

## JOHN CAGE

Filliou :

John, the question I have to ask you is, just as in the field of music you mentioned it seemed impossible to get rid of harmony and counterpoint, and yet, once it was done, the whole field of music was changed..... What would be the equivalent, for instance, in the field of education.

Cage :

Well, one would have to look at the educational system and try to see what its nature is, so to speak, essentially, when it does not have any of the structures which have been placed over it by means of social agreement or conventions. One of the first things that you would get rid of in education that has nothing to do, obviously, which education, is all the business of bureaucracy, which would include forms and the filling out of forms, certificates of degrees, prizes, anything that would indicate that something has been accomplished, or in fact, anything that would indicate the manner in which the thing should be accomplished. Education should become a field in which it was uncertain either that anyone would become educated, or uncertain that they were not educated before they entered the experience of becoming educated. Buckminster Fuller, whom I visited recently, said that when a child is born he is, so to speak, completely educated. He has in his body all that is meant, ultimately, by the word education. He doesn't need anything else than be born. Now I think, however, you might say that about education - a sine qua non - the basis of it is not just the one person, but two people. Now, we know from George Herbert Mead, the American philosopher who lived in Chicago, that one person can, on occasion, be considered as two people, so that you could have the notion of two if you only had one. He gives it the term "I and me" and he says that in each person there is, so to speak, a dialogue going on.

Filliou :

You know, I have a piece that consists in my

coming on the stage and giving orders to myself. I come on the stage and say "bow", and I bow. "Say 'hello' to the audience," and I say hello. "Smile," and I smile, and so on - it goes on for the whole performance.

Cage :

Well, we know this fact of education: namely, that one person can do it, and we use the term self-education. However, more and more nowadays we have the sense of society as being, in itself, an individual, if you can conceive, for instance, of the extension of the central nervous system by electronics, thinking in terms of McLuhan, that we share one mind; that when we have two people as you and me, that we haven't departed really from our being together, so that when we conserve it's as though one mind were doing this. In a sense, what we want to have in the world, it would seem to me, is an education of society as though it was one person.

Filliou :

Rather than handed down from above.

Cage :

The great error in the old educational structure was not only what I have already mentioned, the bureaucracy, the giving of degrees and everything, but on what basis those degrees were given and the bureaucracy was established: namely, the handing down, not of a dialogue existing in one person or in a number of people, but rather the introduction of a third body of material which, theoretically, was to be transmitted. This enables people to correct one another. For instance, if I pick up this printed information and my intention in educating you is to get this information into your head and when you repeat it to me incorrectly I then don't give you a degree. I only give you a degree when you repeat it to me as it already is. Well, this we now know to be a waste of everyone's time, because this doesn't have to go into my head in this way in the first place. I don't have to give it to you. If you want it for some reason you can pick it up somewhere else.

Filliou :

Education as we know it now reflects an or-

ganization of society that goes very, very far. Like in France, the whole educational system was created by two political and military dictators, Louis XIV and Napoleon, and it does not correspond to anything anymore.

Cage :

I think, first of all, we need a situation in which nothing is being transmitted: no one is learning anything that was known before. They must be learning things that were, until this situation arose, so to speak, unknown or unknowable: that it was due to the fact of the person coming together with other people or, so to speak, coming together with himself, that this new knowledge which had not been known before could become known.

Filliou :

In very young people, pretty much self-contained and who know everything, very often it is not a process of learning, but remembering what one knows from the very first. So in this knowledge unknown, in what way could people participate or perform, as I call it, so there is exchange, a certain awareness of this knowledge ?

Cage :

I don't know exactly what to say - except that when a person is having such an experience it often gives all the appearance of arising without any rational explanation. Actually, it must occur through connections being made which one had not previously made, either between things which were somehow, so to speak, in the head - things that came into the head from the experience. This is, no doubt, augmented when the other person is not in the individual but is actually another person. A greater quantity of information exchanges or experience exchanges immediately come in the more people there are, but that is exactly the situation we are now living in - one of an abundance of ideas and experiences.

Filliou :

So we must have not only a dialogue but a permanent exchange.

Cage :

Now, I don't think we need do anything else than make an empty canvas upon which this

education can be painted. We don't need anything more than an empty space of time in which this music could be performed, if education were music. And when we have now an empty canvas or an empty space of time we know in the areas of art that we don't need to do anything to those in order to have the esthetic experience, - they already are that. So, we could say of the educational experience, or the learning experience, that we do not have to consciously learn anything in order to learn something.

Filliou :

If we don't have to consciously learn anything we don't have to unlearn it.

Cage :

We are inevitably, each minute, wherever we are, without lifting a finger, without anything being transmitted, unavoidably being educated.

Alison Knowles :

Then what do you call the whole body of technical information that is necessary?

Cage :

That we can more and more leave as a kind of reservoir in the hands of our machines and computers. We know that we can do that. We know that we are approaching a situation where we don't have to remember a single thing, because these machines remember perfectly. We don't even have to have books around because we will shortly be able to get books that will far exceed any library that we can accumulate, through world libraries. But we also know that if we are going to approach those books of the past, all that body of information, that even in the area that we might call research or scholarship and somehow disconnect from creativity - that we can't so disconnect it from creativity. History itself only becomes history when we create it, and as many histories as there are minds and uses of minds can be, so to speak, invented and useful. There can even be from a rational or factual point of view, an incorrect history - by the fact that you had it it would become a true one, a correct one. This was the great point of Suzuki's in connection with the history of Zen Buddhism,

that there were many Chinese and Japanese scholars who spent their time arguing about when such and such a patriarch actually lived, etc -. Suzuki said that whatever we say is true. If we say he lived in the 9th century, that is true. If later we say he lived in the 11th century, that is true.

Filliou :

I accept this. But, you see, we arrived at this kind of knowledge or awareness - most of us have been trained to fit into society as it is now, where first you get into lower echelon of the system and then, if you deserve the rewards as they see fit, little by little you replace them and you have one more round, and a few people of themselves go through the process of unlearning what they have formally learned and challenge the system itself. My very precise question, John, is this: it seems to me what you say implies a complete change of society itself, that is, not education alone. Is this correct?

Cage :

Yes. The entire social structure must change, just as the structures in the arts have changed. We believe, I think, since this has been accomplished in the arts in this century, that it is an indication, at least in the minds of the artists, that there is a need for it to happen in the other fields of society, particularly in terms of political and economic structures and all the things that go beside, like educational structures. The thing that need not so much a change of structure as a regenerative set of changes of a physical rather than revolutionary nature are the utilities: the distribution of water, food, the use of transportation, communication. Those things can change to accomplish more service with less input. This appears to be the pattern necessary in view of great increase of population.

Filliou :

More service with less input of human labor?

Cage :

Less resource input, which would include world resources and labor. We see a trend in this direction of doing more with less and it becomes also urgent to do that.

Filliou :

As an artist, I like McLuhan for pointing this out. Artists have an awareness of the great trends that are developing. There is again a problem of transmission of this awareness, particularly as long as society is dominated by people who insist upon the acquiring of the same skills that allow them to take over the system.

Cage :

Well, I'll show you. It will happen in all sorts of ways. One way is this: speaking of education, changes in education and how they will come about - people will notice more and more, as they already do, that within five years after you get a PHD from a given American university in a particular field, all the things that you learned in the course of your education are no longer of any use to you. This is due to the fact that changes are happening more rapidly than they happened earlier, that the techniques involved, the information useful, etc...., are not the ones which you were taught. So, one will become skeptical about what the function of education is, and ultimately, what one will have to do, is to give each individual, from childhood, a variety of experiences in which his mind is put to use, not as a memorizer of a transmitted body of information, but rather as a person who is in dialogue, A, with himself and B, with others as though they were him, too. Now, there is near Chicago at the present moment already a school without partitions. There are a large number of classes where, in the study of any one subject (I do not know how they teach it, because I have not visited there - but say they were still teaching in the old way of transmitting information) you would at least be hearing, since there are no partitions, not only the information in your subject but the information in the adjacent subject. Now it is conceivable that there would occur at this point, even if you didn't change your seat, what McLuhan refers to as the brushing of information against information. Now, when you see this that is being transmitted to you as being nothing but information and when you see a different kind of information on the other side of the table,

and when in your mind these two things come together, very often a third thing, or even a larger number of things occur in your mind. Your mind invents or creates, so to speak, from this bruising, and it is there that we need to be if we are going to be learning something that we did not yet know - where the learning process now takes place outside of us, obliging us to imitate it, the new knowledge only comes into existence in our heads.

Filliou :

What I had in mind was a kind of pioneer world that should be in the hands of artists, where we will create, and by creating, make claims upon this part of the world. I call this the idea of permanent creation. There would be no difference between students and teachers. It might be just as a kind of availability or responsibility that the artist is willing to take, but anybody might make suggestions about what kind of things might be investigated or looked at and I think it might be in a spirit of fun at times, but many problems may be solved by the way. One principle I have developed is to get rid of the idea of admiration, which is implied in our whole society - the idea of authority and admiration and receiving prizes is implied. You might be, or I might be with fifty young people - if we engage in the type of dialogue that you have in mind, the whole group might come out with, by brushing information against information, all kinds of answers.

Cage :

Right.

Filliou :

Specifically, I am trying to think of ways of suggesting that in every school, at every level such kind of an institute should be set up, without any other part from the establishment, students might be willing to come to this thing and meet some artists and they may raise questions themselves and everybody try to do something about it.

Cage :

I think you have to begin, quite conscientiously, with the notion that education is taking place without its being any effort, with-

out doing anything - that would already be a step in the right direction. I give you two instances. In the 12th century there was a great man in the time of Dante and Meister Eckhart, but he lived in Tibet, and his name was Mila Repa. He studied, first Black Magic because he wanted to get even with his mother's relatives who had been cruel to her - and he was able, from a distance, to bring hailstorms down on their property, but at the same time not to have the hail destroy his mother's property. He was able to bring buildings down when they came together for dances and killed whole groups of the evil relatives. After he accomplished all this revenge and Black Magic activity, he then went to a teacher of White Magic, to study White Magic in a spirit of repenting, you know. Well, that teacher taught him absolutely nothing for years - just let him live in the house and eventually Mila Repa became very impatient, because he was of the opinion that he wasn't learning anything - nothing was being taught to him. At one point he became so alarmed that he secretly left the teacher and went to another teacher, but the first teacher was clairvoyant and knew where he was going and what he was doing and everything and sent a message, mentally, to the second teacher telling him to refuse to take Mila. So Mila Repa was obliged to come back to his teacher who looked as though he were teaching him nothing and by this process of not teaching, he ultimately educated him, and he became one of the greatest leaders of Tibetan spiritual life.

This story occurs over and over again in the annals of Zen Buddhism - the student who comes to the teacher and begs him for instruction. The teacher says nothing - he's just sweeping up leaves. The student goes off into another part of the forest and builds his own house and when he is finally educated what does he do? He doesn't thank himself: he goes back to the teacher who said nothing and thanks him. Its this spirit of not teaching which has been completely lost in our educational system.

We had a great man in the United States,

Thorsten Veblen, who wrote a book called "Higher Learning in America". The original subtitle was "A Study in Total Depravity". Why? Because the educational system in the United States is under the control of all the things to do with politics and economics. All of these things which are transmitted as though they were the things we had to learn are, in truth, means to force us into the accepted social structure. Therefore the educational system as it is at present distorts and enslaves the mind.

You want to know the basic thing I am interested in? The basic thing, I would say, is to do nothing. The second thing would be to do, so to speak, what enters our heads. It should not be fixed in advance what that would be.

Filliou :

I have in mind jumping a whole generation. I'm thinking of very young children coming up now. Can we do something while we're doing nothing? If we could reach children..... (Transcriber's note: " This is the end of Side One of the tape. Filliou's statement is lost.")

Filliou :

You were telling me about Fuller's ideas, about being interested in everything - that education was only one part of it.

Cage :

I had mentioned the school as a place without partitions and Fuller's notion of the child being educated by being born..... but it - another thing I was saying was more interesting..... something we didn't catch..... Give me a clue.....

(Transcriber's note: " Confusion in this part of tape. They both lose their train of thought.")

Filliou :

You mentioned Veblen. The thing that interests me very much in Veblen is that he says that any institution, by the very fact that it exists is obsolete.

Cage :

Right.

Filliou :

By the time you set up something, it is already obsolete, so we shouldn't spend the energy in setting up something that will be obsolete by the time it is set up. Tell me, in your own experience in communicating with younger people, or people who might have been considered students, like when you were in the New School.....

Cage :

Look at what is happening now in the field of music. The structures that are developing now are quite different from the structures previous to the last decade or so. Previous to that time..... and I still, in a sense, belong to it because my music is published for instance by Peters..... Now young composers coming along tend not to think of entering that old structure of finding a publisher to publish their music - they'd rather distribute it themselves. They move about the world more or less as performers. The whole thing of the distribution of information in the form of correspondence is now worldwide. What does that bring about? It brings about a community of individuals who have no one ruling what they may not do. They are free in their musical actions from anything resembling economic or political structures. They are, so to speak, in an anarchic situation with a very few exceptions, and those exceptions are when, as with Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman, they step on prejudices which the society still maintains by means of its beliefs. Where else do they fail, in terms of the old structures? They fail when, through their actions to which they are dedicated, they are somehow not able to make a living and starve or have to change their directions because of their desire for food and so forth. I think that all of these things go together in such a way that we don't have to solve just education or just art, but we have to change the entire society. For instance, we can see in the field of economics that, even among relatively conventional minds, the notion of basic economic security and of giving the necessities of life to all the people on the planet is becoming a more and more prevalent and conventional-

ly held point of view. Now, when that occurs it will enormously affect the field of education. For instance, the present *raison d'être* of education is to get a degree in order to get a job in order to pay your bills. But, those jobs which you have been having as a goal are not going to be existing. There aren't going to be any jobs, because the machines will more and more be doing them. At the same time there will be more and more people, so the society will become geared not for employment, but for unemployment. There will be no reason to get a degree. What would you do with a degree in a society which does not offer any jobs? You have no use for it.

So we come again to Buckminster Fuller. What does he say that society will do when the people cannot have jobs and are unemployed? He says they will live their entire lives in the "university". The "university" is not just higher education - it's the whole body of education. All of us will then spend our lives according to him, in the field of education since we won't be moving out of it into another job-life. This alone - the mere thought that you would have to spend your entire life being educated, is revolting now, not because of what it could be, but what you remember it to be. You would not want to live in the universities as you know them. But, we must change the universities so that they would be the places that we loved, as we now love our un-ruled, anarchic, art-life.

Filliou:

For me, the whole idea of this study came from the idea of the creative use of leisure. I found that artists are people who organize leisure. In other words, I call art a certain form of organization of leisure.

Cage :

Well, artists are busy as bird-dogs. They never have enough time. They work night and day and they are completely involved in their work. They can't distinguish between that work and play. They require no vacations from this work because of their total involvement. I think, essential, and by essentially I mean by virtue of being born,

people are this way - they all know perfectly well what to do with their time if they are left anarchic. This is what we must move towards, and I can't think we will move toward it successfully by specializing our goal, but rather by generalizing it to the transformation of the entire society.

Filliou :

Yes. I agree with this. When you spoke of the type of work and the kind of thing we need, it came to me, in a strange way, that, once, I saw a shoeshine man in Spain. I realized, all of a sudden, that if we wore no shoes there would be no shoe-shine man. And my whole life changed after that, except that I now I would add something: the shoe-shine man was whistling - he had a few coins in his pockets - and so, I would like to make it that we have no shoes and no shoe-shine man, but he keeps whistling. I think this has much to do with what you said at first : that with less resources we must produce more. Society as a whole, I think, can do it. Right now we are almost equipped to do it. It's really as if we took the world and put it upside down, or rather, I think, that the world is upside down and we are putting it straight. We work hard as we can for the lowest possible reward: most are very happy to work creating, provided they get the minimum rewards that allow them to be fed.....

Cage :

Or even none.

Filliou :

Yes, even none, but this of course goes too far, because.....

Cage :

Well, we have very, very few instances.....I have only one instance, with all the struggles, of really getting down to zero. I always, except for that moment, had a nickle or dime or something. But once, I had nothing.

Filliou :

But we see, still, that even in art, the point of view that you represent for many artists is almost still a parallel direction in the world. I was reading a review in the New York Times or Herald Tribune - something

about music - a critic was writing about somebody who had "a talent for taking John Cage seriously." I thought it was fantastic, after all these years and all the fantastic élan of modern art, that we have all this enormous dead-weight with us. I think it makes us humble: it gives us an idea of what we are up against if we tackle society as a whole, although I feel that the need is urgent. We'd better hurry: we don't have much time.

Cage :

Well, I admit, as anyone must, that the problems of changing society are enormous, but I think they become less oppressive when one fixes his mind, even if he does so foolishly, on the possibility of that change taking place. When you fix that way, you begin to think of things to do that will bring that change about: your whole concentration goes in that direction, just as it would go in the opposite direction of hopelessness and so on if you concentrated your mind on the fact that it was hopeless.

Filliou :

That's right.

Cage :

If I had remained, in musical thought, convinced of the ineradicable character of harmony and counter-point and all those things I was taught, I would have had to remain in those structures. It would not have occurred to me that they were removable. It's clear now that they were removable, and though not everyone yet agrees, many people are active in a completely different way than they were. I think the same is true of the entire society.

Filliou :

I agree, and it is part of my character not to... .... I'm realistic in the same way: I know what I'm up against and I do want to change it. Even if we are to do nothing, I want to claim that we do nothing. I want to give examples of doing nothing. It is very much in my mind due to the fact that I know there is no other solution - anyway, I don't see any other - or perhaps time is the best solution, but I don't even know that there is much time.

Cage :

I think, as far as our lives and behavior are concerned, that we are on the search for clues as to how to proceed and how to behave in this very complicated historical moment of the old structures remaining and new structures becoming either evident or desired. You see it everywhere. And then, we determine our actions by those clues once we're convinced of their usefulness and validity, and try to apply them. The first one I've given you seems so little and so difficult because it's so basic - that idea that we're being educated without being educated. Well, let's see if we could add something. If we add something it should be added in the spirit of that basic nothing and not be antagonistic to it. Because, if we got rid of this new basis, we would have gotten into what you spoke of: namely, a new structure which, according to Veblen, might be as bad as the old one eventually. So, we must somehow keep free of replacing, filling up, that emptiness with a new structure. So we're already close to a new principle which we can recognize, coming from many different directions. For instance, a man named Avner Hovna wrote an article in one of the UNESCO publications on the effect on society of automation - the sum of which, as far as I recall, is that we must substitute flexibility values for continuity values. Now, we know immediately when we think now of education that our educational structure, as we know it, is characterized by continuity values: it has always resisted even the most recent aspect of the continuity: namely, the avant-garde. But, we don't want that continuity value - we have no use for it. We need flexibility value. So, our education must be characterized by anything that leads toward change in flexibility. Therefore, coming back to the architecture of the school - a big, empty space in which the students are not obliged to sit in one chair, but are free to move from chair to chair.

Filliou :

And also from time to time, I suppose.

Cage :

From time to time.

Filliou :

One of the big problems now is that we have schedules, hours.....

Cage :

This must be refused. Anything that represents a continuity from one day to the next should be changed to something that represents flexibility from one day to the next. Anything resembling an interruption, a distraction, should be welcomed. Why? Because we will realize that by these interruptions and distractions and flexibilities we enrich the brushing of information against information, etc.

Filliou :

You know, this high school friend of mine, Philip Corner, also does it - he has been asking some of the questions I have written in my postcards to children. One of them is, "Why did you get up this morning?" Practically all of them answered "Because I have to go to school," and many of them add "I didn't want to get up, but what are you going to do - my mother made me get up because I have to go to school." The very idea of school is unpleasant because of this rigidity, this continuity, this schedule you have to meet all the time.

Cage :

We, then, know we want the flexibility. We also want an anarchic situation in which people do what they want - not because they were obliged to do it.

At this point, the transcriber stopped transcribing. I remember, however, that at the end, I was in the process of telling John how in the past "enlightenment" was supposed to come around the age of 30: Buddha, Christ, Hamlet, Zarathustra, Gandhi are cases in point, in real life or in fiction. Now young people want to reach that stage by the time they're 20. And I remember John kept commenting "Beautiful". Then the tape ended.

R.F.69