

## Octet '61 for Jasper Johns

A prolific composer, pianist, and cellist, Cornelius Cardew (1936-1981) was a member of the free improvisation group AMM, and founded the experimental ensemble Scratch Orchestra. Over the course of his musical life he premiered many important works by such composers as Stockhausen, Cage, Tudor, Feldman, Young, Wolff, and many others. Cardew was also a founding member of the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain, and spent much of the later part of his career devoted to this political cause. Cardew died on 13th December 1981, the victim of a hit-and-run car accident near his London home in Leytonstone. The driver was never found.

A pre-cursor to his seminal *Treatise* (1963-67), *Octet '61 for Jasper Johns* (1961) is written for any instrument or combination of instruments. The score consists of sixty-one signs: sixty appear in sequence on one page, and one may be used "anywhere and as often as desired." Most of the signs are in the form of ambiguous graphic notations that are open to an infinite number of interpretations. Cardew specifies that the performer should write out an actual part in standard notation, using the signs as a point of departure. The performance notes provide further insight into the composer's intentions:

"The signs should be allowed to suggest something concrete: a sound, a technique. The traditional connotations of signs or parts of signs should provide sufficient context for a concrete interpretation of at least one sign by almost any musician. This done, his utterance of the one sign should provide sufficient context for the comprehension of neighboring signs. And so on...The piece is an opportunity for an interpreter. It demands no very sophisticated formal approach (the performer does not have to be a composer, he merely has to discover and use that modicum of creativity that is available to all)...The stimulation of the interpreter is a facet of composition that has been disastrously neglected. Disastrously under-stimulated performances of contemporary music are the result (for here, past glories cannot act as stimuli). When performed, the piece may be judged as a musical experience (sounds brought together by human agency) and thrown down the drain. No one is to blame. My reputation is free to suffer. This piece is not gilt edged".