

I'll Never Tell



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**'To know of some is good; but for the rest, silence is to be praised'**

Ser Brunetto speaking of his fellow sodomites to Dante in the *Inferno*

In a world where rights must be claimed, where many still struggle for recognition and representation it seems uncouth to consider how silence could be praised. Yet as we bear witness to an age of militarism justified through a humanitarian framework – one must question how the act of claiming a right is to announce oneself within a particular frame. Indeed, to be recognised one must provide a legible narrative complete with historically contingent signifiers that might bear little to no relationship with how other lives are lived especially beyond the borders of a very 'normative' frame.

Considering our current political discourses, that liberally include and aim to protect marginalised subjects, Elisabeth Povinelli has made a rather sharp critique of how difference becomes 'managed' by our liberal governments.

**'The subjects of recognition are called to present difference in a form that feels like difference but does not permit any real difference to confront a normative world. In these moments, recognition cannot be separated from its modal twins, espionage and camouflage, and thus the precarious potentiality of each is continually oscillating across all three state'**

Elisabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment*, 2011, pp 31

If we are to acknowledge that difference can be managed, quarantined and held in a particular stasis then what can we know of what is camouflaged or not seen? If the actual story, the interesting narrative,

is always the one not announced then how can we know of the life that is lived otherwise? Its very otherness seems contingent on its withdrawal from the normative frame. It is in this context that silence, withdrawal, refusal and camouflage potentially can become thought of as strategies with a personal agency.

## Performative Silences

There are endless examples of narratives cut short, of stories left incomplete and lives sorely misrepresented or appropriated. Renowned for a trademark minimalism and especially for his performative silences, John Cage provides a significant alternative narrative of how one might occupy the realm of the unspoken. *4'33"* is now a canonical piece by Cage in which the performance entails musicians not playing their instruments for the time specified in the title. This work is described most often as an example of an expanded notion of music in which even the ambient sounds in the room are to be considered musical. Cage's influences from Zen Buddhism are also introduced into the narrative of the meaning or context of *4'33"*. We are encouraged to consider the sounds within our immediate context, to understand any audio as potentially musical, and any sound as a potential signifier with its own aesthetic qualities. In addition, we are aware as an audience that we are making the meaning of the work – the authorial role of Cage is to produce a situation in which the work becomes supposedly objective, something that we and we alone produce.

If we were to imagine attending a performance of *4'33"* we would be seated in an auditorium before a stage

where musicians would be assembled holding instruments that will not be played. We would be an audience watching a performance and we would do so whilst simultaneously being aware that we should listen otherwise, we should focus upon the sounds in the room, on something other than what is before us. However, what if we are to consider what is still before us, what we can still see, the image that we are occupying in that moment, the grand concert hall that we might be situated in – the bodies in front of us on the stage? Rather than drawing our attention elsewhere, what otherwise remains is of specific importance and something which is largely unsaid.

In his essay entitled *John Cage's Queer Silence Or How to Avoid Making Matters Worse*, Jonathan Katz provides an additional reading of Cage's silences focusing on Cage's lifelong relationship with choreographer Merce Cunningham. Reflecting Cage's silence about this relationship, which was an 'open secret' at the time, becomes for Katz an intriguing parallel practice to Cage's musical procedures.

**'If silence was, paradoxically, in part an expression of Cage's identity as a closeted homosexual during the Cold War, it was also much more than that. Silence was not only a symptom of oppression, it was also, I want to argue, a chosen mode of resistance. Cage became notable precisely for his silences – clear proof of its unsuitability as a strategy of evasion. Closeted people seek to ape dominant discursive forms, to participate as seamlessly as possible in hegemonic constructions. They do not in my experience, draw attention to themselves with perform-**

**ative silence, as John cage did when he stood before the fervent Abstract Expressionist multitude and blasphemed: 'I have nothing to say and I'm saying it'**

Jonathan Katz  
(<http://www.queerculturalcenter.org/Pages/KatzPages/KatzWorse.html>)

When we consider Povinelli's triad of recognition, camouflage and espionage it interests me as to how that could describe an idea of the performative silence as an act of resistance. If recognition is not possible at that particular moment, as it wasn't for Cage, an additional agency has to be found through occupying the position of one who is camouflaged. As an act of resistance or an expression of agency we move further into the realm of espionage.

Another reference that is often attributed to 4'33" is Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings. Cage and Rauschenberg were close friends and lived for a time in the same apartment building in New York. Cage lived with his partner Merce Cunningham above Rauschenberg and his partner Jasper Johns. Although, at this point my analysis borders on gossip, I think it is significant that all four men were living largely closeted lives in close proximity to one another and that these influential figures each incorporate strategies that echo Katz's hopeful prognosis. It is significant that Rauschenberg's white paintings are also often cited as an influence to Cage; Rauschenberg was also a 'closeted homosexual during the Cold War.'

Although these factors are potentially part of a process of posthumously authoring figures into social categories they did not willfully assume during their lives, Cage also acknowledged that the separation between art and the author's biography was complex.

Although canonized as an example of Barthes' notion of the death of the author, the audience becoming the agents that construct the meaning of a work, Cage recognized that such an assertion would have to manifest itself in a lived contradiction:

**'Sometimes we blur the distinction between art and life; sometimes we try to clarify it. We don't stand on one leg. We stand on both.'**

John Cage, *M: Writings '67-72*, 1973, pp106

Exemplified by Cage's silences, the spoken and unspoken are both positions of marking one's presence, enacting an agency whilst living a contradiction. As a challenge to the desire for documentary, for bringing previously unheard stories to light, one must also consider the violence in revealing what remains hidden. To destroy the agency of the performed silence does not bring this information into the light, rather it changes it, removes its agency and inscribes the knowledge into a realm to which it was always a contingent part but could conditionally never emerge. It is in this mode that non-disclosure, silence and ambiguity take on new meanings as significant acts imbued with a performative agency.

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