

Non-intentional art practices in design

(Working draft)

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Introduction

This essay is the beginning of an exploration into the notion of serendipity and design methodology. I want to begin this journey by presenting and briefly analyzing the creative processes developed by artists such as John Cage in design research where I believe that they can be of use.

I

Creating difference

Considering the ubiquitous and almost transparent nature of items such as electricity, and the telephone one could say that the greater the impact and dissemination of a new invention the higher the probability that it will recede into the background of the prosaic. Given this paradoxical condition one cannot help but wonder then how it is that the *new*, that which is *different* and *unfamiliar*, comes into being in the world.

It might have been the irony of such situation that prompted the art historian George Kubler to propose that: “Inventions that are commonly thought to mark great leaps are actually one with the humble substance of everyday behavior, whereby we exercise our freedom to vary our actions a little.” (Kubler, 63) Indeed it was an approach to the mundane aspects of everyday life that artists such as John Cage used to forever alter the perception and understanding of what is music and art.

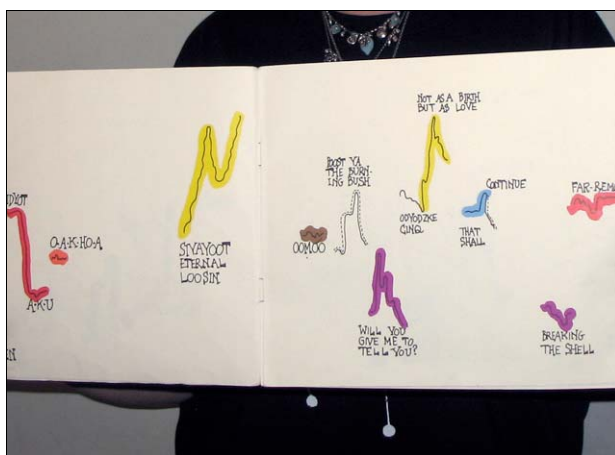


Figure 1: Photograph of a notation score for a vocal performance at Musicircus held in the Tate Gallery in London on May 28, 2006. In Musicircus, performers are free to organize and conduct their own performance.

II

Randomness and the design process

Indeterminacy, or randomness, plays an important role in the design process, particularly in relation to boundary problems whereby the objective is either to

narrow, expand, or altogether change, the set of options available at a particular point in time.

In design of information technology (IT) tools, for example, the concept has been used as descriptor in the representing the difference in information retrieval strategies of the expert and non-expert user. As opposed to the expert who most likely commands knowledge of the classification systems of the domain, the non-expert's search is represented as a random search. From this point of view, the corresponding design agenda becomes a boundary problem of how to narrow the search.

The situation might be quite different in the beginning of a concept design process where the objective is to actually widen the scope of the search and allow for new possibilities to emerge in the set of considered design solutions. John Chris Jones cites brainstorming and synectics as two methods that employ randomness and that are used as part of the design process:

“A completely unplanned strategy, known as a random search, is appropriate when it is required to find many starting points for independent searches over a wide area of uncertainty.” (Jones, 78)

In design, brainstorming is used as a direct intervention instrument to stimulate the rapid production of ideas. In this method, participants contribute to a common pool and the resulting ideas and concepts are considered to be as important as the classification tree that emerges. (Jones, 274-277)

Synecotics is yet another method that employs the combined use of analogy and spontaneous thinking to effect a transformation into the way a problem (and potential design solution) is perceived and represented. (Jones, 278-285) Engaging in methods such as these involves casting aside, at least temporarily, overarching notions of design as an intentional, ordering activity.

III

Non-intentional music and John Cage

John Cage was an American experimental music composer, a writer and visual artist. He is widely known for his conceptual approach to music and art creation that makes use of indeterminacy, or randomness. Cage was an early composer of what is called “chance music” or music in which some of the elements are left to be decided by chance. This type of music has since been labeled as “aleatoric” music.

An indeterminate piece of music, in Cage's terms was one that, as opposed to the music of results, was made without any intention so that two performances of it would never be the same. He further proposed that because the hearing is experienced by the listener as if it were his own action, such music is his, *rather than the composer's*.

Cage is also well known for his pioneering exploration of electronic music and his non-standard use of musical instruments. (Wikipedia) Though his works were sometimes controversial, like many of the pioneering artists of his era, he is remembered for raising questions about the definition of art. Cage's views on the subject, some of which are expressed in an early manifesto called *The Future of*

Music, are based on the idea that the raw matter of art is happening in around us. In his role as a composer he sought, for example, to capture and use the sound noises of everyday reality not as an effects but rather, as music instruments. (Goldberg, 123)

Serendipity in art has been defined as the making happy chance discoveries. (Reichardt) The art of John Cage is interesting for design because of the way in which the existential conditions, that define the performance (of music or art) event itself, are intentionally altered in order to propitiate the emergence of serendipity. If we look at design as an activity that is instantiated through language, it could be said that Cage played with the established ontological definitions of what constitutes a music event. Categories such as author, duration, location and content became the subject of active inquiry in Cage's works.

IV Musicircus

“You won't hear a thing. You will hear everything.” John Cage.

Since its first performance in 1967 that reputedly included musicians, dancers, mimes, vocalists, films, slides, black lights, balloons, cider and popcorn, Musicircus has been regarded as a festival of serendipity. A fusion of the words “music” and “circus,” Musicircus is sometimes described as a musical composition and at other times as a performance event. (See Figure 2.) It is one piece from Cage's repertoire that continues to be performed. The illustration shown in Figure 3, for example, is the poster from a Musicircus held by the Chicago Composers Forum in 2005. The fact that it still continues to be performed raises interesting questions about the persistence of art through time.

Musicircus	
Category	Musical composition
Date	1967
Instrumentation	For any number of musicians, being prepared to perform in the same place (event).
	Indeterminate
	November 17, 1967 in the University Stock Pavillion at the University of Illinois.
Dedicated to	--
Choreography	--
Published	--
Manuscript	Realisation (holograph, signed, in black and blue ink, 4 p.) in the New York Public Library.

Figure 2: A categorical description in the **John Cage Database** on the WWW defines Musicircus as a musical composition.



Figure 3: Poster for the Musicircus realized by the Chicago Composers Forum and the Museum of Contemporary Art in September of 2005.

On Sunday, May 28, 2006, as part of a festival labeled The Long Weekend, the Tate Gallery in London staged a version of Musicircus. The event was curated by Richard Bernas. It lasted a total of 3 hours and involved dozens of musicians and performers with an audience of thousands who participated in this potpourri of music and art.

More than a museum, for an afternoon, the Gallery resembled a fair with hundreds of visitors ambulating through the halls looking at the art in the walls but also, stopping for brief moments to observe and listen to the performances. Musicians and performers moved about; up and down the escalators, they mingled and chatted with the visitors. The performance added a new dimension to the experience of culture, since it raised interesting questions with respect to the nature of heritage institutions and how an audience is expected consume culture.

V

The (Non) structured structure of Musicircus

In Musicircus Cage played with the categories of space, time, and content. A Musicircus, for example, can happen anywhere. Though the initial one was held at the Stock Pavilion at the University of Illinois, a structure sometime used for exposition of cattle and rodeo events, Cage also mentions in his letters having held a Musicircus in a school gymnasium.



Figure 4: The Stock Pavillion at University of Illinois



Figure 5: One of the performance areas, prior to the beginning of the event, at the Musicircus at the Tate Gallery in London. The duration of the program is one of specified ontological parameters.

Cage's work used space in an iconoclastic manner that dissolves the conventional separation between audience and performer. (See Figure 6) This can be seen in the arrangement of performance space into marked areas that allowed the audience to walk around. (Cage, 1973)



Figure 5: A Musicircus is composed of several autonomous centers or focuses of performance.

With the exception that there has to be a beginning and an end, the duration of the event, or of other sub-events contained in the main act of Musicircus are not clearly marked. However, to differentiate Musicircus from a traditional event, he indicated that it should last longer than an ordinary concert:

“One very important element is that there should at all times be many people performing simultaneously. The next is that, since none of the musicians are being paid, there being too many of them, the entire event must be free to the public. ... In harmony with the separation of this work from conventional economics, I have not made a score nor have I published one of course.” (Cage, 1979)

Cage also sought to break away from the classical performance model in which the audience sits in the theater passively watching the action unfolding on an imaginary plane formed by the proscenium. He did this by obliterating the centralized figure of the conductor as the coordinating element in the structure of traditional music.

“No single person can experience any Musicircus in its entirety. Instead, audience members ultimately create their own individual versions of the piece, determined not only by where in the area they might be situated at any given time, but by the events on which they choose to focus from moment to moment.” (Patterson)



Figure 7: Like other works in Cage’s non-intentional music, a Musicircus can feature the use of traditional instruments in a novel manner such as for example to create non-traditional sounds. Marina Rosenfeld’s Sheer Frost Orchestra shown here, uses a combination of guitars and nail polish containers.

There is the blending of aspects from diverse and disparate genres: Like in a circus, there had to be dancers and acrobats as well food and drinks on sale throughout the performance. Also, performers were free to create their own performances. Figure 1 for example, shows a photograph of the notation score created by a vocalist for her performance in the Musicircus at the Tate. The visual script in the pages depicts the elements of the performance.

Conclusions:

In this essay, I have briefly presented some ideas about the use of randomness and indeterminacy in 20th century western art. I have also presented an example of how they were used in the design of a contemporary music and art event, the Musicircus.

Because of their role in developing innovation, non-intentional strategies and random processes from art can be of importance to design. Clearly design stands to learn much and make use of its artistic heritage.

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