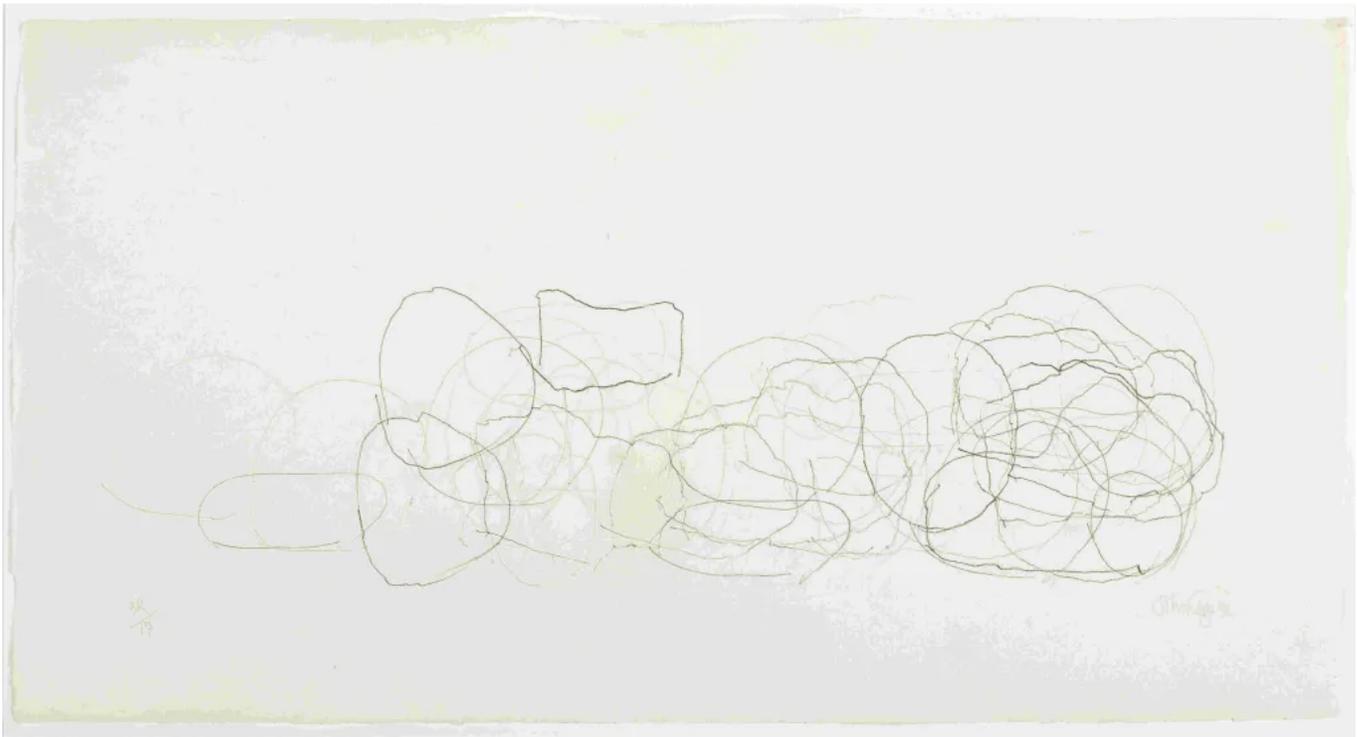




Versions of Ryoan-ji (Allen S Weiss)

JUNE 28, 2019 / JOHN DOUGILL



John Cage, Where R = Ryoanji (1992)

When is Ryōan-ji not Ryōan-ji? At what point does representation become abstraction, or does one thing morph into something totally different? John Cage loved stones, and collected them from all over the world. He also loved Ryōan-ji from the moment he saw it during his first trip to Japan in 1962. In 1983 Cage began producing a series of drawings entitled, *Where R = Ryoanji*, based on the sketched outlines of 15 small stones from his collection. Chance operations using the *I Ching* determined each choice of stone and its position on the paper, the type of pencil used, the number of times each stone was outlined, and the total number of outlines drawn. This is a lesson in the limits of representation, for the only aspects of the garden that remain in the drawings are the two invariables: the *proportions* of the paper (which roughly approximate those of the garden) and the count of 15 stones that were used for the tracing (though the final result always contains a greater number of stone outlines than the 15 stones of the garden). It is as if the drawings represented the most basic schematic groundplan of the *karesansui* garden of Ryōan-ji, in potentially infinite abstract variations. The reduction of the

garden to its schematic representation in Cage's drawings radically reduces the figurative sense of the garden (the stones set on raked sand representing mountains arising from the waves of the ocean), and indeed it is only by reference to the title that we know these forms somehow represent the garden, or even stones. With *Where R = Ryoanji*, we are at the limits of metaphor and representation, due to the transformation of medium and the reduction of form. It would seem that Cage identified with the creators of Ryōan-ji rather than its spectators, valuing creative gesture over spectatorship, process over product, image over icon, presentation over representation.

for Robert Aitkin
RYOANJI
JOHN CAGE

John Cage, Ryoanji (1983 ff)

Cage subsequently produced, beginning in 1983, a series of musical compositions simply entitled *Ryoanji*. The graphic score is separated into two

parts to be played simultaneously: percussion (invariable through all versions) and instrumental (different scores for various solo instruments, voice, and small ensemble). The different instrumental versions were composed by using the outlines of the same 15 stones utilized for the templates of *Where R = Ryoanji*. We might surmise that Cage produced these templates rather than redrawing the stones for each new musical composition so as to eliminate the variations that would result from the vagueries of draftsmanship, thus standardizing the series. In each case, the outline of the stone is split horizontally, and only half or less is used.

These templates are randomly placed upon facing pages, with the pitches at the beginning and end of each line randomly determined, and the total pitch range of the piece fixed by the specific register of the instrument in question. The result is a series of either microtonal steps or glissandi (a continuously rising or falling tone) sounding either independantly or concatenated to form simple melodies. (In the case of overlapping lines in solo scores, one of the glissandi is pre-recorded.) Since the same limited number of curves are reused, the form is vaguely that of a fugue.

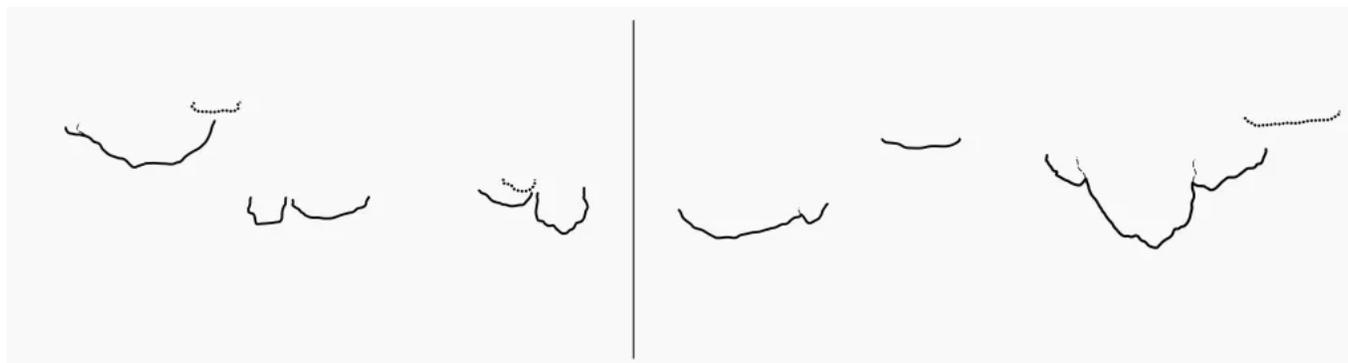
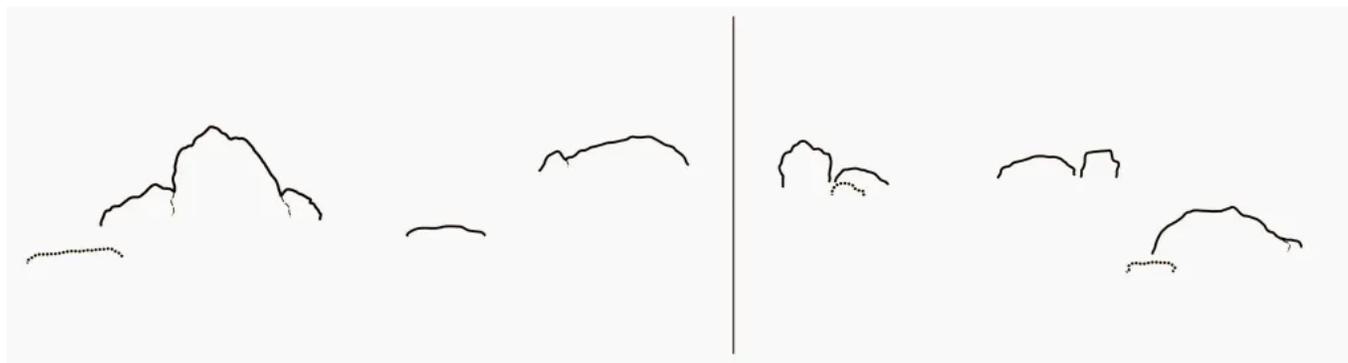


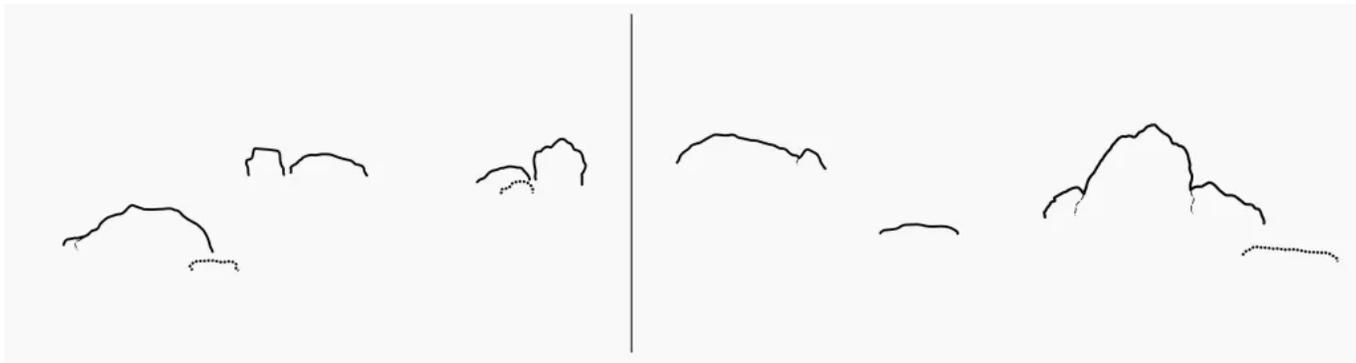
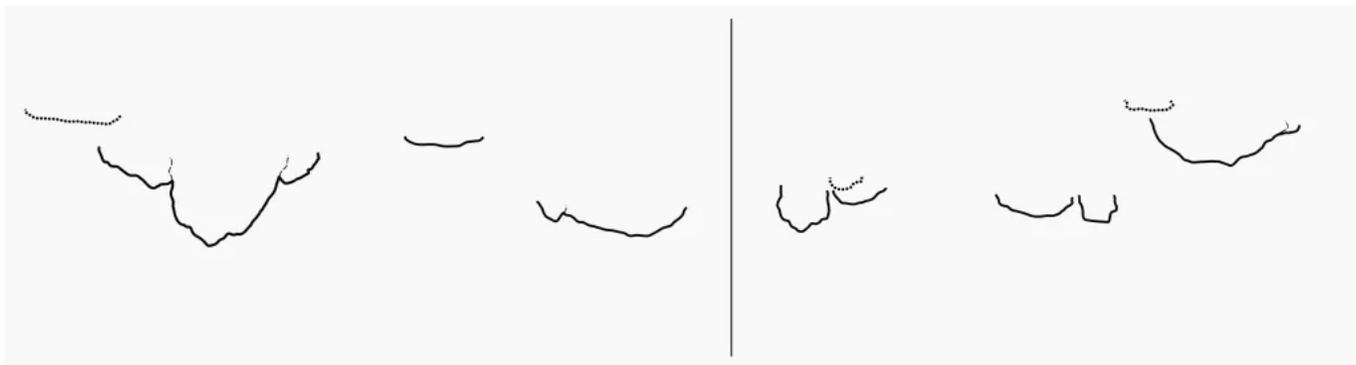
Ryōan-ji (composite photo with stones outlined; graphics Tom Rasky)

Perhaps the most interesting question concerning this score is why Cage didn't simply take a schematic drawing of Ryōan-ji, with the stones represented either in overhead outline or frontal silhouette, using their actual forms and relative positions in the garden to indicate pitch, duration and counterpoint. Such an instrumentalization of the garden would have

certainly accorded with Cage's duchampianism, with the garden serving as a readymade musical score. The shapes that would be generated by the actual stones of the garden – whether drawn from above or frontally – reveal diverse curves, steps, and even flat lines, which would variously translate into glissandi, with whole tone, half-tone, or microtonal steps, and occasional nearly constant pitches. One might argue that while the visual impact of this hypothetical score might be more engrossing than that of Cage's actual score, its musical manifestation would be less compelling, even somewhat inchoate. However, within a system of chance operations and aesthetic indifference such as Cage's, this critique would be moot.

I have long wondered why Cage did not do this. I, however, find this possibility intriguing, and thus propose in homage a sketch of my miniature *Opus No. 1 (Ryōan-ji for John Cage)*, scored for any glissando producing instrument (including voice), to be played without vibrato, *lanto*, *mezzo-piano*, with pitch to be determined by any preferred random method, according to the range of the instrument.





Allen S. Weiss, Opus No. 1 (2012; graphics Tom Rasky)

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