

## Ido Govrin

**Erratum** [from Marcel Duchamp's *Erratum Musicale* (1913) to John Cage's *museumcircle* (1989-95)]

### 1

In contemporary lingual use, the word *erratum* refers to an error, a mistake, a fault. In the field of publishing, its plural, *errata*, describes a list of textual or printing errors and their corrections, inserted at the front of a book. As far as we can say, this Latin-originated noun branched out and developed about 600 years ago from the verb *err*, in Old French, which means "to wander, go astray and lose one's way."

Moreover, it cognates with other words in various languages: in Sanskrit, *arsati* (flows); in Old English, *ierre* (straying; angry); in Gothic, *airzitha* (error; deception); and the Old High German, *irron* (astray) and *irri* (angry). These words reflect the notion of anger as a "straying" from normal composure.

*Erratum* thus has made a long journey, allowing its meaning to shift, reflecting a sense of irregularity, eccentricity, deception, error and the condition of anger that, supposedly, follows a state of vagrancy - but only supposedly since, in fact, *erratum* is everything but an error. It is (or could have been), in itself, the opposite path, which leads away from error - the path of potentiality that leads to everywhere.

### 2

Due to a chance-based compositional process, Duchamp's piece feels as if written as a musical series without a tonal centre, without a tonic. The composition thus lacks a sonic tension and feels as if its notes were placed in a nonchalant manner. As a musical miniature there's no feel for future variations; It is, in short, a musical sketch.

But what can truly be considered incidental in the chance-based compositional process of this piece? The act of choosing the various notes isn't really incidental since the decision for a chance-operation itself isn't incidental. Nor is the piece's formalized unfolding. Both, after all, are subjected to a certain human will.

### 3

Duchamp emphatically argued that the essence of the work of art doesn't reside exclusively in the artist's mind, in the sense of an ultimate "truth" residing in the artist's intention. He distinguished between the work of art (as an object) and the creative act. For Duchamp, the foundation of the work of art - its essence as an object - is the result of the artist's various intentions, acts, and choices. In regard to the creative act, he claims that its essence lies at the intersection between the object and the spectators, where each and every spectator constitutes his or her own truth and interpretation.

Cage followed this axial thought in *museumcircle*, where he formulated the space of the museum as a performative object, adding the visitor as the one who literally performs the piece, continuously working to regenerate it in different ways.

The difficulty raised by both approaches is the same. Despite Cage's elaboration of Duchamp's proposals on the essence of the work of art and the creative act in general, both artists associated that essence with the human subject (albeit with different focuses), and eventually subjugated it to the tyranny of a human factor (whatever that may be). They conceptually restrained experimental music's wishful thinking to emancipate sounds (or works of art in general) by correlating essence with human tyranny. The essence of the work of art or of the creative act, as proposed, lies beyond the human and might even involve a mystical aspect in it. The artist, similar to the nineteenth century's figure of the genius, can never fully explain the work whose essence lies beyond anything he or she could vocalize. To a certain extent, this approach goes back to the classical conception of art that Duchamp rejected, a conception in which the essence of the work of art or of the creative act derives from an irrational, religious, or even mystical aspect of culture.

### 4

A few issues, though, left unanswered. For example, why "imprint"?

### 5

In order to compose a musical piece and to provoke the concept of the work of art, Duchamp first removed the virtuoso intermediary, and then proposed the chance-operation as an indifference action, thereby promoting idea over teleological end-product. He celebrated the *idea*

as "the beauty of indifference," taking the means and aims of work's production away from the artist and repositioning it in the public space. Thus a composer is made, not born.

While it is true that you don't need to be a trained composer to compose music, you do need to have an *idea* about your potential composition. Thus, in the case of Duchamp, what enables "a work of art" isn't really the chance operation but an idea, since in itself this process is merely a mechanism and an operating function that is derived in advance by the artist.

## 6

My following interpretation\* of *Erratum Musicale* tries to restage and reexamine what I believe is at the core of Duchamp's piece, but does so with certain modifications according to my own artistic interests.

We are told that Duchamp, influenced by Lewis Carroll's composition methodology, wanted to create a song and to create it in the guise of the composer whom he supposedly was not. Thus he composed a song using chance-operations and there he was, a composer. We are also told that the more elaborate framework under which this song came to be thought of represented Duchamp's idea about the status of the work of art and the means to create it. In other words, it was a rethinking of the status of the work and of the artist.

While these perspectives may indeed be true, I would like to focus on a more specific issue that I believe was of interest to Duchamp; the very concept of relation. It is difficult to take Duchamp literally - I think we can agree on that by now, though some critics of his work claim just that. But perhaps he can be thought of first and foremost as a philosopher, and as such, we may view him for his work examining and establishing concepts. In *Erratum Musicale*, I tend to think he was particularly interested in the concepts of relation, relationship, inter-relation, and more specifically, the relationships between text and sound, language and sound, and language expressed as marks on a page and sound. If we follow that line of thought, however, we no longer have the concept of relation between language and sound, but instead have the synthesis of both elements into a new whole. For when we can no longer relate one thing to another, when we can no longer think of a thing in relation to another thing - at the "end of thought" - we no longer find relation but unity.

\* *Erratum - Theory Act #2*. Image Coming Soon #1, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto (Canada) - March 2015.

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