

Excerpt From

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Silencing and Alternative Silences

On June 6, 1986, the composer John Cage took part in a performance with bandleader and Afrofuturist trailblazer Sun Ra. Like the Kirk film, the event was structured not as a collaboration but as a juxtaposition. Although this time the two artists did share the stage, the concert consisted almost entirely of them trading off segments. Ra's portions featured him playing unaccompanied keyboard improvisations on his Yamaha DX7, or reading poetry, while Cage's consisted of excerpts from his unaccompanied vocal piece "Empty Words IV." The two artists had never met until two days before the concert, when they convened at Cage's loft for a New York Times photo shoot to promote the event. Ra did vaguely recall, however, that he had previously read portions of Cage's book *Silence*. Like Fontaine, the organizers of the event—record producers Rick Russo and Bronwyn Rucker—again pitched the idea of the two artists creating a piece together. Cage pushed back once again, as Russo recalled: "After the photo shoot, I talked to them about doing a piece together. Cage was very concerned that it would appear to be a publicity stunt. Sun Ra sort of reluctantly agreed, though Sun Ra seemed to be more open to doing a planned piece together." In a quote from the New York Times preview of the event, Cage stresses the fact that the performance will not be a jointly conceived piece: "'I don't know what I'm going to do yet,' said Mr. Cage. As for working with Mr. Ra, he added, 'It's not a collaboration, it's a meeting, and if there is a collaboration it will develop there.'" The article contains no quotes from Ra. It's somewhat unclear what Cage might have meant by "publicity stunt" in this context. After all, the two had just completed a specially arranged newspaper photo shoot, so attracting publicity was clearly a goal of all parties. Even the venue for the concert—a former penny arcade near the Coney Island Boardwalk called "Sideshow By The Seashore"—seemed geared toward creating a sort of spectacle. Cage doesn't provide any further details on why a more carefully considered collaboration would have been more of a "stunt" than an unplanned meeting. One could read the statement as a distancing device to distinguish his work from jazz improvisation—a "defensive maneuver against the vitality of those popular forms" in the sense suggested by Born and Hesmondhalgh. By avoiding the language of collaboration, Cage could claim that this "meeting" somehow didn't count as part of his true "composerly" output but was merely a casual get-together and sharing of ideas. In the film footage that survives of the concert, the separation between the two artists is palpable. Though the original album liner notes depict a grand entrance by the pair, the footage shows the two walking out somewhat haphazardly, punctuated by an awkward handshake initiated by Ra. The two occupy different areas of the stage, separated both spatially and visually by a long table. To the audience's left, Ra sits with his keyboard, in full cosmic regalia and flanked by several members of his Arkestra. On the right Cage sits alone in a denim work shirt, reading from a set of stray papers strewn upon the table. The two ultimately do end up playing together briefly for a few short minutes near the end of the performance. In Ra biographer John Szwed's account, however, even this moment might not have been fully welcomed on both sides: "Only once, for the briefest of seconds, did they play together, when Sonny added some soft bell tones behind Cage, but then quit, perhaps feeling a draft, sensing that Cage was somewhere else." A recent reissue of the full concert shows the joint piece lasting about five

minutes, with Ra offering minimal accompaniment to Cage's continued performance of "Empty Words." Even this moment has the feeling of a supplement to Cage's piece, rather than a fully fleshed-out collaboration. Though by all accounts Cage was friendly with Ra throughout the process of organizing the concert (at one point he told Ra that "a writer friend had said to him that if he wanted to take another step in music and didn't want to be behind the times he ought to listen to Sun Ra"), there seems to be a consistent desire to maintain a level of distance. Silence also played a role in the way Cage structured his portions of the concert. Much of this silence is embedded in Cage's choice to perform "Empty Words," a composition he had written in 1978. "Empty Words" is a solo vocal piece that contains no recognizable language but instead only individual letters and sounds. In many ways the piece was a somewhat natural selection for Cage to present in a solo setting; it requires only a single microphone and no external performers. Cage performed it on numerous occasions in the years following its completion. The full version is designed as a marathon affair, with part four alone taking approximately two-and-a-half hours. Importantly, the words and stray syllables of the piece are interspersed with long extended silences, often lasting several minutes. Cage described this sparsity of material as designed to create room and opportunities for meditation or for the mind to wander. These long gaps make "Empty Words IV" a particularly notable example of Cage returning to questions of silence within his late oeuvre. For the Coney Island performance, time restrictions meant that the piece had to be pared down extensively. Thus, for each of Cage's turns, he performs a segment of "Empty Words IV" in a sort of binary form: first, a section of the text, then a long interlude of silence (lasting two to three minutes), and then concluding with a second section of the text. On the most recent reissue these interludes are labeled "silent solos," purposefully echoing the structure of a straight-ahead jazz performance (head-solos-head). Ironically, this structure bears little resemblance to what Ra does in the concert, since the keyboardist (like many in the jazz avant-garde) had expanded far beyond only using head-solos-head structures, and he does not employ them at all here. It should be noted that the "silent solo" designation does not exist on the original LP version, and it's unlikely that the description came from Cage himself. Still, in light of Cage's ongoing distaste for the jazz solo as emblematic of ego, this idea of the oxymoronic, perhaps cheeky "silent solo" is an intriguing one to consider. Could this be read as yet another critique of jazz performance practice? A comment along the lines of "Why would one bother playing complex solos rather than simply listening to the sounds around us or letting the mind wander?" Without over-reading the gesture, we might simply observe that such a reading would fall neatly in line with Cage's ongoing critiques of jazz. This extends the possibility of reading the concert alongside Cage's earlier interactions with Jarman and Kirk. In all three instances Cage structures his contributions around some form of silence, framing it as something the jazz musicians would not (or could not) do. At the same time, by appealing to silence, Cage is able to bypass the types of improvisation favored by jazz artists, which he was ill-equipped to engage with regardless. Cage, of course, would have been out of his element in such settings—he's certainly no improviser at the level of Ra, Kirk, or Jarman—and would have been perhaps further disadvantaged by the fact that he (by his own admission) knew next to nothing about his collaborators before their meetings. By falling back upon the notion of silence, Cage recuses himself from actually engaging with either the jazz/Black music tradition writ large or with these artists in particular. And this becomes particularly stark in the Kirk and Ra examples when Cage refuses to collaborate on a joint piece. Silence becomes not a way for Cage to listen to the world around him—that is, listen to these fellow artists, who had read his work and arrived open to collaborate—but to shut it out, instead assuming that he possessed something that the jazz artists did not.