art and The Beatles' apocryphally named *White Album* of 1968. Richard Hamilton's minimalist design for the cover art of the album was self-consciously conceptual as well as an analogue of the aesthetics of silence, gesturing visually to a phonograph record with no sound on it. The two exceptions to this Zen quiescence were an individually stamped serial number (endowing this mass produced object with an auratic singularity) and the name of the band in embossed bas-relief. The album was an unofficial Fluxus edition of an unrealised event score of 1966, described simply as 'a white label and simple sans-serif type' (Friedman, 99, 77). The embossed type in particular was an acute play on the sensory tourniquet of sound and vision. It could be read visually, but also in a tactile sense, felt into being through touch, like reading Braille. *The White Album* gatefold was the undecidable, irreducible *pharmakon de Platon*, a synaesthesia in excess of either/or. It was sound *and* vision.

Side 2

'Le rouge et le noir are the colors denied us' [9:00-9:02]



© Jesse Fernandez (New York, 1960)

Of the many portraits of Borges, none was so iconic as the 1960 photograph taken by Jesse Fernandez. The picture was taken five years after the Argentine master went blind. It's not a comfortable image. Borges' posed countenance is also poised, but oddly so. It is self-consciously askance, a contorted elegance punctuated by the awkward, ambiguous gesture with which his right hand seems to clutch his throat, insinuating an imminent utterance, a blockage or inability to speak. The image can be read as an analogy of silence and blindness. But for Borges the idea of an absolute blindness was as absurd as the notion of an absolute silence was for Cage. Borges' own 'modest blindness' was the subject of an

elegant and elegiac 1977 lecture entitled 'Blindness'. With the pathos of a blind man tintured with the phenomenal insight of an extraordinary man of letters, the literate medium of sight, Borges counters the popular myth that the blind live in an enclosed black world: 'I, who was accustomed to sleeping in total darkness, was bothered for a long time at having to sleep in this world of mist, in the greenish or bluish mist... which is the world of the blind' (107). Borges yearns for the colour red, as well as a complete darkness that he knows is denied him, in the same way that Cage speaks of an impossible silence, coveting the unavoidable sounds that compromise it. In his pursuit of silence, *silence absolu*, the composer visits the anechoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951. His experience there becomes one of his most celebrated stories:

In that silent room I heard two sounds, one high and one low. When I described them to the engineer in charge, he informed me that the high one was my nervous system in operation, the low one my blood in circulation. (*Indeterminacy*)

Silence and darkness, blindness and insight.

The fallacy of absolutism, of an ideal silence or an ideal darkness, is a paradox to which Borges felt irresistibly drawn. It is conspicuous that the majority of his most famous fictions dealing with metaphysical and ontological questions were published during the 1940s, the decade in which the conundrum of cybernetics entered the history of ideas. The concept of a totally black void was for Borges a cybernetic perplexity. Complete darkness was not an absolute, but rather the degree to which the dying of the light was forestalled, put off, delayed. Cybernetics is to information what Zeno's second paradox is to physics, a postal condition of differing closure, completion, the end. Borges revisits Zeno of Elea's famous thought experiment on entropy in two texts: in the fiction, 'Avatars of the Tortoise' (1925), and in the essay,

'The Perpetual Race of Achilles and the Tortoise' (1929). The labour of Zeno's indefatigable tortoise is an avatar of the banal, if lugubrious exemplum of cybernetics postulated by its inventor Norbert Wiener, whereby he describes the action of picking up a lead pencil. The action of picking up a pencil is not achieved as a causal act of will, but is rather a compromise of entropy, incremental reductions in the 'amount by which the pencil is not yet picked up' (Wiener, *Cybernetics*, 7). Zeno's second paradox prescribes that the fleet-footed Achilles will never beat the sluggish tortoise in a footrace. The apparent *fait accompli* is stymied by the law of infinite regress, since every micro division of space traversed by both protagonists is eternally divisible, and therefore unsurpassable. Borges represents this series of infinitesimal intervals numerically, endowing the *regressus in infinitum* with its algorithm:

$10+1+1/10+1/100+1/1000+1/10,000+ : : :$ ('Tortoise', 203)

Borges sees in Zeno's paradox a corruption of 'living time', the 'desperate persecution of both immobility and ecstasy' ('Tortoise', 202). Hladik had only the 'problem of a single phrase' and a year in which to complete it. When he found it, the 'drop of water slid down his cheek', in counterpoint to a 'maddened cry' and the quadruple blast of the firing squad ('Miracle', 162). At that exact moment, March 29, 9:02 am, Jaromir Hladik died in the anonymous, ignominious shadow of a barracks wall.

But what if time resisted the pressure to move on? Borges was fond of invoking the notion of reality contaminated by dreams, of unreality as a condition of experience. He was also mischievous in his plausible and compelling juxtapositions of fiction and reality, as well as writing of imaginary books as if they were part of the canon of world literature. His dictum that 'it suffices that a book be possible for it to exist' ('Library', 117) implies a potential version of Hladik's tale, a parallel 'Secret Miracle' in which the fatal bullet never hits its target. Perhaps it is to be found in a remote cell of the Library of Babel, in an addendum to the list of published works of Pierre Menard, the dream of the Red King, or an obscure OULIPO pamphlet found in a bookshop on the Rue Monge in Paris. It makes perfect sense to imagine Hladik's death succumbing to the law of diminishing returns, the 'mobile history' of Zeno's paradox, in which Hladik's perpetual year is sustained for all time in that interval between 9:00 and 9:02.

Nine years after Cage's death in 1992, on the anniversary of his 89th birthday, a work that will be his perpetual legacy was set in motion at the church of St. Burchardi in Halberstadt, Germany. The work, *Organ²/ASLSP*, is designed to be the longest piece of performed music in history. The work is scheduled for completion in 2640. The piece is a sonic allegory of Zeno's paradox of infinite regress, an elongation of Hladik's miraculous twelve months (in the original score of 1985, with its direction to be played 'as slow as possible', the work would be played for only twenty minutes). A single note, played on the 5th day of the month (to mark Cage's birthday), will sustain the work for the lifetime of the organ on which it is played (639 years) in an impossible performance that no single performer can complete and no single audience can hear.

For six generations *Organ²/ASLSP* will be the ultimate unfinished gesture. But for those who even hear one or two notes of the work it will also be the ultimate work in progress, a work always *in medias res*, never having begun, never to be completed; a canny variation on the endless cycle of *Finnegans Wake*, a text to which Cage was irresistibly drawn throughout his life, with its recursive 'commodius vicus of recirculation'. *Organ²/ASLSP* is a work suspended in another interval, 2001: 2640.

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Dedicated to Barney Rosset, Richard Seaver, John Calder, Maurice Girodias and George Clinton's brass section.

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