In 1958, Alan Watts, the popular philosopher and interpreter of Zen Buddhism, published an essay on Zen and contemporary American culture titled “Square Zen, Beat Zen, Zen.” Watts’s books The Spirit of Zen and The Way of Zen were cult classics among artists and intellectuals from Greenwich Village to North Beach, and together with his weekly KPFA radio talks in San Francisco, contributed to what he now observed was all the “hullabaloo about Zen” among “Bohemian” artists, the Beat writers, and “snobbish” East Asian academics, each of whom he proceeds to decry for their particular distortions. Musing on the “extraordinary growth of Western interest in Zen during the last twenty years,” Watts speculates:

The appeal of Zen arts to the “modern” spirit in the West, the words of Suzuki, the war with Japan, the itchy fascination of “Zen-stories,” and the attraction of a non-conceptual, experiential philosophy in the climate of scientific relativism—all these are involved…. Here is a view of the world imparting a profoundly refreshing sense of wholeness to a culture in which the spiritual and the material, the conscious and the unconscious, have been cataclysmically split…. To the Westerner in search of the reintegration of man and nature there is an appeal far beyond the merely sentimental in the naturalism of Zen—in the landscapes of Ma-yuan and Sesshu, in an art which is simultaneously spiritual and secular, which conveys the mystical in terms of the natural, and which, indeed, never even imagined a break between them.

Watts was a chief interpreter of Zen Buddhism as an East Asian wisdom tradition grounded in the concept of satori—sudden enlightenment, or what he termed “moments…of cosmic consciousness.” Satori, he taught, is a concept of spontaneous liberation. The enlightened self transcends the dualism of subject and object, mind and phenomena, while affirming a view of reality as abundant void and perpetual process. In his essay, Watts identifies tenets of Zen and satori that to his mind have been misread by a nexus of 1950s artists and poets that includes by name or inference John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Robert Rauschenberg, and Mark Tobey, and the writers Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen. He claims that these artists found false affinities in how Zen situates consciousness in “the sphere of human, everyday life which we might call existential.” Skipping the principles of order and discipline that lie at the heart of Taoist-inflected Zen “freedom,” they use Zen ideas to rationalize “sheer caprice in art, literature and life” as a means to “revolt against culture and social convention.” Watts declares, “Today there are Western artists avowedly using Zen to justify the indiscriminate framing of simply anything—blank canvases, totally silent music, torn-up bits of paper dropped on a board and stuck where they fall, or dense masses of mangled wire.” He cites the calligraphy of the eighteenth-century artist-monk Taigu Ryōkan, whose wild and free script reflects the Zen aesthetic of “controlled accidents” (fig. 57). The difference is that Ryōkan could invent a new style of script precisely because he had mastered its classical structure.

But contrary to Watts’s sweeping criticism, the constellation of artists and poets whom he derisively calls Beat Zen discovered uncanny relevance to their psychic state and aesthetic mood in the flood of English translations and commentaries on Zen Buddhism available to them. Their uses of such mediated Zen in fact became a productive strategy for creating a radically new
aesthetic program. While satori rhetoric was expressed in terms of a universal spirituality whose coordinates ranged from Western medieval mysticism to American transcendentalism, its Asian origins appealed as a critical counterpoint to postwar American artists’ Judeo-Christian and modern Western philosophical notions of existential being. The prolific and revered Zen philosopher D. T. Suzuki couched satori experience in a nature-centric, not anthropocentric, idiom that attracted a generation of artists coming of age in the wake of nuclear and politically facilitated holocausts. Suzuki’s alternative humanism promised attainment of “the art of self-forgetfulness” wherein one “thinks like showers coming down from the sky; he thinks like waves rolling on the ocean; he thinks like the stars illuminating the nightly heavens; he thinks like the green foliage shooting forth in the relaxing spring breeze. Indeed, he is the showers, the ocean, the stars, the foliage.”

Suzuki often cited the esoteric ink painting (fig. 58) by the zenga artist Sengai Gibon (1750-1836) as the quintessential embodiment of the universe and hence a diagram of satori. He interpreted Sengai’s three fundamental forms as geometries of formlessness and infinity, which underscored his own view of emptiness (śūnyatā) as the essence of Zen enlightenment.

This essay examines the phenomenon that Watts observed but inverts his derogatory “Beat Zen” term to became a useful descriptive. It follows three interconnected collectives of artists and writers whose sustained if eclectic connections to Zen and other forms of Mahayana Buddhism emerge as critical influences on the concept, method, and philosophy of their art. Together, they occupy a transformative role in the American neo-avant-garde. I have termed these collectives “Cage Zen,” “Beat Zen,” and “Bay Area Conceptual art.” Cage Zen links the intermedia arts of neo-Dada, Fluxus, and Happenings through the mediation of Cage. Beat Zen appropriates Buddhism, as well as such iconic figures as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, as a philosophical underpinning of the spontaneous writings and modes of subjectivity forged by Kerouac, Ginsberg, and others in the Beat movement. Bay Area Conceptual art is grounded in both Cagean and post-Beat approaches to Zen as method. Their understanding of Zen gave these artists and writers a conceptual framework to abandon artistic intention and compositional structure. It drove the manifestos of Cage’s “silent music,” Kerouac’s “spontaneous prose,” George Maciunas’s “anti-art,” and Tom Marioni’s “situation art”—all of which rejected orthodox modernism in favor of the sheer immediacy and authenticity of everyday life.

One can argue, as Watts does, that several of these figures have a distorted view of Zen. But such distortions—mediated, even imagined concepts of Zen—were central to their creative processes. The complex web that adopted Zen crisscrosses back and forth between the East and West coasts, with outposts in Tokyo; Dartington Hall in Devon; and Darmstadt and Wiesbaden, Germany. It developed initially around universities and art colleges like the Cornish School of Art in Seattle; Black Mountain College in North Carolina; and Columbia University, Rutgers University, and the New School for Social Research in the New York area. In the 1960s, the Davis and Berkeley campuses of the University of California became enclaves for artists and poets engaged with Asian philosophy and aesthetics. It culminated in 1974 with the founding of Chögyam Trungpa’s Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, which was the first center for the interdisciplinary study and practice of Buddhism, psychology, and experimental literary and visual arts. Anne Waldman and Ginsberg cofounded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa, where Harry Smith lived as a resident shaman and several figures discussed in this chapter lectured and performed.
Artists’ readings on Buddhism and their understanding (and misunderstanding) of classical Zen painting, calligraphy, and poetry transformed philosophical and aesthetic discourses. Their sources ranged from the medieval Christian mysticism of Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–ca.1328) to Henri Bergson’s philosophy of “perceptual becoming,” László Moholy-Nagy’s *The New Vision*, and Marcel Duchamp, who famously denied any interest in Zen whatsoever. The conceptual and structural shifts that differentiate the neo-avant-garde from the historical avant-garde occur in part because of what these artists *construed* Zen to be. Watts criticized these artists’ work for not being correctly Zen, but none of them ever purposefully set out to make Zen art. Cage’s oft-quoted 1961 comment on Zen and Dada contains his retort to Watts:

> Critics frequently cry “Dada” after attending one of my concerts or hearing one of my lectures. Others bemoan my interest in Zen. One of the liveliest lectures I ever heard was given by Nancy Wilson Ross at the Cornish School in Seattle [in 1936]. It was called *Zen Buddhism and Dada*. It is possible to make a connection between the two, but neither Dada nor Zen is a fixed tangible. They change; and in quite different ways in different places and times, they invigorate action. What was Dada in the 1920’s is now, with the exception of the work of Marcel Duchamp, just art. What I do, I do not wished to be blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki, reading of the literature), I doubt I would have done what I have done. I am told that Alan Watts has questioned the relationship between my work and Zen. I mention this in order to free Zen from any responsibility for my actions. I shall continue making them, however. I often point out that Dada nowadays has in it a space, an emptiness, that it formally lacked. What, nowadays, America mid-twentieth century, is Zen?[^4]

### Cage Zen

Cage’s study and appropriation of Asian philosophy and aesthetics shaped his compositional practice and writings from the mid-1940s through at least the mid-1960s.[^5] He was open about his use of Taoist and Buddhist texts, haiku poetics, and Indian mysticism as inspiration for his radical proposition “to stop all the thinking that separates music from living.”[^6] Increasingly, Cage’s formal and philosophical insights became the foundation of his credo on art as an open field of experiential immediacy:

> We learned from Oriental thought that those divine influences are, in fact, the environment in which we are. A sober and quiet mind is one in which the ego does not obstruct the fluency of things that come in through the senses and up through one’s dreams. Our business in living is to become fluent with the life we are living, and art can help this.[^7]

Thoroughly identified with Japanese Zen, Cage is most revered as a modern American Zen master. “I thought of John as a sort of teacher/preacher/soldier,” Jasper Johns remarked.[^8] His studies and friendship with Suzuki, whose Columbia University lectures he attended in the 1950s, stimulated this focus.[^9] “Since the forties and through my study with D. T. Suzuki of the
philosophy of Zen Buddhism,” he wrote, “I’ve thought of music as a means of changing the mind...an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let sounds be themselves.”

Cage’s aesthetic statements appropriating Zen terms, concepts, and rhetorical devices like paradox shape such key writings as “Lecture on Nothing” (1949–50), “Julliard Lecture” (1952), “Robert Rauschenberg” (1953), “Experimental Music: Doctrine” (1955), and “Composition as Process” (1958). His conception of Zen as a technique to activate perception also influenced such historic compositions as 4’ 33, Haiku, and Water Music (all 1952, plates 77–79). The mode of direct experience that impressed Cage is zazen, the basis of formal meditative practice that informs traditional Zen arts like archery, calligraphy, haiku, and tea ceremony. But Cage was not concerned with ritual practices and disregarded their social and political history as an organized religion in modern Japan. Rather, his use and interpretation of Zen were strategic and creative. A key technique he aestheticized is the doctrine of dharma transmission. In monastic forms of Zen Buddhism, enlightenment passes through direct experience between the minds of master and student, without the mediation of religious texts or ritual. Cage’s Zen-inspired experiential methods established mental, transformative interaction—a relational dynamic between the creator and recipient/viewer—as a crucial principle in neo-avant-garde art. In this formulation of Cage Zen, art is a catalyst for direct insight into nature, consciousness, and being. Art, Cage remarked, is “not self expression but self alteration.”

For Cage, the formulation of space and emptiness as substantive essence, worthy of being material for art, refers to the central principle of void, or śūnyatā, in Mahayana Buddhist metaphysics. Cage contrasts traditional Western notions of silence to his own sensibility instilled with Zen philosophy in his influential treatise “Composition as Process” (1958):

> What happens, for instance, to silence? That is, how does the mind’s perception of it change? Formerly, silence was the time lapse between sounds, useful towards a variety of ends.... Where none of these or other goals is present, silence becomes something else—not silence at all, but sounds, the ambient sounds. The nature of these is unpredictable and changing. These sounds (which are called silence only because they do not form part of a musical intention) may be depended upon to exist. The world teems with them, and is, in fact, at no point free of them.

Cage’s concepts of space and emptiness informed his theory on the interactive relationship of art, the viewer, and what he calls “the environment.” Here silence and emptiness are not the opposites of sound and form, as in Western thought, but rather contain in themselves the complete presence of duration and change. Requiring the artist’s and viewer’s focus, art abandons fixed form and becomes an indeterminate (or “purposeless”) process. Cage calls such events “experimental action,” which are “generated by the mind as empty as it was before it became one.... [It] sees things directly as they are: impermanently involved in an infinite play of interpenetrations.”

As Branden W. Joseph argues, Cage’s conception of emptiness influenced the interpretation and practice of neo-avant-garde production in the 1950s: Rauschenberg is a prime example. In summer 1952 at Black Mountain, a laboratory for creative innovation where painters, composers, poets, architects, and craft artists drew freely from Eastern and European traditions, Cage invited Rauschenberg to participate in the multimedia event Black Mountain Piece, in which he included
Rauschenberg’s *White Painting* as part of the set (1951, fig. 60). Rauschenberg’s series of all white canvases, entirely devoid of any articulation or form, developed from his collage painting *Mother of God* (ca. 1950, fig. 59), which presents a white circle symbolic of the divine on a background of city maps. Rauschenberg wrote to his dealer Betty Parsons:

> They are large white (1 white as 1 GOD) canvases organized and selected with the experience of time and presented with the innocence of a virgin. Dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends, they are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of intuition.

Cage saw in Rauschenberg’s blank surfaces how the artless operation of site, process, and durational time could constitute a work of art. This paradigm shift moved the definition of art as a fixed object in time and space to an intuitive experience of time and space. Impressed by Rauschenberg’s idea that “a canvas is never empty,” the *White Paintings*, Cage mused, offer “reflective surfaces changing what is seen by means of what is happening…a painting constantly changing.”

Proceeding from this epiphany, Cage wrote the celebrated score for *4’33”*, which David Tudor performed at Black Mountain that same summer. This structure of three movements of silence lasting four minutes and thirty-three seconds was Cage’s manifesto presentation of silence as the absence of intentional sound: Nothingness manifest as full, and the random sounds of the environment emerge as the listening experience. In performance, the silent score is frequently indicated by the opening and closing of the piano lid. In the score illustrated here, the three movements of time are marked in proportional notation to space (1952, plate 77). Cage dedicated the score to Irwin Kremen, who later wrote on the radical nature of its notational structure: “In effect, real time is here the fundamental dimensions of music, its very ground. And where time is primary, change, process itself, defines the nature of things. That apply describes the silent piece—an unfixed flux of sound through time, a flux from performance to performance.”

One of Cage’s model texts was “The Doctrine of Universal Mind,” a collection sermons and dialogues by the ninth-century master Huangbo (d. ca. 850). Cage read this text as a late-night performance at Black Mountain in summer 1952. Huangbo’s teachings are among the principal doctrines of Zen Buddhism and a founding text of the Rinzai school of sudden enlightenment. What Cage took from Huangbo’s witty colloquial writing is the need to drop rational cognitive, and deductive thinking in favor of an intuitive grasp of all that is present. As Huangbo teaches, “avoid pondering things in your mind, thereby purging your bodies of discriminatory cognition…. If you can only rid yourselves of conceptual thought, you will have accomplished everything…. That which is before you is it.” As if in response, Cage writes, “Where these ears are in connection with a mind that has nothing to do, then the mind is free to enter into the act of listening, hearing each sound just as it is, not as a phenomenon more or less approximating a preconception.”

From the late 1950s, the artists associated with Fluxus and Happenings expanded, challenged, and radicalized the parameters of Cage’s Asian rhetoric and methodology. They reveled in an
increasingly eclectic inventory of Asian thought, traditions, and contact with avant-garde artists of East Asia. Kaprow’s event composition for 18 Happenings in 6 Parts (1959, plates 94–96)—with three simultaneous performances, eight overlapping sound tracks, and precise instructions for the audience—transformed central conditions of Cagean indeterminacy and interactive participation. By 1962, when Nam June Paik performed Zen for Head (1962, plate 85) at the first Fluxus festival of new music in Wiesbaden (1962, fig. 61), the value shifts from intention to nonintention, from object to process, and from stasis to duration reflected the broader application of what Paik called the “old Zen-Cage thesis: ‘It is beautiful, not because it changes beautifully, but—simply—because it changes.’”

Zen for Head was Paik’s enactment of la Monte Young’s 1960 performance score, “Draw a straight line and follow it.” Paik dipped his head, hands, and necktie in a bowl of ink and tomato juice, and using his body as a brush, dragged himself along the entire length of a thirteen-foot-long sheet of paper. Paik’s allusion to Zen in his title and emulation of expressionist “Zen calligraphy” to create a Dadaist hand scroll inverted all that Cage Zen had come to represent. This irreverent and inelegant antic upended the virtues of contemplative experience with the wild force of unmediated action. Writing in 1963, artist Earle Brown described Paik as “a kind of Oriental Kammerkrieg…a place for war-surplus bravery, fear, heroics, aggression, hot and cold running sweat, cruelty, exhilaration, love.” Referring to Paik as a Zen teacher, Brown describes how it is “very traditional in the East for master to give directly to pupil (a whack on the head) the sound, or the experience rather than a lecture or an indirect (notational) directive…. Paik doesn’t tell somebody, he up and does it.” In this way, the imagined projections of how a Zen master behaves became coupled with the reception of Paik’s work, framing the critique of his performances not as artistic creation (in the manner of Cage) but rather as a direct embodiment, by virtue of his being Korean-born, of traditional Asian wisdom. Later, when asked if he were a Buddhist, Paik replied: “No, I’m an artist…. Because I am a friend of John Cage, people tend to see me as a Zen monk…. I’m not a follower of Zen but I react to Zen the same way as I react to Johann Sebastian Bach.”

Paik graduated from the University of Tokyo in 1956, wrote a dissertation on Arnold Schoenberg, and was closely associated with the Japanese intermedia avant-garde. He joined some twenty Japanese artists who participated in various Fluxus productions from its founding in 1961 through Fluxus organizer Maciunas’s death in 1978. Besides Paik, whose family fled Korea with the outbreak of the Korean War, contemporary Japanese avant-garde artists dominated the American imagination of Zen. From their centers in Tokyo, where neo-Dada was ascendant from around 1960, and New York, where composers like Toshi Ichiyanagi, who had studied with Cage at the New School, were active in the downtown neo-Dada scene, young Japanese artists were cast as mediums of a non-Western, antirationalist aesthetic. They were seen as natural poets of quotidian existence, agents of Maciunas’s theory of anti-art: “Anti-art is life, is nature, is true reality—it is one and all. Rainfall is anti-art, a babble of a crowd is anti-art, a sneeze is anti-art, a flight of a butterfly, or movements of microbes are anti-art.” Indeed, Maciunas’s manifesto for Fluxus was a blatant call for the radical elimination of Western culture: “Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual,’ professional & commercialized culture, PURGE the world of dead art, imitation, artificial art, abstract art, illusionistic art, mathematical art, —PURGE THE WORLD OF ‘EUROPANISM’ [sic]!” Maciunas exhibited Yoko Ono’s Instructions for Paintings at his AG Gallery in 1961 and helped bring several composers associated with Tokyo’s
Like Maciunas, Kaprow used Japanese artists as radical embodiments of positive non-Western values. In 1966, he included Yayoi Kusama’s environments and the Gutai group’s happenings in his landmark book Assemblage, Environments & Happenings. By incorporating Kusama and Gutai in his theory of avant-garde art, Kaprow, like Maciunas, could make his case for the end of formalist Western art. His proposal for a radical set of “form-principles” that would render “the line between art and life...as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible,” included “change,” “chance,” “accidents,” and a notion of time that was “variable and discontinuous.”

Significantly, Kaprow describes the new “world-view” as “primarily a philosophical quest and a finding of truths, rather than a purely aesthetic activity.” On George Brecht’s “sparse scores” of performance pieces and concept art, Kaprow writes: “Certainly [he is] aware of the philosophical allusions to Zen Buddhism, of the subtle wit and childlike simplicity of the activities indicated.” These notations describe basic actions, such as Brecht’s score that simply reads “exit,” or pose the reenactment of daily life, like Alison Knowles’s Identical Lunch (1973, plate 92), which calls for players to eat a daily lunch of a tuna fish sandwich.

The proto-Fluxus and Fluxus scores—with their distilled conflation of image and word, epigrammatic structure, and frequent reference to nature—mirror haiku’s poetics of pure actuality and metaphors of immediacy. Brecht, Ono, and Young experimented with what critics have called their “haiku-like” and “Zen-like” use of language. Young edited a collection featuring scores and other writings titled An Anthology (1963, plate 82), and Ono published a collection of her poetry and instruction pieces as Grapefruit (1964). Their event scores or instruction pieces could be performed live before an invited audience or in the mind as a thought (their visualization being performative, like Young’s score for “little whirlpools out in the middle of the ocean”). They expanded upon Cage’s scores by directing the viewer-listener from concrete experiences to a space composed entirely in the mind. Young’s composition that reads “turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area” infers the existence of music beyond what the human ear can hear. Ono’s Instruction for Paintings call for paintings “to be constructed in your head.” At her AG Gallery show, she showed this series as ephemeral objects whose “instructions” she read aloud for visitors to mentally realize (fig. 62). At Sōgetsu Art Center in Tokyo in 1962, Ono eliminated the object altogether and displayed the instructions, scribed by her husband Ichiyanagi, alone on the gallery wall (plates 83–84).

Cage’s fascination with Zen texts and Japanese aesthetics; his friendship with Suzuki, who moved from New York to Kamakura in 1958; and his influence among younger Japanese composers eventually led him to visit Japan in 1962 for the first of several trips. Ichiyanagi arranged through Sōgetsu Art Center for Cage and Tudor to perform concerts at various venues across Japan, and Ono accompanied them (fig. 63). (Cage premiered 0’00” at Sōgetsu on October 24 and dedicated it to Ichiyanagi and Ono.) Sōgetsu was the Tokyo headquarters of Teshigahara Sōfū avant-garde ikebana school, and through his enlightened patronage, was the center for...
experimental art and performance from the late 1950s through the 1960s. In 1964, Cage returned to Sōgetsu as the musical advisor for the Merce Cunningham Dance Company’s world tour. Rauschenberg, who was the company’s art director, traveled with them, visiting India, Thailand, and Japan for the first time. He created his Combine painting *Gold Standard* (1964, plate 97) as a live demonstration on Sōgetsu’s stage during this trip.

*Gold Standard* represents a unique convergence of Rauschenberg’s methodology, Cage’s mediation of its Zen interpretation, and the contemporary Japanese avant-garde, in whose history this event reigns mythic. When Cage first met Rauschenberg, he described him as “‘natural’ Zen.” Both were experimenting with allowing the random constellations and material of everyday life to demarcate fields of perceptual experience as art. Their collaboration *Automobile Tire Print* (1953, plate 80) was a manifesto about just that: Cage drove his Model A Ford, with black paint applied to a black tire, over a long stripe of paper that Rauschenberg placed on the street outside the artist’s studio in New York. The tire’s abstract, linear imprint created what Walter Hopps calls a “quotidien icon.” Rauschenberg’s Combines, which grew from his process-based collage and assemblage works, incorporate everyday materials in “random order” to form what Cage described as “a poetry of infinite possibilities.” For *Gold Standard*, Rauschenberg used a six-panel gold-papered folding screen that Teshigahara supplied and assembled the Combine in front of a packed auditorium from junk he had collected in the streets of Tokyo: a road barrier, a page from the local *Japan Times*, Coca-Cola bottles, an electric lamp, and an RCA Victor Dog. Rauschenberg’s nonverbal, four-hour performance was billed as an “open interview” with Japan’s leading neo-Dada art critic Yoshiaki Tōno; instead of answering the questions, however, he turned on a TV on. Sometime during the performance, Cage and Cunningham walked out. Perhaps there was too much visceral history in the congregation of Rauschenberg’s stardom and apotheosis of urban junk in that 1964 season of Tokyo’s Olympics, an event that marked Japan’s new status as a reconstructed, industrialized world power. Against the open violence of Rauschenberg’s contemporaneity, Cage’s disembodied, dehistoricized conception of Japan, and hence of Zen, was uncomfortable to sustain. Rauschenberg, newly liberated from the constructs of Cage Zen, resigned from the Merce Cunningham Dance Company the next day.

Earlier that year, Cage wrote an essay for an exhibition of Johns’s series of targets, flags, and numbers at the Jewish Museum, New York. Cage understood the difference between the paintings and Pop art in terms of Johns’s approach to “structures, not subjects.” His structures are “anonymous” and inherently about the process of adding, subtracting, and multiplying the elements of painting until “we tend to our ultimate place: zero, gray disinterest.” Invoking his oft-repeated reference to Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy’s teaching on the purpose of art, Cage writes: “[Johns] is engaged with the endlessly changing ancient task: the imitation of nature in her manner of operation.” As with his statements on Cunningham, Rauschenberg, and Tudor, Cage interpreted Johns’s work in terms of his conception of Zen emptiness as a field of perception. It was not Zen itself, but Cage’s interpretation of its potential as an aesthetic system that produced the critical framework for understanding the radical nature of Johns’s “structures.”

In fact, Johns’s trajectory with Japan, like Rauschenberg’s in late 1964, was more grounded in the historical, globalized present. As a soldier with the U.S. occupation forces, he was stationed in northeast Sendai for six months in 1952–53. “I think the main effect it had on me was to give
me the idea that the world was real,” Johns reflected later.\(^{37}\) He returned to Tokyo in summer 1964 at gallerist Kuzuo Shimizu’s invitation. A massive construction site as it prepared for the Olympics, Tokyo had an atmosphere of frenzy and lingering despair, that of a defeated nation operating in a Cold War polity beset by immanent atomic annihilation. While there, Johns painted *Watchman* (1964 plate 98), *Souvenir*, and *Souvenir 2.* *Watchman* is a monumental canvas that presents a visual, psychic metaphor of the disjunctive fragmentation that he perceived in Tokyo that summer. The discontinuous relationship of its parts—a real upside-down chair and cast leg attached to a painted surface with the words Red and Yellow stenciled over expressionist splashes of color—resists and subverts synthesis. Tōno, the leading champion of Johns’s work in Japan, perceived in its hallucinatory narrative “an impression of dead silence, in which a drama had ended, leaving a sense of emptiness yet substantialness.”\(^{38}\) Johns’s response expresses how the complexities of presence stimulated his vision of simultaneity, multiplicity, and their analogues as interpenetrating focal points in his canvas:

> On the street, you will look up at the sky and then look down at a building, or you will look at a woman and then at a construction site. In this work you shift your eyes from the leg to the ball, or from the colored square to the “scraping,” don’t you? When I painted flags or targets, I used to see the whole picture at a time, only to make “seeing” meaningless. Recently, I’ve been using such objects and traces of action in order to diversify the way to see things.... I want to confuse the meaning of the act of looking.\(^{39}\)

By the 1970s, Johns exhausted his interest in Duchamp’s conceptual method and reclaimed painting as a vital art and tool of humanist philosophy. His meditation on the tragic themes of love, transience, and death culminated in his homage to Cunningham, the monumental painting *Dancers on a Plane* (1980–81, plate 99). (Johns succeeded Rauschenberg to become Cunningham’s artistic advisor from 1967 to 1978.) The painting reveals Johns’s interest in the paradox of showing dance, a three-dimensional activity on a stage in time, on a two-dimensional, static, canvas surface. Through a complex and kinetic organization of chalky, diagonal brush strokes (his signature crosshatch style initiated in 1974), he created a system of repetitions and reiterations whose shifting, darting inner structure charts his concept of dance. For him, dance is an X-ray in movement, space, and time of a duality of human existence: sexuality and death. This painting is part of a series that Johns made between 1979 and 1981; it includes the related *Cicada, Tantric Detail*, and *Dancers on a Plane* sequences, which contain explicit imagery of phalluses, testicles, and skulls.\(^{40}\) These works are all loosely based on a Tantric Buddhist *thangkha* depicting the archetypal deity Chakrasamvara in mystic union with his female consort, an iconographic representation of the actuality of enlightenment through the ecstatic union of compassion and wisdom (fig. 65). In this richly and pulsating manifestation where both the male and female embody the Buddha, each is adorned with garlands of skulls: the dance of life coexists with death. Chakrasamvara is an aspect of the Hindu deity Shiva taking the form of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer and force of all creation and destruction. Johns’s homage, disguised in this reinvented system of Tantric imagery, suggests Cunningham as an avatar of Shiva, too.

Barbara Rose writing on the *Tantric Detail* paintings that followed *Dancers on a Plane*, interprets Johns’s engagement with Tantric imagery during this period thus: “His objective now is no longer the impersonal detachment of Zen stasis, symbolized in the target, an image related to Zen discipline and meditation, but an acceptance of potentially apocalyptic catastrophe.”\(^{41}\) She
describes Tantric Buddhism as “a religion that deals in millennial cycles, accepting poverty, multiplicity destruction, chaos, catastrophe, and various categories of the darker sides of experience.” His eclectic but penetrating reordering of Tantric imagery is a form of religious art, she writes, and is “the manifestation of nothing less than a religious conversion that permits the artist to survive and to grow by embracing his own mortal fallibility.”

But the invisible presence of human movement in Dancers on a Plane, and in the related Cicada and Tantric Detail drawings and paintings, are less about Johns’s appropriation of Tantric art than they are about art itself. Of his relationship to his Tantric source, Johns comments:

> Seeing a thing can sometimes trigger the mind make another thing. In some instances the new work may include, as a sort of subject matter, references to the thing that was seen. And, because works of painting tend to share many aspects, working itself might initiate memories of other works. Naming or painting these ghosts sometimes seems a way to stop their nagging.42

Cage’s influence on the neo-avant-garde from neo-Dada to Fluxus was inextricable from Duchamp’s provocations surrounding the conceptual dimension of the art experience. Duchamp’s call to put art back in the service of the mind corresponded with Cage’s strategies for relational dynamics, the centrality of the phenomenology of perception. The pioneering Conceptual artists Arakawa and Madeline Gins, William Anastasi (Issue, plate 101), and Dove Bradshaw (fig. 64) linked the programs of Cage, Duchamp, and Buddhist mediations through the use of visual and verbal paradox to probe the question of the very nature of the mind that contemplates art. By exposing the conceptual space between the viewer/recipient and the creator, their work opens up perceptual meaning to multiplicity, destabilization, and nonsense. Arakawa and Gins’s eighty-three panels incorporating diagrams, drawings, stenciled words, and various collage elements, The Mechanism of Meaning (1963–71/1996, plate 100), offers a series of interactive exercises. Their essentially philosophical project, which Duchamp admired, proposes how meaning is constructed not by abstract knowledge systems but rather by an individual’s active engagement with the world.

Watts, in his outright dismissal of the popular interest in Zen, misread the agencies of mediation for Zen itself. Cage himself cared less about the actual practice and history of Zen than his creative application of it, both for his compositions and the work of artists he admired. Significantly, the literary and textual sources for Cage’s uses and interpretation of Zen—namely, the writings of Suzuki—were in fact produced as a modern Japanese philosophical project to establish Japanese Zen as a universal philosophy compatible with globalized aesthetics. This double mediation consciously denied ideological identity with its historical present. And yet it inspired a whole new language of contemporary creativity in postwar America. For much of the 1950s and 1960s, Cage’s writings, musical compositions, and constellation of friendships with visual artists, poets, performers, and musicians created a new set of conditions for art making. Cagean Zen became synonymous with art conceived and communicated for the quasi-spiritual purpose of focusing consciousness upon direct, unmediated experience, allowing the accidental contents of sensory perception to become art itself. More than just a new subject of art, this radical structure of durational time, spatial transparency, and experiential being became the new parameters of art as an open field of relational dynamics. Kaprow remarked that 4’33” was
Cage’s “most philosophically and radically instrumental piece. ‘Instrumental’ in the sense that it made available to a number of us not just the sounds in the world but all phenomena. Then the question is, now that everything’s available, what do you do?” Zen, and the related systems of Taoist, Tantric, and Indian art and philosophy that postwar American artists contemplated as the East, was the nagging ghost that summoned contemporary creativity.

Beat Zen

The Chicago Review issue on Zen where Watts’s “Beat Zen, Square Zen, Zen” essay appeared also featured an excerpt from Kerouac’s The Dharma Bums (1958) and a description by Gary Snyder of sesshin meditation at the Zen temple Shōkokuji in Kyoto, where he was living at the time. This confluence was not coincidental. In The Dharma Bums, Kerouac fictionalized a shift in the Beat sensibility, which he, along with Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs, had articulated and eulogized in sensational novels and poems since the early 1950s. These included Kerouac’s On the Road (1951–57), Ginsberg’s epic poem “Howl” (1955), and Burroughs’s Junkie and Queer (both 1953). These works shocked the American literary establishment by confronting all that stood for sanity, seducing readers toward the hipster underworld of dope, crime, and sex. The Beats, who came of political awareness in the immediate aftermath of World War II, coalesced around their discontent with American values of corporate liberalism and social conformism. As outcasts of a homogenizing culture, their early literary movement was characterized by confessional tales of wild, hysterical, and extreme pursuits of ecstasy. The Dharma Bums stakes out a different territory of altered consciousness, suggested in the title of Kerouac’s Chicago Review excerpt, “Meditation in the Woods.” Through Kerouac, Beat antisocial values of lunacy and transcendence became transfigured as samādhi rhetoric, “the state you reach when you stop everything and stop your mind and you actually with your eyes closed see a kind of eternal multiswarm of electrical Power of some kind ululating in place of just pitiful images and forms of objects.”

Kerouac’s novel re-creates his experiences with Ginsberg (Alvah Goldbook in the book) and Snyder (Jaffy Ryder) around Berkeley in 1955. They were members of a growing community of poets interested in Mahayana Buddhism, among other strains of non-Western cultures. Its members included Kenneth Rexroth, the self-taught translator of Chinese and Japanese poetry, and Whalen, who later became an ordained Zen monk. Kerouac lived with Snyder for several months in Mill Valley, and through Snyder he became a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in summer 1956, which becomes the central narrative event of The Dharma Bums. In the novel, he describes Snyder as student of Chinese and Japanese languages, a poet fond of Ezra Pound (himself a modernist translator of classical Chinese texts), and a Zen enthusiast who fashioned himself after the Tang poet-recluse Hanshan, whose Cold Mountain poems Snyder would later translate. In the earlier version of The Dharma Bums manuscript (1957, plate 103), before he changed Snyder’s name to Jaffy Ryder, Kerouac recounts his Buddhist epiphany wherein he finds through solitary meditation in nature a greater force of transcendence than he had ever found in the highway joyrides recorded in On the Road:

When I was at Desolation Peak I’d get up around 9 o clock every morning…. And outside, for hundreds of panoramic miles around, the snow capped rocks of the High Cascades, Wilderness
Isaac Gerwitz traces Kerouac’s involvement with Eastern spirituality to the early 1940s.47 A French-Canadian Catholic, Kerouac never abandoned his faith in a personal God-being: When asked what the Beat generation was seeking, Kerouac answered, “I want God to show me His face.”48 A series of drawings circa 1956–58 depict visions of the Buddha, Bodhidharma, and God as living incarnations of wisdom, compassion, and piety (fig. 66; plates 104–5). But despite his recurring theism, Kerouac became increasingly intrigued by the Asian concept of divinity as a “mass of intelligence.”49 He was initially drawn to Hinduism and wrote in his journal about maya, the illusion of man’s temporal, phenomenological existence.50 This concept resonated with Kerouac’s view that modern man was wretchedly alienated from nature and his own essence, which is also the theme of his first published novel The Town and the City (1950). But his interest in Buddhist texts as one of many inspirational sources—Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Thomas Wolfe were among his favorite fellow seekers—shifted to become Kerouac’s single focus of intense reading from 1953 to 1956. Unlike Cage, whose encounter with Buddhism was largely filtered through Suzuki and other popular commentators, Kerouac delved into the foundational scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism compiled in the multivolume The Sacred Books and Early Literature of the East and A Buddhist Bible, edited by the well-known scholar Dwight Goddard. Kerouac filled eleven “Dharma notebooks” with transcriptions and analyses of these sources, and wrote proselytizing letters to Ginsberg outlining his “Chinese position,” claiming to have arrived at the center of things where “nothingness resides and does absolutely nothing.”51 His discovery of the Dharma, the Buddhist cosmic law of existence, “was the manifestation of the universal essence of mind revealing itself to itself, as before and before, as now and now again, as after and long after indeed. As already.”52 Kerouac complemented his self-guided studies of Buddhist sutras with meditation. In The Dharma Bums, which he dedicates to Hanshan, he describes his midnight meditations, sitting cross-legged under the stars while reciting to himself the opening lines of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra: “I am emptiness, I am not different from emptiness, neither is emptiness different from me; indeed, emptiness is me.”53 By 1959, Kerouac’s conversion from Beat to Buddhist beatitude was complete:

Who knows, my God, but that the universe is not one vast sea of compassion actually, the veritable holy honey, beneath all this show of personality and cruelty. In fact who knows but that it isn’t the solitude of the oneness of the essence of everything, the solitude of the actual oneness of the unbornness of the unborn essence of everything, nay the true pure foreverhood, that big blank potential that can ray forth anything it wants from its pure store, that blazing bliss, Mattivajrakaruna the Transcendental Diamond Compassion!54

Kerouac’s interpretation of Buddhist emptiness, impermanence, and the Tao, or flow, of perpetual process legitimized his formulation of “spontaneous prose” as an unmediated act of
inspired “Zen lunacy.” Kerouac had written the first draft of On the Road in three weeks, on a continuous roll of paper, high on Benzedrine; his later writings came about in similar bursts of stream of consciousness. He published his method as the “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” and “Belief & Technique for Modem Prose” in Evergreen Review in 1958 and 1959. Among his admonitions are “Be crazy dumbsaïnt of the mind” and “Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better.” He attempts to connect such unorthodox formlessness to spiritual insight, encouraging young writers to originate their focus of interest on visual facts from “the eye within the eye.” Kerouac’s interpretation of Buddhist states of self-transcendence and principles of direct apprehension of truth are transfigured as a writing style that communicates the flow of subjective reality “without consciousness” in semitrance. Writing is a form of action, and takes on the psycho-spiritual mandate to expose the self to the recesses of consciousness. It is an index of authenticity. Drawing his spontaneous prose from William Carlos Williams’s modernist poetics, Burroughs’s factualism, jazz improvisation, his alcohol- and drug-induced highs and Zen-type meditation, Kerouac opened up a new mode of subjectivity that defined the Beat literary movement and influenced the counterculture’s worldview and artistic methodologies.

The Bay Area literary community that Kerouac describes in The Dharma Bums gained national attention in 1955 when Ginsberg read “Howl” at a poetry reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. (The other readers were Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Snyder, and Whalen; Rexroth was the master of ceremonies.) Ginsberg’s descriptions of “my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, naked … listening to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox” were so sensational that Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights publication of “Howl” was banned for obscenity. Influenced by Kerouac, whom he called the “new Buddha of American prose,” Ginsberg believed in the Beat’s destiny to revolutionize prosody with “unworried wild poetry, full of perception.” A fellow reader of Mahayana sutras and classical Zen poetry, Ginsberg desired to give contemporary poetic form to what he called undifferentiated consciousness and the concretion of personal experience. But for Ginsberg, Buddhist psychology ultimately accrued different meanings than it had for Kerouac. Ginsberg’s apocalyptic incantations, a deliberate blasphemy of American liberal values, were couched in a rhetoric of mysticism that envisioned Asia as politically innocent and spiritually superior to the bleak U.S.A. (“Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb,” he exclaims in the 1956 poem “America.”) Writing to Kerouac from Paris in 1957, he comments: “Now the bitter American reality encounters the century to come.” But beyond what critics called his “sentimentality, bathos, Buddha and hollow talk of eternity” lay Ginsberg’s profound interest in the relationship of yogic breathing, or prānāyāma, mantra chanting, and the physiological effect of spoken words. He sought a new poetic measure that corresponded more closely to the body’s breath than to the artifice of iambics and was structured on the repetition of certain rhythms or sounds. In this, Ginsberg likened his poetry to the meditative tool of mantra recitation popular in Vajrayāna Buddhism, a Tibetan form of devotional Buddhism that would become central to his life. Mantras are power-laden Sanskrit syllables or series of syllables whose sound, according to Ginsberg, correlates to “physiological body yoga.” The recitation of mantras, he claimed,

physiologically in the body … is … the key to suddenly wakening up … if you have a prosody built on that, it’s like having the basic patterns of physiological reactions built into the language, into the alphabet…. In the Moloch section of Howl, or parts of
Kaddish … the rhythmic units that I’d written down were basically breathing exercise forms which if anybody else repeated would catalyze in them the same pranic breathing physiological spasm that I was going through and would presumably catalyze in them the same affects or emotions.64

For the Beats, Buddhist meditation techniques were an extension or elaboration of their interest in altered states of consciousness. Criminal danger and excesses of alcohol, speed, yagé, and heroin were ways to decondition themselves from normalcy, complacency, and quietism. In 1960, Ginsberg met Timothy Leary, who was at Harvard University conducting experiments with psilocybin to study what he called existential transactional behavioral change. Leary’s equation of the consciousness-expanding effects of hallucinogens with Hindu and Tantric yogic states of meditation was key to his new psychology of mind. This genealogy dated to Aldous Huxley’s influential 1954 Doors of Perception, which describes the author’s awakening experiences on mescaline in terms of Hindu and Tantric mysticism. Ginsberg joined Leary in advocating psychedelic drugs, including LSD, for their potential to aid attainment of transcendental states of mind. Ginsberg describes his first LSD experience as seeing “a vision of that part of my consciousness which seemed to be permanent and transcendent and identical with the origin of the universe—a sort of identity common to everything—but a clear and coherent sight of it. Rather beautiful visual images also, of Hindu-type Gods dancing on themselves. This drug seems to automatically produces mystical experience.”65 Ginsberg could have been describing Harry Smith’s experimental collage Film Number 11: Mirror Animations (ca. 1957, plate 118). Smith’s animated films use overt magical symbolism and drug-induced hallucinatory visions; of Film Number 11 he commented that it was an “exposition of Buddhism.”66 The film’s sequences of dissolving images opens with snow crystals falling through the frame, which then become an abstract molecular cluster, a Cabalistic tree of life, a skeleton and a receding theater in an infinite field of depth. An Indian dancer emerges, disappears, and reemerges, floating away on a cerebrum in a final frame.

These ideas culminated in the 1964 publication of The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which Leary coauthored with Richard Alpert, who later became the popular Hindu teacher Ram Dass. The Psychedelic Experience uses the Bardo Thödol, the classic Tibetan Buddhist text of death and transmigration, “to teach the person to direct and control awareness in such a way as to reach that level of understanding variously called liberation, illumination, or enlightenment.” The interpretation of mind-altering drugs as a variant of Eastern mystical experience is evident in the book’s opening lines:

A psychedelic experience is a journey to new realms of consciousness. The scope and content of the experience is limitless, but its characteristic features are the transcendence of verbal concepts, of space-time dimensions, and of the ego or identity. Such experiences of enlarged consciousness can occur in a variety of ways: sensory deprivation, yoga exercises, disciplined meditation, religious or aesthetic ecstasies, or spontaneously.65

Several of the poets sketched in The Dharma Bums pursued formal Buddhist training through the late 1950s and 1960s. Snyder went to Japan to undertake formal Rinzai Zen monastic training, first at the temple Shōkokuji and later at Daitokuji in Kyoto from 1956 to 1968. The rise of the
San Francisco Zen Center, established by the Sōtō Zen teacher Suzuki Shunryū in 1962, became as much a cultural center as a spiritual training center. Whalen (Warren Coughlin in Kerouac’s novel) became its resident poet and head priest of its affiliate, the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Ginsberg went on an extended trip to India and Japan from 1962 to 1963, where he posed as a sadhu or Indian holy man on the shores of the Japan Sea (Sea of Japan, plate 110). In 1970, he became a follower of Chögyam Trungpa, a Sino-Tibetan teacher of the Kagyû as well as Nyingma sects of Tibetan Buddhism who was gaining popularity in America for his Wild Wisdom teachings. Ginsberg worked closely with Trungpa to develop the literary program at the Naropa Institute and devoted several months each year to teaching by Trungpa’s side.

The Beats’ legacy is their open equation of art with spiritual euphoria. John Clellan Holmes, in his widely read 1958 Esquire article on the Beats, recorded that “it was Kerouac’s insistence that they were on a quest, and that the specific object of their quest was spiritual.” Their literary style and lifestyle were one and the same, shifting creativity from an act of conscious construction to an act of living consciously. As with the Cagean neo-avant-garde, the imagination and interpretation of Asian mystical experience catalyzed this new mode of subjectivity. Holmes writes, “And if other generations have lamented the fact that theirs was ‘the worst of all possible worlds,’ young people today seem to know that it is the only one that they will ever have, and that it is how a man lives, not why, that makes all the difference.”

**Conceptual Art in the Bay Area**

Watts was a central figure in transmitting Asian thought to the community of Bay Area artists. He was a founding teacher of the American Academy of Asian Studies, which opened in San Francisco in 1951. Backed by Louis Gainsborough, a businessman with interests in Asian, Islamic, and Sufi philosophies, the Academy offered classes in Asian languages, histories, politics, and religion as a counterpoint to the more formal Oriental departments in American universities. Watts’s ambition in the Bay Area was nothing less than “the practical transformation of human consciousness.” His approach was eclectic: His lectures on Buddhism and Taoism were “mixed-up” with “interests in quantum theory, psychoanalysis, Gestalt psychology, semantics, and aesthetics, Eckhart, Goethe, [Alfred North] Whitehead, Jung, or Jiddu Krishnamurti.” Using the Academy as a base and through his writings, lectures, KPFA weekly radio talk shows, and charismatic Orientalist persona—he lectured in formal kimono, kneeling on a cushion before eager audiences—Watts emerged as a force in shaping the postwar Bay Area as a center of alternative culture. His interpretation of Asian philosophy and cultures embodied a critique of Western rational thought and materialism. By the early 1960s, San Francisco was generating what Watts called “a huge tide of spiritual energy in the form of poetry, music, philosophy, painting, religion, communications techniques in radio, television, and cinema, dancing, theater and general life-style.” Despite his tirades, he himself became a public icon of Beat Zen.

Bruce Conner was among the artists who tuned in to Watts’s weekly talk shows. “In developing the way in which you live—a ‘philosophy’ or ‘religion,’” Conner reflected on these experiences, “I think people collect things, they keep adding to themselves—it goes along.” Conner related his awareness of Buddhist concepts to the Asian immigrant population, especially
Japanese and Chinese, in the San Francisco area. “Particularly here on the West Coast, we are immersed in a community of Asians, who import their points of view, their philosophies…. [We] got secondhand information, misunderstandings in general.” Other encounters came through Leary (Conner designed the jacket for *The Psychedelic Experience*) and McClure, with whom he often collaborated. From this unschooled constellation emerged what Conner called “a new Vision” based on his explorations of Christian, Tantric, Gnostic, and Native American traditions. “In my films, collages, and other works, I was bringing back references to discoveries within that realm of the spirit.”

Conner expressed his interest in “spirit” through an investigation of light and the nature of dematerialized form. *Mandala* (1966, plate 116) is one of a series of small black-and-white drawings composed of tiny, felt-tip marks whose accumulation creates an optical field of quietly pulsating energy. He organized these marks in circular images, which represent “a universal form” that implies infinity. Its title *Mandala* and hanging scroll mounting emphasize its status as an object of meditation. The use of light and dark, positive and negative ground also defines his series of *Angel* photograms from the mid-1970s (*Sound of Two Hand Angel*, plate 117). Conner’s body, placed to create a life-size photographic negative, becomes exposed as sheer light, an image of ephemeral being. Conner’s particular conceptualism, which influenced what became known as Bay Area Conceptual art of the 1970s, represents a new affinity to Buddhism culled from a syncretic, contemporary spiritualism that revolves around imagery of ephemeral experience. “A mystery is something that has value to me,” Conner remarked. “Many times if something is explained, resolved, the next step is to go to the next layer of experience, like an onion—peel it off and see what’s underneath, go on and on until finally it disappears.”

Marioni was drawn to San Francisco’s “laid-back, meditative air,” traditionally attributed to its “Asian influence.” The post-Beat atmosphere gave rise to such experiments in art as spontaneous action grounded in the tiny sublimities of everyday life. The presence of such towering poets as McClure, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, Rexroth, and Whalen, all of whom were learned in Buddhism and Asian literary traditions, inspired an artistic culture attuned to the metaphysics of acute natural observation. The art communities around the Richmond Art Center (where Marioni was a curator from 1968 to 1971) and the University of California at Davis and at Berkeley, were receptive to Cage’s teachings on chance operations and composition as process. By the late 1960s, Asian rhetoric infused the performative, environmental, and ephemeral art that characterizes the situation-based work of Terry Fox, David Ireland, Paul Kos, Marioni, and Jim Melchert, among other Bay Area Conceptual artists. Remote from the aggressive New York art market, the Bay Area artists used humor to further subvert their perceived long shot at commercial success. Marioni’s *One Second Sculpture* (1969, fig. 67) reveals the operation of these ideas. The work consists of an action—Marioni threw a metal tape measure into the air—and the simple acknowledgment of its result—the fallen, uncoiled line as sculpture. Thomas McEvilley analyzes this work as “negating craft by preserving the art material as raw matter, negating intention by invoking intervention of chance, and negating ego by unquestioningly accepting the result.” The notion of art as an open field of mental and sensory awareness, contained in the situations of everyday life, found expression in Marioni’s first “social” work, *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*. This ongoing situational work was initiated at the Oakland Museum in 1970 when Marioni convened a beer-drinking party in the exhibition space and left the litter of the event in place. He continued to
host weekly beer gatherings for the arts community through most of the 1970s; his credo was to “make art that’s as close to real life without its being real life.” In *An Aid to Communication* (1979, plate 111), the shelves of empty beer bottles comprise a record of the deconditioning effects of free alcohol on these quotidian, conversational events.

In 1970, Marioni founded the Museum of Conceptual Art in a second-floor office on Third Street, south of Market Street, in San Francisco. Conceived as an alternative museum for actions and situational art, its opening exhibition was titled *Sound Sculpture As*. Recognized as the first exhibition anywhere devoted to sound art, it featured Kos’s installation *Sound of Ice Melting* (1970, plate 113) – eight microphones hooked up to amplifiers and speakers recording the sound of twenty-five pound blocks of ice melting in real time. Kos’s interest in “finding the visceral quality of materials, finding their edges” defines the particular ontology of Bay Area Conceptual art as rooted in the poetics of plain reality. Kos’s friendship with poet and haiku translator Robert Haas encouraged his study of Zen poetry, which taught that such actualities “of the moment seized on and rendered purely” offer an “irreducible mysteriousness of the images themselves.”

David Ireland’s creative philosophy also acknowledges the inherent perfection of things “as they are.” Like others in the Bay Area, he felt part of “a natural sangha” or Buddhist community by virtue of the popular influences of Zen and Tantric culture endemic to the social geography of northern California. This increasingly pervasive attitude became coupled with a politics of antimaterialism. The zeitgeist conflated the embrace of Buddhism with a wholesale critique of American corporate liberalism, mass commodity culture, and its “imperialism” in the Pacific and Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War years. Ireland appropriated Zen’s cultivated amateurism and poverty of materials to “strip away the ranking system” and “uncover” the natural conditions of art that “occur in the process of life itself.” This attitude culminated in his project to turn his Victorian House at 500 Capp Street into a site of aesthetic practice. *Broom Collection with Boom* (1978–88, plate 115) is made from old brooms found scattered throughout the house, and his collection of newspaper rubber bands accompanied by a sound recording of that daily act (fig. 69) are assembled from the humblest materials “like a prayer or … a religious object that in itself doesn’t contain your salvation or your enlightenment; it only reminds you of your obligation to the philosophy … of trying to see what is … as a Zen master would have it.”

The confluence of Cage Zen, Beat Zen, and the Bay Area’s psychically charged conceptualism found an unlikely apotheosis in Andy Warhol’s first long-duration film, *Sleep* (1963, plate 119). It stars the young Beat poet and Tantric Buddhist practitioner John Giorno (who was Warhol’s love interest at the time). Ostensibly, the film documents Giorno in real time, as a single shot lying naked and asleep for six hours. In fact, the film is comprised of twenty-two separate close-ups of Giorno’s body that Warhol printed and then spliced together into multiple, variously repeated sequences. The initial image, which appears nearly static on screen for twenty minutes, actually consists of six repeated one-hundred-foot rolls of film. Warhol’s purposeful if crude technology of repetition—the reenactment or replay of a single unit of sound and image—was perhaps inspired by Cage’s 1963 concert of Erik Satie’s *Vexations*, consisting of 840 repetitions of a single eighty-second piano phrase. For Cage, the experience of Satie’s *Vexations*—together with his appreciation of Berkeley-trained Young’s compositions of a single repeated sound that were all the rage in the downtown New York music scene—revealed how durational repetition
can induce awareness of subtle and minute variations in a structure of apparent sameness. “The effect of this going on and on was quite extraordinary,” Cage remarked, adding that after the Satie performance, “the world seemed to have changed.” Perhaps influenced by Giorno’s involvement with Ginsberg’s psychedelic Tantricism, Warhol’s *Sleep* also compelled an altered state of consciousness in the viewer through an intense and prolonged repetition of sameness—literally the contemplation of a man breathing. Warhol explained, “If I’m going to sit and watch the same thing I saw the night before, I don’t want it to be essentially the same—I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.” The pervasive Buddhist gestalt offers a new layer of meaning for Warhol’s art in the counterculture era. As Giorno recently reflected, “Andy in a sense was a Buddhist and he understood intuitively, at least in the years I knew him in the 1960s, the nature of emptiness. He just came from it.”

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68. Tom Marioni performing *Studio Kyoto*, Ohara Shrine, Kyoto, 1982. Documentary photograph

1 The essay was originally published in a special issue on Zen in *Chicago Review* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1958) and revised and expanded by City Lights Books in 1959. Aside from Watts, the contributors are Jack Kerouac, Akihisa Kondō, Harold E. McCarthy, Senzaki Nyogen, Ruth Fuller Sasaki, Hisanmatsu Shin’ichi, Gary Snyder, D. T. Suzuki, Philip Whalen, and Paul Wienpahl. Unless otherwise noted, the following citations are drawn from Alan Watts “Cage Zen, Beat Zen, Zen,” *This Is It and Other Essays on Zen and Spiritual Experience* (1960, reprint Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 77–111. The following quotations are from the Vintage Books edition.


3 *The Third Mind* artists and poets who lectured or held teaching positions at Naropa include John Cage, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, John Giorno, Michael McClure, Meredith Monk, and Harry Smith. Naropa Institute became Naropa University in 1999.


9 Although Cage dates his attendance of Suzuki’s lectures as 1945–47 or 1949–50, Suzuki only arrived in New York in summer 1950; gave his first lecture at Columbia in March 1951; and began his official teaching there in spring 1952. See Patterson, “Cage and Asia: history and sources,” p. 53.


Patterson, “Cage and Asia,” p. 55.


Nam June Paik, “To the ‘Symphony for 20 Rooms,’” An Anthology, ed. La Monte Young (New York: La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low, 1963), n.p.


Maciunas, “Manifesto” (1963), In the Spirit of Fluxus, p. 25.


Allan Kaprow, Assemblage, Environments & Happenings (New York: Abrams, 1966), p. 192. Italics are Kaprow’s. The following quotations are drawn from this text. He published documentary photographs of both outdoor and stage “theater art” by nine Gutai artists, including Saburō Murakami, Kazuo Shiraga, and Atsuko Tanaka that date from 1955 to 1962.


Ibid., n.p.


Joseph, Random Order, p. 162.


Cage, “Jasper Johns: Stories and Ideas” (1964), A Year from Monday, pp. 73–84. The following quotations are from this text.


Johns (1964), quoted in ibid.


Rose, “Jasper Johns: The ‘Tantric Details,’” p. 70. The following quotations are from this text.


Kerouac, “God’s Wisdom” (1957), typescript, Kerouac Archive, New York Public Library, subseries 2.12; scrolls.


Kerouac, cited in Gerwitz, Beatific Soul, p. 150. The quote is taken from an October 1942 notebook in the NYPL Kerouac Archive, box 6, folder 67.

Gerwitz, Beatific Soul, p. 151.


Kerouac, The Dharma Bums, p. 138. He is paraphrasing the famous lines of the Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra, also known as the Heart Sūtra, one of the foundational texts of Mahayana Buddhism.


Ibid.


Ibid., pp. 35–37.


Ibid., p. 17 (accessed July 1, 2008).

Bruce Conner, interview with the author, September 13, 2006, San Francisco. Hereafter Conner/Munroe. The following quotations are from this interview.


Conner/Munroe.

Ibid.

Tom Marioni, interview with the author, October 31, 2007, San Francisco.


Paul Kos, interview with the author, September 13, 2006, San Francisco.


David Ireland, interview with the author, November 1, 2007, San Francisco.


Cage, quoted in ibid., p. 25.

Warhol, quoted in ibid., p. 32.