

The garden of Ryōanji

*the silence
and taps the stones
the cry of a cicada*¹

The title *Ryoanji* of John Cage's piece refers to the garden of the Ryōanji monastery in Kyōto. It is a famous Zen garden, considered one of the most important; a mysterious, fascinating place that has attracted many artists and still receives a large audience.

Cage was challenged and inspired by this garden. He drew, and wrote the piece *Ryoanji*. The drawings have been exhibited several times, in particular at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

The Ryōanji garden is a garden built towards the end of the 15th century or the beginning of the 16th century. It is a dry garden, that is, it is only made of stone and sand, without any vegetation, without flowers, without water, about 200 m², rectangular, flat. It is also called a “garden of nothingness”. On a surface of raked white sand, fifteen grayish stones of various sizes are distributed in five groups of two, three or five, according to an aesthetic balance often considered admirable, and

¹ Poem of Bashō (1644–1694).

built according to precise and symbolic arithmetic rules. The calculation of this distribution makes it impossible for the gaze to reach all fifteen stones, whatever the point of view, except, it is said, in a very rare state of mystical trance.

The atmosphere of this garden, which combines great sobriety, a rejection of all figurative elements, a large place for emptiness, and a severe rhythm, lends itself by its mystery to pause, meditation and silence. It is therefore a pure space, stripped to the extreme, and whose strong symbolic resonances can be perceived. In many cultures, and particularly in ancient Shintoism, the gods manifest themselves in certain places and natural elements, including mountains and rocks. Shintoism is a worship of the forms and forces of nature and thus a powerful mystical ecology. The Ryōanji garden is an expression of this. The laid stones of a Zen garden must not be altered from their original condition, respected in their state, untouched, true.

Of this Ryōanji construction of stone and gravel, many interpretations have been proposed. The most usual one is that of a mountain/water ensemble, the stones referring to the mountain, the water being represented by the raked sand - the sinogram “landscape”, stated in “shanshui” means mountain/water. Beyond all inventive or transcendent interpretations the Ryōanji remains a powerful work of art, striated spaces and erect volumes, silent emptiness, which combines gravity, mystery, compactness, density depth and enigma.

It is said that:

“the Zen monks built their garden as presenting them with an image of the universe in its most condensed form, in which they could discern their own face”².



² François Berthier, *Le Jardin du Ryōanji, lire le zen dans les pierres*. 1989, 1997, Adam Biro, Paris.

Ryoanji

John Cage's work is distinguished by its graphic expression; this emphasis on graphics has also made him famous.

In the last decade of his life, he produced a number of works. In 1982, he designed a cover for the French translation of his *Book of Mushrooms*, the starting point for a series of drawings and plays entitled *Ryoanji*:

“Paper was prepared with two rectangular systems. I used two sheets and created a “garden” of sounds, partly tracing the contours of the stones I had used for the drawings. I wrote a music of glissandi, for which, with the help of chance operations, several lines were drawn in the same vertical space. I made a distinction between sound systems, I retained a maximum of four. For the accompaniment, I focused on the raked sand: a percussion part consisting of a single complex sound, an unspecified sound played in unison”.³

Cage thus wrote solos for oboe, flute, voice, double bass, and trombone. Each solo has eight “gardens” (except for the solo for voice, which has nine), “gardens” whose duration of execution is proportional (to the horizontal length of the graphism).

³ John Cage, “*Ryoanji*: Solos for Oboe, Flute, Contrabass, Voice, Trombone with Percussion or Orchestral Obbligato (1983–85)”. *PAJ, A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Septembre 2009. pp. 57–64.