Aleatory Aesthetics: Appraising the Aesthetics of “Chance” in Gerhard Ricther’s *Cage* Paintings

Gerhard Richter’s *Cage* paintings (2006), on display at the Gagosian Gallery at 541 West 24th Street, are named after the composer John Cage, apparently drawing on the theme of coincidence. The paintings are massive, sprawling works, constructed from intersecting fields, lines, and swaths of uneven smears that reflect the broad squeegee tool which Richter dragged across the canvases, before removing areas of paint to generate a subtractive method of concealing and revealing variegated layers and patches. These paintings are, for their part, an attempt at a genuine advancement in Richter’s oeuvre, and one must admit that the abstraction in play here is distinct from that of Abstract Expressionism; the *Cage* paints are, indeed, detailed in their strips and textures. Having said that, the viewer familiar with the various threads of post-1945 “lyrical abstraction” cannot be assigned fault for any such connections they might draw between them and Richter’s *Cage* paintings. All of which is to say, one will, at least at first, find themselves puzzled if not somewhat nettled as to where the interstitial figures and blurred ghosts which have famously decorated Richter’s canvases have escaped to.

Richter, well-known for delicately culling to the canvas figures from his, and Germany’s, personal past—whether a family member in SS uniform or popular culture iconography—is famous for his “blurring” technique, with evanescent figures and outlines vanishing into foreground and background. Richter’s “capitalist realist” works of the late 50s and early 60s were a practice in the study of such icons. This eventually gave way to the colour charts, painted nudes, aerial townscapes, city views, and Rhineland mountain ranges of the late 60s and 70s, but the latticework connecting these diverse forays was an interest in memory. Some have even deemed Richter the “original pop artist”—and while one could make a case that Andy Warhol, too, had an interest in the vagaries of collective memory (albeit, one can, and certainly many *have*, made the case for every imaginable motivation to ascribe to Warhol)—but Richter’s interests were overtly politically and socially galvanized, contra Warhol. Richter’s politically and socially sensitive works were never of the social realist stripe, however, but were works which required due parsing from the viewer, so as to understand how episodic memory and collective remembering is never a neutral affair but one prone to misremembering and media machinations. Richter’s well-known works like *Ema* (1966), *Uncle Rudie* (1965), and *Betty* (1978) each played with abstraction and the notion of a “memory trace,” with blurred edges indexing the charred process of remembering and forgetting, with Richter well-aware of the collective specter dangling over post-WWII Germany, a time during which many both wanted to forget but could not.

But the *Cage* paintings do not feature such phantasms and fragmented icons that speak to the storage, encoding, and recollection of memory traces. Nor are icons of any sort to be detected in the vapor. These *Cage* works are purely squared in the domain of abstraction, and any logic or story they have to tell is one relegated to color-field construction and the phenomenology of perception. For instance, *Cage 1* features mossy channels and scores of lines atop verdant plots, with coal-charred corners and an hoary, white blemish at the rightmost edge. The phenomenology of spectatorship is not entirely uninvolving: indeed, the sheer size of Richter’s canvases impose their presence, and tracing the color fields as they blur into one another is an irenic practice. There is good reason why Richter insists that these six paintings are shown together. With other paintings, such as *Cage 5*, monochrome fields dominate, as the sketchiness of charcoal-gray lines and small patches of tawny yellow collapse into one another, crimson speckles and dapples occasionally peeking through. Basking in the highest level of abstraction, these canvases are meditative and aesthetically pleasing—they are works of process, with stripped tracts denuding any attempt to cover up and patch the process. But if there are any besmirched and shadow-cloaked skyscrapers or figures of familiar fancy to parse in between the squeegee-swamped fields that *Cage* unspools, it is the audience’s imagination that is acting as interpretative liaison.

These *Cage* paintings are, in some sense, a settled continuation of the practice Richter turned to in the 1970s, during which he began to make abstract works with so-called “chance” elements. Those Abstraktes Bild (Abstract Painting) works were intended to examine the qualities of space, form and light, while retaining the hazy blurring that had characterized Richter’s earlier photorealist paintings. In the *Cage* paintings, we are told, the focal point is chance, proper.

However, I have but no clue what “chance” could possibly be referring to in the Abstraktes Bild paintings, or the *Cage* paintings (or much of painting that proclaims to be “aleatory,” in general). “Chance,” “the aleatory,” and “randomness” are descriptions that artists, critics, and theorists seem to use terribly liberally, often using them to describe what they consider to be an unplanned operation. But, under scrutiny, these putatively “chance” operations are just as determined as the intently focused pool player’s striking a billiard ball against another. That is, “chance” is often used by such artists—and, seemingly, is being used by Richter here—to describe nothing more than considered improvisation. Even at a more superficial register, any viewer who gazes from corner to corner of these hulking *Cage* works will see very little “chance operations” (if such a device even could possibly exist): there is intention and a logic in every painting, as certain colors were chosen to complement or break with others, certain patches have been *intentionally* removed, and there is a causal history of decision, creation, placement, and removal that one can relay as an engaged viewer. But the eponymous name of this series is John Cage, and the *Cage* paintings profess to capture change much like the composer John Cage attempted to in his compositions. Thus, we must ask, how did John Cage attempt to engage “chance,” and is Richter doing something analogous? This means that we must also query: what is *unique* in John Cage’s compositions?

What is distinct in Cage, and something difficult but not impossible for a visual artist interested in “chance” to capture, is that in Cage’s “chance” works—e.g., *Music of Changes* (1951), *Two Pastorales* (1951-2), *Seven Haiku* (1951-2), *For M.C. and D.T.* (1952)—Cage utilizes a compositional tool over which he does not have control. In 1958, Cage introduced his ideas regarding indeterminacy in Darmstadt, Germany, in a lecture entitled “Composition as Process.”[[1]](#footnote-1) At this period of his life, Cage had discarded the ideas and methods underlying his earlier compositions, which had included: numerical structures, considered improvisation, unambiguous notation, and preconceived form. In this lecture, Cage presented his ideas of “non-intention.” In “Composition as process,” Cage lectures on composition that is indeterminate with respect to its *performance*, remarking that:

“… [t]hat composition is necessarily experimental. An experimental action is one the outcome of which is not foreseen.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

“… [t]he early works have beginnings, middles, and endings. The later ones do not. They begin anywhere, last any length of time, and involve more or fewer instruments and players. They are therefore not preconceived objects, and to approach them as objects is to utterly miss occasions for experience.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

“… constant activity may occur having no dominance of will in it. Neither as syntax nor structure, but analogous to the sum of nature, it will have arisen purposelessly.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

If Cage aims at music which is unforeseen and purposeless, it is because this music is free from the intentions and expressions of the composer’s mind. But this is not something simply left up to improvisation—for one’s “feeling” of being a conscious driver of their artistic process does not mean that they are not acting out of intention, wittingly or not. Thus, Cage implemented *models* for the realization of this kind of music.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Chance in music, and in visual art, cannot simply “happen” due to the improvisational whims of the artist and their “feeling” of not being in control. It is necessary to provide a mechanism within which it will operate. Thus the composer of a “chance work” or the artist of a "chance painting" must first design some system in which chance has a role to play. A system must therefore provide for certain "givens," or fixed elements: e.g., collections of musical materials that are to be manipulated, such as the overall structure of the work. This system must have a collection of rules or procedures to be followed so as to produce the final score (or painting), where these rules draw upon the given materials and structures to make decisions based on some random factor, such as the toss of a coin or a computer-generated random number. The execution of this compositional system then produces the musical score, a score dependent at least partially on the design decisions of the composer/artist, and also partially on those purely random events. Whereas traditional musical analysis proffers the score as the direct expressions of a composer's ideas and intentions, with chance music the score is arrived at indirectly, via the compositional system. One would expect from Richter, or any self-professed artist of “chance,” to produce a similar mechanism.

Indeed, one could still make the case that the intentions of the composer/artist are evoked even in such a “chance” device/mechanism. After all, the artist/composer who appeals to such an operation certainly *intends* to utilize the device. But, at the very least, the specific directions, or “form” (e.g., musical notation, paint splatters) that their overall work ends up taking is not something that the composer or artist is aware of or could be aware of prior to engaging with this process. While one can say even in these operations, the intention or ideas of a composer or artist is to involve an algorithm or rule-book, such that even here "chance" is a fairly deflated concept that we should discard, we can, at the very least, say that at the register of notation in musical composition, or visual output (e.g., brushstrokes) in a work of visual art, the artist who evokes some “chance mechanism” appeals to a device distinct from being "caught up in the phenomenology” of the artistic process of creation. And unfortunately, Richter, unless he is concealing some such grand “chance mechanism”—and if he is, it is one that is outsized by its givens, evident by the harmonious color fields (e.g., verdant greens that give way to mossy patches)—is appealing to Cage, and the notion of “chance,” more broadly, as little more than metaphor.

All of this underscores that when Richter, and visual artists in general, invoke "chance operations" as a motif, they are more than likely simply speaking to the improvisational whimsy which they allow themselves to be guided by in applying paint, a practice in which they attempt to not reflect upon their intentions while going through the operations. But this is hardly “chance,” proper. Even if it may not “feel” like conscious deliberation to the artist, there is no reason to think there is an element of intervention or structural influence not controlled for by the artists themselves. All that we have with works like the *Cage* series are givens. Thus, if the element of “chance” is inoperative, as we have argued, then what do Richter’s *Cage* works offer that proffers a genuine advancement in his oeuvre? As Richter is one of my favorite artists, and one whose influence on later generations of artists—particularly on the Düsseldorf School (which includes luminaries such as Thomas Ruff, Thomas Demand, Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky and Candida Höfer)[[6]](#footnote-6)—cannot be overstated, the fact that I leave this question to be echoed but not answered is but a testament to my genuine dismay.

1. John Cage, *Silence* (Wesleyan: Wesleyan University Press, 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., p. 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Cage’s Variations I (1958) and Variations II (1961). The Variations are not scores, but ‘compositional tools’ that present procedures for creating scores or successions of musical events. Any trace of preconceived composition has disappeared, and the work exists solely as a model for a process (Pritchett 1993, p. 126). The materials of Variations II consist of a set of transparent sheets with dots and lines, to be arranged in any order and interpreted as musical parameters by the performers. This is the beginning of Cage’s instructions for Variations II: Six transparent sheets having single straight lines. Five having points. The sheets are to be superimposed partially or wholly separated on a suitable surface. Drop perpendiculars by means of any rule obtaining readings thereby for (1) frequency, (2) amplitude, (3) timbre, (4) duration, (5) point of occurrence in an established period of time, (6) structure of event (number of sounds making up an aggregate or constellation). A single use of all sheets yields thirty determinations. For a recreation of these determinations, see: Erik Christensen, "Over and Hidden Processes in 20th century Music," in *Process Theories: Crossdisciplinary Studies in Dynamic Categories*, ed. Johanna Seibt (Dordrecht: Springer, 2003), 97-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Albeit Bernd and Hilla Becher's photography lessons should also be underscored as imparting an equally important influence on these artists. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)