Introduction: Creativity, repetition, transformation

John Cage’s well-known ‘silent’ composition 4’33” (1952) ‘exists’ in various forms: as a piece of experimental music; as a series of different performances – ‘live’ or ‘recorded’; and as a number of scores – musical, visual, and linguistic. This chapter locates the creativity of ‘Cage’s silence’ within the acts of re-mediation and performance, or, more specifically, in the in-between spaces of transduction (Kress, 2010) in which silence is not only repeated, but also re-perceived and transformed (Rogers, 1985). Before discussing 4’33” in some detail, however, I discuss the transformative aspects of artistic creativity more generally.

Following Boden (2004) and others, Rodney H. Jones (2012) suggests that most art falls somewhere between what we may call “‘big C’ Creativity’ and ‘small c’ creativity’. The former refers to the creativity of objects, processes, and events on a large scale – potentially a world scale. These can be significant works of art and literature, or scientific theories and discoveries that have the power to affect the lives and ways of thinking of large numbers of people, although not all art is ‘genius’ and not all of it has a universal reach. The latter refers to creativity on a much smaller, often personal, scale, evident in the mundane routines of ‘problem-solving, joking and verbal play’ (Jones, 2012: 2). The cline between ‘small c’ and ‘big C’ creativities corresponds to the scalar view of artful performance in sociolinguistics, which, as suggested by Nik Coupland (2007: 146–7), can be identified on a scale between ‘high performance’ and ‘mundane performance’, or what has been known in anthropological linguistics as the cline between ‘full performance’ and a ‘breakthrough’ into a fleeting performance in a strip of ongoing talk (Bauman & Briggs, 1990: 74; Hymes, 1975).

Art – especially contemporary art – complicates the notion of creativity in that it is almost impossible nowadays to identify what is creative about an art object as judged simply by its formal features. In literary works of art, we can certainly identify a number of linguistic forms and rhetorical figures that are typically employed to enhance the aesthetic quality of texts, for example rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration, wordplay, evocative metaphor, and so on, but they can be found as much in published, widely admired literary works as well as in ‘everyday’
language (Maybin, Chapter 1; Maybin & Swann, 2007; Tannen, 1989). In visual arts, the quality of composition, brushstrokes, or represented detail can also be considered important markers of artistry and creativity. However, the notion of finding artistic quality as located in the art object itself has been unsettled in contemporary art in no small measure owing to the work of Marcel Duchamp, who exhibited his sculpture *Fountain* at the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York in 1917. As is well known, *Fountain* is a ‘found object’ – a urinal – that Duchamp had bought a few days before the opening of the exhibition from the showroom of the J. L. Mott Ironworks, then signed and dated ‘R. Mutt 1917’. What Duchamp achieved in this momentous act was precisely a shift of focus away from the object itself to the artistic process of turning it into a work of art (see Veale, Chapter 22). Therefore, rather than taking the product-based approach to creativity – that is, focusing on the properties of a particular creative text, linguistic, visual, or otherwise – I am going to lean towards the process-based approach that is concerned with what people ‘do to come up with a creative product or inventive solution to a problem’ (Jones, 2012: 2).

This is not to say that the form or shape of the artwork is not consequential for its analysis. However, rather than on form per se, I focus here on what Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (2001) refer to as the ‘constraints’ and ‘affordances’ – that is, the potential uses and limitations – of the material and formal properties of texts, objects, and events that allow us to perform specific actions, invoke particular representations, take preferred subject positions, or express and share indexical meaning. This is what Rodney H. Jones (2009) refers to as the ‘technologies of entextualisation’ and ‘recontextualisation’ – the meditational means appropriated for the production and transportation of texts, such as typewriters, computers, video cameras, oil paints, marble, metal, onstage performance, and so on – that create different spatial and temporal ‘relationships of possibility’ (van Lier, 2004: 105) in moments of social participation. There are strong echoes here of Bauman and Briggs’ (1990) work on performance, which involves the recontextualisation, or transposition and relocation, of linguistic resources from one domain into another, frequently with artful overtones and form focusing (see also Coupland, 2007: 147). In performance, the importance of the ‘referential’ function may be subordinated to the ‘poetic’ function (Jakobson, 1960), or, in the words of Richard Bauman (2001 [1975]: 182), artful performance ‘offers to the participants a special enhancement of experience, bringing with it a heightened intensity of communicative interaction’.

According to Bauman and Briggs (1990), performance invokes or represents a special interpretive frame within which it is understood; it is highly (self-)reflexive, calling forth special attention and heightened awareness of the act of speaking, holding the performer to scrutiny and evaluation by the audience in terms of his or her skill and effectiveness. Entextualisation renders discourse ‘extractable’ from its surrounding environment, opening up ways of constructing histories of performance, ‘linking performances with other modes of language use as performances are decentred [decontextualised] and recentred [recontextualised] both within and across speech events – referred to, cited, evaluated, reported, looked back upon, replayed, and otherwise transformed in the production and reproduction of social life’ (Bauman & Briggs, 1990: 80; see also Maybin & Swann, 2007: 501).

In sum, performance is an interactive or interpretive frame (Goffman, 1974) that is organised as a succession of intertextually linked recontextualisations, isolating ready-made texts (discourses) and inserting them into new ones. Following on from Bakhtin, who treats all language as dialogic and thus either iterative (retro- or prospectively), Richard Bauman (2004: 9) cites Richard Schechner (1985: 36), who states that performance means ‘never for the first time’. This notion then takes us to the consideration of repetition.
Creativity as repetition

Entextualisation and recontextualisation have become particularly productive terms in current discussions of discourse creativity, especially when scholars turned their attention to the creative potential of repetition (see Carter, 2004; Johnstone, 1987; Tannen, 1989; Toolan, 2012). For example, while accepting the importance of the inventiveness and novelty in creative (literary) works, Michael Toolan (2012), following Jakobson (1960), considers creativity in terms of repetition. Toolan’s (2012: 23) view of repetition is very broad, and includes all kinds of ‘schemes’ and ‘tropes’ that are often ‘complex’, detectable relationships of sound, rhythm, word shape, or meaning, rather than ‘full and simple replication’. Examples include rhyme, metre, assonance and alliteration, intertextuality, and irony, as well as metaphor and figuration. However, Toolan (2012: 29) notes that not all instances of literary creativity are equally successful, although those that are enable or compel the reader to a sense of ‘an enriched apprehension of the Other, and therefore of the Self’ (see also Attridge, 2004), as well as a judgement ‘that taken as a whole, in context . . . the text is to a significant degree not a repetition of previous works, but a new and unforeseen departure, a productive variation’ (Toolan, 2012: 34, emphasis original).

Alastair Pennycook (2007, 2010) delves deeper into the resolution of the apparent paradox between the ubiquity of repetition and widespread creativity in everyday discourse. He suggests that traditional ideas about creative imagination linked to the romantic figure of an artist working in relative isolation and crafting unprecedented, completely novel artworks be replaced by a different philosophical tradition that ‘emphasizes difference, repetition, intertextuality, flow, mimesis and performativity’ (Pennycook, 2010: 42). Pennycook sees the origin of this approach in the Heraclitean notion of the impossibility of entering the same river twice. Running through Nietzsche, to Heidegger, and on to Deleuze and Derrida, Heraclitus’ idea appears to foreground sameness and generalisability as marked and in need of explanation, in contrast to difference and repetition as unmarked. Deleuze (2004) argues that repetition is a form of difference and that it produces difference rather than sameness. This is, according to Claire Colebrook (2002: 120, cited in Pennycook, 2010: 43), because: ‘Each repetition of a word is always a different inauguration of that word, transforming the word’s history and any context.’

For Pennycook (2010), creativity conceived of as repetition is linked to intertextuality and recontextualisation, because no two occurrences of the same event, action, or text can ever be the same. In this vein, Bauman’s (2004) account of performance involves the notion of rekeying of texts – that is, opening up alternative and shifting performance frames for understanding and interpretation, for example through reports, rehearsals, translations, relays, quotations, summaries, parodies, etc. Derrida’s (1982) notion of iterability of language concerns its effectiveness judged by the recognition of some utterances as citations. Likewise, Bakhtin’s (1935, 1953, 1963) literary theory (see also Vološinov, 1973) is centrally based on the related concepts of dialogicality, heteroglossia, and multiply embedded speech genres (see Pennycook, 2007: 504). Thus Pennycook (2010: 51) concludes: ‘Language creativity is about sameness that is also difference, or to put it differently/similarly, language creativity is about sameness that is also difference.’

Creativity as transformation

In the last quote, Pennycook (2010) both raises and illustrates a paradox intrinsic to the view of repetition as creative. What I believe is central to the resolution of this paradox is the
notion of transformation that runs through the above discussions of recontextualisation, performance, and intertextuality. Transformation has been mentioned in passing several times, although the specifics of how it is brought about and how it ‘works’ in the creative process merit more detailed consideration. For this reason, I turn briefly to the work of the art and literary theorist Franklin Rogers, and his 1985 book Painting and Poetry: Form, Metaphor and the Language of Literature. I find Rogers’ discussion of the transformative processes in the formation of the artistic vision, from the original ‘recept image’ to the ‘artistic image’, of particular relevance to sociolinguists interested in language/discourse creativity.

Rogers (1985) documents his formulation of the transformational process with several examples, ranging from Paleolithic cave paintings to modern art. By way of illustration, I cite here just a few. First, we can consider the idea of the prehistoric artist tracing with his fingers, or with a three-pronged instrument, the soft walls of a cave, leaving random markings called ‘meanders’, ‘macaronis’, or ‘finger flutings’ – a kind of prehistoric doodle (see Figures 20.1 and 20.2). In some instances, the free-flowing markings may have given rise to the shapes recognisable as human figures or animals. The shapes of these figures often tend to be distorted because of their ‘found’ character. On occasion, however, they are clearly recognisable, as in the case of one such figure on a cave ceiling in Altamira (Figure 20.3), where a prehistoric artist made a rather extensive field of meanders and then, as a consequence of these marks, either he or some subsequent artist found, near the right end of the field, a quite accidental linear formation suggestive of a bull’s head. A few additional touches sufficed to provide the tip of the muzzle and the nostril, a better delineation of the eye, and a horn that, since it crosses over all other lines in its course, was obviously the last stroke in that portion of the drawing (Rogers, 1985: 29–30).

The ‘meander’ technique of the Paleolithic cave paintings turned out to be remarkably contemporary, when, some 35,000 years later, Max Ernst wrote about his accidental ‘discovery’ of the frottage technique of dropping pieces of paper on the floorboards and rubbing over them with a pencil, leaving traces of the wood’s grain. Earlier, many other artists prided themselves on similar ‘discoveries’, among them Leonardo da Vinci, whose advice to would-be painters in inevitable cases of a loss of invention included the following:
Figure 20.2 Flutings at the start of the 150m² Desbordes Panel, Chamber A1, Rouffignac Cave, France

Source: © Kevin Sharpe and Leslie van Gelder. By kind permission of Leslie van Gelder.

Figure 20.3 Cave of Altamira – Bisons in the Great Ceiling, 14,000BP

Source: © Museum of Altamira–P.Saura. By kind permission of the National Museum and Research Centre of Altamira, Department of Culture of Spain.
I shall not fail to include among these precepts a new discovery and aid to reflection which, although it seems a small thing and almost laughable, nevertheless is very useful *stimulating the mind* to various discoveries. This is: look at walls splashed with a number of stains or stones of various mixed colors. If you have to invent some scene, you can see there resemblances to a number of landscapes, adorned in various ways with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, great plains, valleys and hills. Moreover, you can see various battles and rapid actions of figures, strange expressions on faces, costumes and an infinite number of things which you can reduce to good integrated form.

(*da Vinci, 1956: 50, quoted in Rogers, 1985: 24, emphasis original*)

As observed by Rogers (1985: 24), this discovery by Leonardo (and later by Ernst and others) was known not only to the early cave painters, but also to all other people, artists and otherwise, who have seen ‘a figure in a piece of driftwood, a face in a grain of wood or stone’. More importantly, however, what all of these examples (and others discussed by Rogers) suggest is that creativity always concerns a pre-existing idea, object, text, or action and a transformative element that involves the artist’s (or someone else’s) imagination, or what will be called shortly ‘memory image’.

We can now proceed to an overview of Rogers’ (1985: 32–40) stages of the creative process in art, or his model of how the artistic vision is formed and how it informs the work of art.

1. The initial stage involves a *recept image* – that is, any object in the visible field, such as the cave wall (*as cave wall*), or the meanders or doodles traced by the fingers of the artist on the cave wall (again, *as meanders or doodles*). These could also be Leonardo’s walls or Ernst’s floorboards.

2. The next stage involves the formation of the *percept image* with some elements of the recept image retained and some filtered out in a selection–construction process. A *schematised memory image* of the percept image is formed.

3. Next, certain elements of the percept image are re-perceived as potential elements of something else – as elements of a memory image of objects of a distinctly different order. For example, a schematised memory image of a percept ‘rock’ (first-order object) is transformed into a memory image of another percept ‘bison’ (second-order object).

4. Once abstracted from the percept, and reduced to scattered and disjointed transformable form fragments in the artist’s imagination, the form fragments are then reassembled with other elements from the memory image to form the *artistic image*.

In sum, the *transformative process* described above can be schematically reduced to four key stages arising from the presence of a recept image in the visual field: perception → deformation → reformulation → reassembling (see Figure 20.4). Each stage results from its own transformative process. First, the artist ‘sees’ or conceives the ‘original’ object, or recept image, with all of its elements available for selection or rejection in the subsequent creative process. We might say that this is the stage at which the artist weighs the affordances and constraints of the recept image for further action. The act of *perception* is the first transformative process through which the recept image is (de-)formed into a percept image by having its elements broken up and scattered in the artist’s imagination (transformation¹). A schematised memory image of the percept image is formed, which may include only some elements of the original precept; this is the transformative stage of *deformation* (transformation²). Next, the schematised memory image of the first order is *reformulated*...
As is the case with all similar models, that just summarised is an abstraction. In fact, rather than the process of sensory perception in the creative process, it emphasises the role of the artist’s image memory and the sensory, embodied processes of (re-)making (see Ingold, 2013). This echoes Delacroix’s admonition that artists should be sufficiently trained so that they do not have to run back to look at their models each time they want to draw a human figure (or a bison, or any other figure or object):

‘Par coeur! Par coeur! [By heart! By heart!]’ Delacroix was fond of exclaiming and thus said as much as Sabartés and Brassai in their long conversation about Picasso’s image memory. Sabartés commented first on the fact that Picasso’s memory for the forms of the world about him was so good that he no longer needed models. ‘He knows them all by heart – their contours, their singularities, everything that makes them unique.’ Agreeing with him, Brassai suggested that Picasso’s image memory reminded him of Balzac, who also was ‘so impregnated’ with the forms of the world that he, too, had no need ‘to document’ himself to create his characters. Sabartés found the comparison a just one: ‘Yes, your comparison with Balzac seems right to me. With Picasso too, it’s a matter of an extraordinary impregnation. At any instant all the forms of the real are at his disposition. What he has seen once, he retains forever. But he himself does not know when and how it may take form again. So when he places the point of a pen or a pencil on the paper, he never knows what will appear . . .’ [Brassai, 1966: 70].
‘extraordinary impregnation’ – happy phrase – gives birth to both orders of memory images (rock protuberance and bison) which rise in the artist’s consciousness to meet and merge in the moment’s transformational perception.

(Rogers, 1985: 34–5)

Transformation is not the sole prerogative of creativity. In his social semiotic approach to communication, Gunther Kress (2010: 34) observes that the semiotic work of social interaction is always transformative – that it projects and proposes ‘possibilities of social and semiotic forms, entities and processes which reorient, refocus, and “go beyond”, by extending and transforming what there was before the interaction’ (see also Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Later in his book, Kress (2010) uses the term ‘translation’ as the super-ordinate term for ‘moving’ meaning ‘within’ and ‘across’ modes. The former, for which he reserves the term ‘transformation’, involves changes in representation with no change in mode (such as translation of a novel from English to German); the latter processes, which are labelled ‘transduction’, involve moving across modes (for example from image to speech), in a manner related to Roman Jakobson’s (1959: 233) notion of ‘intersemiotic translation’, or ‘transmutation’, in particular concerned with ‘an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems’.

One final remark is in order to conclude this section. The artistic transformative process discussed above does not simply concern the reconstitution of an anecdotal fact (the artist’s original percept), but also the constitution of a new pictorial fact. What this means is that the artist’s memory image of each ‘order’ (say, the protuberance on a cave wall and the bison) undergoes a deformation and transformation, not only the first-order image (the protuberance/cave wall) towards the idealised memory image of the second order (the bison). Both images move away from their sources in their respective orders towards an unanticipated union on a common plane, for example the cave wall. The example in Figure 20.3 provides some evidence of how the Paleolithic artist transformed and adapted his or her unquestionably intimate knowledge of the bison’s anatomy to fit the elements of the wall selected for the projection of the bison’s image. For example, the crouching position of the bison is more typical of a cat or a dog rather than of bovine animals, as bison’s necks are too short to allow them to rest their jaws on the knees of their forelegs (Rogers, 1985: 36). This observation is an apt illustration of why art (of any sort) is rarely, if ever, truly life-like. In order for art to be ‘art’, it needs an element of deformation of the recept image, as well as the artistic image, and that always means a distortion of (perceived) ‘reality’. Having said that, art is never outside of life, but always a part of it. As a performative mode, it is involved in social production of decentred discourse, and each instance of decontextualisation and recontextualisation of text is an act of control tied up with the issues of social power (Bauman & Briggs, 1990: 76).

What is silence?

Silence can be thought of as an ‘acoustic fact’: ‘any interval of the oscillographic trace where the amplitude is indistinguishable from that of background noise’ (Duez, 1982: 13). The ‘noise’ against which silence is to be ‘measured’ can be either linguistic (spoken) or non-linguistic (sound). In English, the word ‘silence’ is ambiguous, and it may mean either absence of talk or absence of sound. Other languages lexicalise this distinction, which means that there are two different nominal and verbal forms to refer to ‘being silent’ or being ‘in silence’. In this chapter, for the most part, ‘silence’ is understood in its broader sense in relation to sound, linguistic and non-linguistic.
However, silence need not be considered only in terms of its ‘negative’ definition as absence of speech or of sound (Jaworski, 1993; Saville-Troike, 1985). More generally, what we choose to refer to as ‘communicative’ or ‘meaningful’ silence is not a predetermined ontological entity. Its form, or ‘shape’, requires us to look beyond the binary oppositions, such as silence vs speech or silence vs sound. Rather, silence should be considered as a dynamic, emergent, and contingent resource deployed strategically in communicative events. Silence is always embodied, multimodal, and material – that is, it arises as a form of social practice, it interacts with other semiotic resources, and its affordances depend on the meditational means, or technologies of entextualisation and recontextualisation (Jones, 2009; Streeck, Goodwin, & LeBaron, 2011).

Nor is silence something that lies outside of language. It is capable of fulfilling a full range of communicative functions, for example ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday, 1978). While silence may be relatively restricted in its capacity to fulfil the ideational function, it has been identified as a possible vehicle for expressing a number of pragmatic meanings (illocutionary force), and as a means of concealing information, maintaining confidentiality, secrecy, and so on – that is, as having a kind of negative referential function (Jaworski, 1993; Saville-Troike, 1985).

With regard to the interpersonal function, silence has a particularly salient role in marking and managing the dimensions of ‘power’ and ‘solidarity’ (Brown & Gilman, 1960). For example, silence is frequently associated with the vertical/asymmetrical dimension of authority and control, especially in situations of extreme power differential (see Braithwaite, 1990), although it can also be used as a potent resource for challenging, defying, and subverting established power relations (for example Gilmore, 1985). In relation to the horizontal and symmetrical dimension of interpersonal distance, silence may be used to maintain extreme detachment between individuals, for example marking their relationship as ‘strangers’, or it may signal extreme closeness, for example between ‘intimates’ (Jaworski, 2000; Saville-Troike, 1985).

Finally, silence, or a pause, is often used to fulfil the textual function, for example indicating the relative salience or infrequency of the word to be said next (Chafe, 1985), or as a type of a ‘contextual cue’, or keying device marking a shift from, say, an ‘interactional’ to a ‘performance’ frame.

Creative transductions of John Cage’s 4’33”

In this section, I consider several examples of the transformation, or transduction, of silence in John Cage’s 1952 composition 4’33”.

John Cage’s 4’33” is one of the best-known examples of the manifestation and use of silence in art. The piece was first performed by David Tudor on the piano in the Maverick Concert Hall in Woodstock, New York, on 29 August 1952. Tudor marked the beginning and end of each part by closing and opening the keyboard cover. The silence produced by the piano is heard as ‘filled up’ with all kinds of incidental sounds made in the environment either by the audience (coughing or shifting in their seats) or any mechanical devices in the concert hall (an electric circuit, air conditioning). Variations in the performance of the piece may occur. For example, the 1993 recording by Frank Zappa of his cover of 4’33” for the guitar includes the musician’s audible breathing. Zappa’s version is, then, arguably one that creates interpersonal intimacy, in which his breathing is an index of close proximity between the performer and the listener (see van Leeuwen, 1999). Thus the form and the ‘effect’ of silence in any performance is dependent on its meditational means. It will be
different whether the piece is performed ‘live’ in a concert hall, or pre-recorded and experienced in the privacy of the listener’s own home.

The BBC Symphony Orchestra, under Lawrence Foster, at the London Barbican on 16 January 2004 (Hoofd, 2010) took on a rather solemn tone, with the musicians and the audience exercising maximum silence and stillness, and a minimum of the coughs and sneezes that can also be heard during other performances of classical music. On other occasions, the player and the audience may take a more joyful, irreverent, or outright comical stance, with much deliberate shifting of posture, smiling and smirking, deliberate coughing, rustling, etc. Therefore, as noted by Jenni Sorkin (2012: 84):

> [E]ach version of 4′33″ is its own chance-inviting performance, authentically new and wholly contingent upon the environment and the audience’s reaction: a different group witnessing itself reacting to the shock of prolonged silence and the eventual realization that any ‘music’ produced is the result of a dramatically altered subjectivity. Each subsequent presentation becomes a fresh endeavor, unable to be replicated. But while the original 1952 audience was unsuspecting, contemporary audiences have, by and large, come to anticipate the self-reflexive aural nature of the event. This expectation has, in turn, altered the legacy of 4′33″, rendering it as a visual spectacle rather than an intensive listening experience.

A shift to the ‘visual spectacle’ in the performances of 4′33″ may be likened to one interlocutor looking up at the face of another to check the direction of their gaze in instances in which a verbal turn is expected, but is not forthcoming. This suggests both that silence, like any other communicative resource, needs to be understood as multimodal and that it can be represented (transducted) through modes other than sound. Cage’s 4′33″ is an apt illustration of Kress’ transduction because Cage produced three types of notation of the piece, each exploiting a different mode. The first, from 1952, now lost and existing only as a reconstruction, was used by David Tudor for the premiere of the piece. It was a blank staff notation, with each half-inch equal to 1 second of the duration of the piece. Subsequently, the notation became more abstract and more linguistic. One version, so-called proportional, consists of parallel, vertical lines symbolically delineating the duration of the three movements. Finally, the written version contains three occurrences of the word tacet, arranged vertically and separated on the page by three roman numerals – I, II, and III – defining the three movements of the composition (Robinson, 2012: 210).

By conceiving this piece of music, inspired largely by Robert Rauschenberg’s 1951 White Paintings, Cage transformed acoustic silence (recept image) into three types of notation, each with different affordances specific to their modes. The musical notation of 4′33″ underscored the status of the piece as ‘a timeframe without intentional sound’ (Daniels, 2012: 24). The graphic score (of which the first version was made in 1953) contained almost no traditional features of the musical composition. It became closer in appearance to Rauschenberg’s and other artists’ abstract monochrome paintings, with the vertical lines separating the different parts of the piece suggesting gaps between canvases (Thoben, 2012). The linguistic scores (produced both in typewritten and calligraphic versions) gave the piece a quality similar to that of concrete poetry. In the words of Liz Kotz (2007: 17):

> Cage reconceived the musical composition as a time structure, voiding the work’s internal musical syntax by gradually abandoning conventional musical notes in favor of noise sounds and quantitatively defined ‘sound parameters,’ and moving toward an
indeterminate relationship between score and performance in which the musical notation ceases to be a system of representation and instead becomes a proposal for action.

The ‘proposal for action’ is certainly crucial here. In his outline of the social semiotic theory of meaning and communication, Gunther Kress (2010: 54) stipulates as one of its fundamental assumptions that ‘signs are always newly made in social interaction’. The notations of 4’33” do not aim to capture faithfully an idealised version of the piece, because none exists. Each performance of 4’33” is a different reiteration of all previous ones (see Pennycook, 2010) and a remaking of a collective experience of art in the moment of its creation. Originally dedicated to and performed on the piano by David Tudor, inscriptions on later scores state that 4’33” is a composition in three parts for ‘any instrument or any combination of instruments’. The emphasis on agency and contingency of the piece, its creative re-enactments, were emphasised by Cage in his subsequent alterations to the linguistic scores, first made in 1957 or 1958, with the first typewritten version produced in 1960. The new scores are indicative of Cage’s continual reworking and reimagination of the piece. Jan Thoben (2012: 81) notes that the most significant changes in the subsequent versions of the scores were the loosening of the rigid time grid, and the replacement of ‘any instrument’ with a more personal and agentive ‘any instrumentalist’.

Conclusion: The making and remaking of 4’33”

Famously, the main prompt for Cage to compose 4’33” was his experience of hearing two sounds in an anechoic chamber at Harvard University in 1951: one was the low tone of his blood circulating; and the other, the high tone of his nervous system. This episode redirected Cage’s attention from silence as an acoustic phenomenon to an intellectual and artistic one (see Thoben, 2012: 76). It took Cage several years to conceive of 4’33” and several days to write it. In subsequent years, he continued to work on the scores and notations in different modes, and on performances in varied social conditions and with new combinations of instruments, including an empty glass, which he turned down for 10 seconds to indicate the ‘pauses’ between the parts. Each new type and version of the score or its copy, each performance and its recording, or its account (verbal, written, or pictorial), enters a chain of transformative and creative realisations of the original recept image (acoustic silence) and the percept image (involuntary noise), and their deformations and reformulations into subsequent artistic images (scores and performances).

The creative process initiated by Cage continues to this day, years after Cage’s death in 1992. Numerous other artists – musicians, visual artists, filmmakers, and performers – have produced one-off or multiple versions and accounts of 4’33”. In a personal note, James Cronin draws my attention to David Toop (2005), Paul Hegarty (2007), and Sara Maitland (2008), who have all argued that sound and silence have a history, and are, in turn, ‘haunted’ by memory and time. These authors specifically speak of the performances of John Cage’s 4’33” as ‘haunting’ the late twentieth-century soundscape.

While this is not the place to review Cage’s legacy, others have documented how his followers have carried on, ‘passing on’ Cage’s silence as a relay baton with an astounding range of further transductions (see Daniels & Arns, 2012; Kamps & Seid, 2012). Cage wrote 4’33” building on his experience in the Harvard anechoic chamber, Rauschenberg’s White Paintings, and other ‘silences’ encountered in his varied intellectual pursuits. Yet none of these transpositions from one semiotic mode to another produce simple ‘semantic equivalences’ (Iedema, 2003). On the contrary, our interpretations of ‘displayed silence’,
in all instances of its re-mediation, transduction, and performance, are subject to varying, systemic constraints and material affordances of the modes and circumstances in which they are deployed. It is these spaces of contrast and change across modes and materialities that are the sites of artistic creativity.

Related topics
creativity and dialogue; creativity and discourse analysis; creativity and technology; language and music; language, creativity, and remix culture

Note
1 I thank James Cronin and Maciej Stanaszek for their useful comments on the final version of this chapter.

Further reading
This is essential reading on ‘silence’ by the man himself.
Daniels and Arns present a celebration and critical assessment of Cage’s 4’33”, with a rich array of visuals.
Jaworski’s collection includes several chapters on silence and Renaissance painting, monochrome painting, and performance art.
This is a highly readable, rich, and wide-ranging account of creativity in art and literature.

References


