Silence
Lectures and Writings

by Derek Beaulieu

pages as "white paintings" of the mind—

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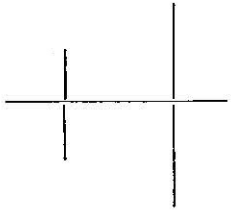

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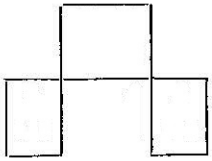

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Silence Among the Myriad Things
Peter Jaeger

In the 1961 version of *Silence*, John Cage compared his engagement with space, silence, and emptiness to a new, Zen-informed version of American Dada. For Cage, Dada at mid-century had in it a space, an emptiness, that it formerly lacked. In derek beaulieu's 2023 erasure of Cage's silence, the empty space voiced by Cage in *Silence* is opened further, expanding the original text towards an altogether wordless performance of the void.

beaulieu's *Silence* erases all of the words in Cage's *Silence* while leaving punctuation and other non-linguistic markings intact. The text includes question marks without questions, full-stop periods without sentences, commas without clauses, section breaks without sections, dashes, back slashes, brackets, and other typographical features found in Cage's original book.
The vertical lines that Cage used in "Composition as Process" to

separate columns of text into performative segments, for example, remain in beaulieu's *Silence*, although the words in between each line have been erased. A diagram from Cage's essay "Erik Satie" indicating the French composer's idiosyncratic time structures remains intact, but without the numbers, Roman numerals and letters that give sense to Satie's text. The page-width ellipses that Cage used throughout *Silence* to demarcate sections of his poem-lectures persist, but without the words in each section. In addition, the book's pages have the look of a rough photocopy, with shaded blotches and high contrast, black-ink gutters. The only word in beaulieu's text that remains from Cage's *Silence* is the word "silence," which appears on the cover, colophon and title page.

We could read the remnant of punctuation and other textual markings as an analogy to the opening and closing of the piano keyboard lid in Cage's infamous 'silent' piece of music, 4'33", first performed by David Tudor in 1952. In beaulieu's text, punctuation frames visual silence; in 4'33", the piano's lid frames aural silence. Much like the gong that rings at the beginning of a Zen meditation session to inform the sitter that Zazen is now underway, the piano lid's movements inform the audience that it is now time to listen to the composition. beaulieu's punctuation similarly shows readers the shape of silence, because it structures and surrounds silence, represented here by blank space. Without the punctuation (or the piano lid or the gong) there would be no edge to the experience of silence. The same could be said of the material book itself as a site for silence – the book-object here frames that silence. And yet, punctuation and the book's other material features are not the opposite of silence. In surrounding the silence, the noise of the book outlines and supports that silence and is in fact the very condition for the existence of that silence.

Cage's often cited understanding of Zen Buddhism may clarify beaulieu's erasure. I am not suggesting that beaulieu writes from a Zen sensibility, but that the trace of Zen cannot be erased from work that references Cage. What becomes apparent in Cage's

attraction to silence is its deep affinity with the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness. *Śūnyatā* refers to the insight that the phenomenal world is tied together in a non-dualistic, interrelated web, in which no single phenomenon stands alone. This void is not an absence, but the ground of all things; Buddhist literature often refers to the "ten thousand" or the "myriad" things existing in a non-dual, non-separate relationship with the void. As the Buddhist *Heart Sutra* states, "Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form. Form is only emptiness, emptiness only form." Cage's turn towards silence perfectly models the inter-relationship between the void and the ten thousand myriad things – between form and emptiness. 4'33", for example, provides listeners with a fixed time period in which to hear the ambient sounds of the concert hall. Those ambient sounds – the myriad things – are for the Zen Buddhist completely empty. Although sound and silence are distinct, they are not divided, for the silence of the void informs everything. The punctuation and other material aspects of beaulieu's book similarly show up as the myriad things of the world in the silence of the void. From this perspective, the remaining punctuation does not offer an end-stopped period or pause in silence, not does it provide links between erased phrases – the punctuation in beaulieu's text remains as silent as the erased words of Cage. Punctuation and the blank space of the page in *Silence* may be different, but they are not separate.

What about those of us who are not into Zen – what can we find in beaulieu's version of *Silence*? Cage's close friend and collaborator Robert Rauschenberg once erased a drawing by Willem de Kooning. *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) presents us with an artwork produced entirely by erasure and by the strategic use of a title. de Kooning was aware of Rauschenberg's concept and he agreed to have his drawing erased. By erasing de Kooning, Rauschenberg pioneered a new aesthetic that questioned the nature of art production and heralded some of the conceptual questions that would engage the pop and conceptual artists of

the next decade: what is art, what is an artist or author, what is the importance of context? The work of Rauschenberg's contemporary Andy Warhol posed similar questions about authorship and artistic originality, and beaulieu's previous major work of erasure, *a, A Novel* (2017) responds to Warhol's eponymous novel by deleting all language, thereby setting the stage for *Silence*. Why these 21st Century erasures of mid-20th Century, cutting-edge texts? How do we understand 'silence' as a concept and experience now, in our current period? Where do Warhol and Cage stop and beaulieu begin, if at all? Just as the work of Cage, Warhol and Rauschenberg posed questions about authorship and artistic creation, the questions posed by beaulieu's erasure, coming as they do almost 70 years later, illustrate the contemporary persistence of inquiry into authorship by one of our most historically-engaged and conceptually-astute writers. In an age of fake news, dis-information and empty political sloganeering, what does it now mean to produce silence?

Rauschenberg exhibited entirely white paintings at Cage's *Theatre Piece No. 1*, an event held at Black Mountain College in 1951; Cage later attributed these white paintings as the inspiration for 4'33". In his essay on Rauschenberg, published in *Silence* 1961 (and erased in *Silence* 2023) Cage writes that his own words "may be read in whole or in part; any sections of it may be skipped, what remains may be read in any order." Here and elsewhere, Cage's compositional method offers readers no centre or place of origin, no continuous narrative, no logical argument, and no teleological conclusion. beaulieu's silence re-visits this centreless space visually and performatively, through a charting of silence in the erased words and punctuated smudge of the page. Indications of silence can be read in any direction or from any angle – from all perspectives, the book frames and revisits that silence. This compositional method entails erasing text while leaving the reading path indeterminate, and readers are offered a space to un-focus from the communicative word.

beaulieu's 21st Century *Silence* exhibits a glut of silent non-information that leads us to an even deeper degree of silence, bringing us closer to an experience of something (of nothing?) that exceeds our abilities to grasp or understand. Why is silence so appealing? In his recent book *Surface Tension* (2022), beaulieu writes: "Poems are the street signs, the signage, the advertising logos for the shops and corporations that are just beyond reach." This is a crucial point in his poetics and in his return to Cage: *Silence* is a little shop of nothing, exhibiting only the myriad things of a vacancy that we are unable to grasp. The text promotes an empty naught that we can intuit without understanding, a zero-degree reading experience in surplus of cognitive knowledge. That surplus is political to the extent that it criticizes implicitly the contemporary commercial, corporate, and literary use of language, where words so often equal lies. *Silence* embodies that critique wordlessly. In opposition to the loud hail of consumerism and instrumental logic, the book is a site for projecting an unknowable whatever that we call 'silence'. With this silence, beaulieu's *Silence* supplies us with a new kind of non-discursive protest literature. It's a noisy book.

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About the Author
Derek Beaulieu is the author / editor of twenty-six collections of poetry, prose, and criticism including *Surface Tension* from Canada's Coach House Books and *a, A Novel* from France's Jean Boîte Éditions. Beaulieu holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the UK's Roehampton University and has been recognized with numerous teaching awards for his contributions to university-level education. He is a recipient of the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee medal in recognition of exceptional impact and service to the literary arts, and was named the only "Celebrated Alumni" in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Calgary. Beaulieu is the Director of Literary Arts at Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, dedicated to the mentorship and education of artists and cultural workers internationally. He can be found online at www.derekbeaulieu.ca.

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