

# The Edible Drawings of John Cage

Bernie Toale



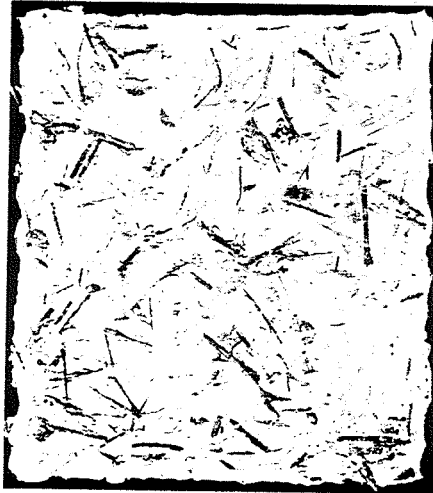
John Cage. Photo by Marc Peloquin

In the Spring of 1989, John Cage produced a suite of paperworks, called *Edible Drawings*, at Rugg Road Paper & Prints in Boston, Massachusetts. This was the first of three suites of drawings he produced with the staff over a three year period. This first set was based on Cage's macrobiotic diet and his theoretical interest in producing paper that could be recycled as food. These drawings were all made by the process of papermaking. With the assistance of plant specialist and papermaker Beverly Plummer, from Burnsville, North Carolina, edible plants suitable for papermaking were collected from local health food stores. Hijiki seaweed, bitter melon, ginger root, and other plants were divided into two categories, structural and decorative. These foods were then grouped into recipes by using the *I Ching* (the Chinese book of changes) as the arbiter of gastronomy. Twelve recipes produced two suites of brittle, green, seed-filled papers. Some were so fragile that they crumbled at the first touch.

In August of 1990, Cage and the Rugg Road staff went to Plummer's studio in North Carolina to produce a second suite, *Wild Edible Drawings*, from plants collected from the fields and forests of that area. After spending several days climbing over the hills collecting vines, grasses, and mushrooms, the *I Ching* once again decided the recipes. This time, milkweed, kudzu, and Joe Pye weed were among the twenty-seven plants used to make twelve different papers, in an edition of six. The papers in this collection represent a six day period of fresh air and wandering.



Medicine Drawing, John Cage. Each drawing 12" x 14", 1992. Edition of five. Photo by Rugg Road.



Medicine Drawing, individual sheets, each is 12" x 14". Photo by Rugg Road.

In the Fall of 1991, Cage once again set out to make drawings from the plants in his life. This time they would be the plants mixed for the Chinese herbal remedies that he used. These medicinal plants were collected in New York City from the herbalist that Cage frequented in China Town. More dramatic in texture than the others, these papers contain large chunks of bark and cross sections of branches and twigs, and are richly colored from ground nuts and seeds. This last suite of twelve papers was produced once again in Boston.

John Cage died in New York City in August, 1992, after a full day of drawing, in preparation for a number of upcoming exhibitions around the world. He will be greatly missed.