



# Nothing and Everything - The Influence of Buddhism on the American Avant Garde: 1942 - 1962

By Ellen Pearlman

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In America in the late 1950s and early 60s, the world—and life itself—became a legitimate artist's tool, aligning with Zen Buddhism's emphasis on “enlightenment at any moment” and living in the now. Simultaneously and independently, parallel movements were occurring in Japan, as artists there, too, strove to break down artistic boundaries.

*Nothing and Everything* brings these heady times into focus. Author Ellen Pearlman meticulously traces the spread of Buddhist ideas into the art world through the classes of legendary scholar D. T. Suzuki as well as those of his most famous student, composer and teacher John Cage, from whose teachings sprouted the art movement Fluxus and the “happenings” of the 1960s. Pearlman details the interaction of these American artists with the Japanese Hi Red Center and the multi-installation group Gutai. Back in New York, abstract-expressionist artists founded The Club, which held lectures on Zen and featured Japan's first abstract painter, Saburo Hasegawa. And in the literary world, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were using Buddhism in their search for new forms and visions of their own. These multiple journeys led to startling breakthroughs in artistic and literary style—and influenced an entire generation. Filled with rare photographs and groundbreaking primary source material, *Nothing and Everything* is the definitive history of this pivotal time for the American arts.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"In this eminently readable treatise, Pearlman, a founder of the *Brooklyn Rail* and early contributor to *Tricycle magazine*, explores Zen Buddhism's influence on the post-WWII American avant-garde, focusing on its practitioners, students, and resultant artistic movements. Beginning with the public classes of noted Japanese Zen scholar D.T. Suzuki, Buddhism was disseminated throughout the arts in America by Suzuki's famed pupil and composer, John Cage, as well as through the work of the Abstract Expressionists, the Beats (e.g., Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac), and Fluxus artists. Pearlman's study also touches on how Eastern cultures viewed the transplantation of their religious beliefs into the American arts, especially in the wake of the atomic bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima—the author notes that while America's artistic elite were embracing Zen Buddhism, artists in Japan were trying to move away from the school of thought, whose institutions were viewed as militaristic and corrupt. Given the book's brevity, Pearlman's survey is remarkably extensive." —*Publishers Weekly*

"This fantastic book deftly illustrates and uncovers the direct Buddhist influence on America's twentieth-century avant-garde. A fascinating series of truly American stories brought to life with amusing and colorful anecdotes, and a true pleasure to read." —Peter Hale, director, Allen Ginsberg Estate

"Ellen Pearlman's book is meticulously researched and an exciting read; Kerouac would be delighted." —John Sampas, executor, the estate of Jack Kerouac

The American avant garde's encounter with Buddhism is the subject of Ellen Pearlman's episodic narrative, *Nothing and Everything* (North Atlantic Books 2012). Though Pearlman aims to discuss the influence of various Buddhist traditions on the post-World War II art scene in New York City during the years 1942–1962, her focus is primarily on Zen. Much of the book profiles the career of the Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki, recounting his early life in Japan, his experience teaching at Columbia University, and his influence on artists, including the experimental composer John Cage. One memorable scene in Pearlman's recounting of East–West encounters took place on a summer day in 1957, when the writer Jack Kerouac and his friends Peter Orlovsky and Allen Ginsberg visited D. T. Suzuki in his Upper West Side apartment. Suzuki served green tea while they talked nonsensically and composed haiku. As the Beat poets departed, the Zen scholar yelled to them, "Remember the tea!" to which Kerouac replied, "Key?" —*Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*

"Zen thinking permeates Western arts: the mid-century pivot to Eastern influence is a truism of previous generations, but curiously absent from contemporary mastications of history. Ellen Pearlman gets it all right: *Nothing and Everything* is the perfectly balanced lesson—art, and change, and friendship." —John Reed, novelist, book editor of *The Brooklyn Rail*

"Pearlman's book works to trace the rippling, whirling influences of Buddhism on some of the most important American artists of the twentieth century. She describes groundbreaking performances, the cross-pollination of the European Dadaists, and the particular Buddhist principles that resonated most deeply with American artists. Artists, avant-garde aficionados, and those interested in the influence of Eastern thought on the West will be thankful to Pearlman for tracking and cataloguing the leaps that made the splashes that cocreated avant-garde." —*ForeWord Reviews*

“The influence of Buddhist philosophy and aesthetics on the American avant-garde is one of the great untold stories of modern art. Ellen Pearlman helps illuminate the way by charting relationships which sparked some of the most important exchanges in American art and thought.” —Alexandra Munroe, author of *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860–1989*

“*Nothing and Everything* brings insight and fact to an important Buddhist teacher whose life and work profoundly influenced the leading members of the avant-garde arts community. Pearlman’s adept writing is a pleasure to read as well as informative about matters that too often are glossed over in accounts of the work of John Cage and those whose work has surrounded him and moved on. A solid reference.” —Pauline Oliveros, author of *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice*

“Ellen Pearlman has done the heroic work of bringing the extraordinarily powerful and radical ‘conjunct’ between Buddhism and the American avant-garde into intelligent scrutiny and focus. It’s a tale that needs telling, one that educates as it elucidates. This is the mysterious koan of any time: why the experience of mortality and impermanence inspires such lucid contrapuntal energy and passion for artistic endeavor. We are here to disappear. Let art guide the way and stay awhile.” —Anne Waldman, poet; co-founder and professor, The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, Naropa University

“The avant-garde is not ahead of its time; it is *in* it. Ellen Pearlman’s book about the ripple effect Buddhism had in American contemporary art is a time capsule filled with treasures.” —Michael Goldberg, director of the D. T. Suzuki Documentary Project

“Ellen Pearlman reveals an amazing truth about the American avant-garde: that much of its freshness comes from ancient Zen philosophy and meditation! Nowhere else is this important story told so clearly.” —David Rothenberg, author of *Survival of the Beautiful* and *Blue Cliff Record: Zen Echoes*

“When D. T. Suzuki began to teach ‘Buddhist Philosophy 101’ at Columbia University in 1952, his class was like honey to bears among New York artists and poets, who had never met an authentic Zen Buddhist. Unknowingly, Suzuki was an important influence on the development of abstract expressionism and Beat-generation poetry. *Nothing and Everything* tells the story of how the seed of Zen was planted in rich, creative American soil. —Denise Lassaw, daughter of sculptor Ibram Lassaw

“Like fresh footprints after a newly fallen snow, Zen and Buddhism left mindful and distinct imprints upon the post-World War II avant-garde cultural scene in New York City. *Nothing and Everything* leads the reader through an odyssey of social and cultural upheavals in this post-war time and the artistic responses that burst into creative expression in art, music, dance, literature, and media. Through extensive research and interview, Ellen Pearlman explores the influence of Buddhism upon the creative milieu and how it altered the course of imaginative interpretations in the ‘new reality’ of mental awakenings. An insightful read and an invitation for continued scholarship where the arts and Buddhist philosophy interweave.” —Cathy Ziengs, Buddhist Door International

“Ellen Pearlman vividly captures the feeling of spontaneity and freedom with which the American avant-garde sought *mu* and experienced suchness.” —Laura Hoffmann, *Artforum* magazine

“If you’re interested in exploring the syncretism of modern Western culture and ancient Asian philosophy, *Nothing and Everything* will give you a fine kickstart.” —LitKicks

“*Nothing and Everything* looks at the strong influence Buddhist traditions and ideals have had on the art style of avant garde—looking at particular artists of the period, their Buddhist influences and how it manifested in

their work. ... *Nothing and Everything* is a strong addition to art history and Buddhist study collections.”  
—*Midwest Book Review*

#### About the Author

ELLEN PEARLMAN is one of the founders of *The Brooklyn Rail* and is affiliated with nine Utne Independent Press Awards. An early contributor to *Tricycle* magazine, she has also written for *Time Out Beijing*, *Yishu Magazine of Contemporary Asian Art*, *Art Asia Pacific*, and other publications. She is a member of the International Association of Art Critics and is listed in *Who's Who in America*. Pearlman has taught at Columbia University, Parsons School of Design, and the New School University. She has been a four-time Vermont Studio Center Special President's Fellow and has been a resident at the Great River Arts Colony in Patzcuaro, Mexico; the Repino Arts Colony in St. Petersburg, Russia; the ACO Artist Residency in Hong Kong and the Red Gate Artist Colony in Beijing, China. She was part of the government-sponsored Chinese Photographers Association trip to Guangxi Zhang Autonomous Region and has worked on collaborate projects with Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Pearlman is the Artistic Adviser of Yuanfen Gallery—the first gallery of new media in Beijing—and was on the Art Panel Review Board for SIGGRAPH ASIA in Yokohama, Japan.

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