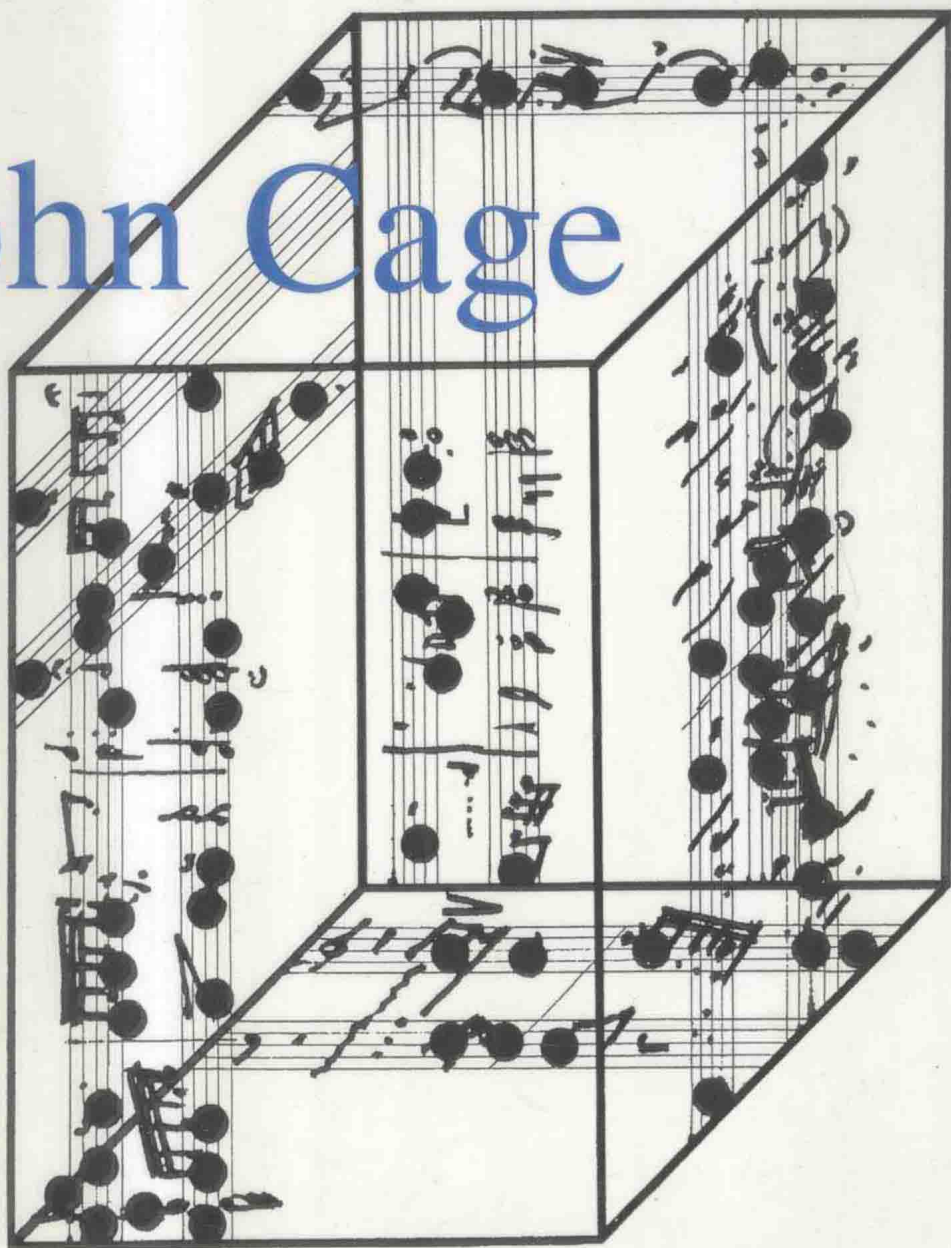


For the Birds

John Cage



FOR THE BIRDS

in conversation with
Daniel Charles

Marion Boyars
Boston : London

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FOR THE BIRDS

*This is the first of an intended collection of
texts published in co-operation with Semiotext(e)
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*This English version was prepared by Richard Gardner
and edited by Tom Gora and John Cage*

Books by John Cage

Silence

A Year from Monday

'M' - Writings '67-'72

Empty Words

'X' - Writings '79-'82

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A NOTE ON THE BOOK'S HISTORY

For the Birds began in 1968 as a series of interviews published in *La Revue d'esthétique* (Vol. XXI, Nos. 2, 3 and 4; April-December, 1968) by its editor, Daniel Charles, and Editions Klincksieck. They were collected into one volume by Editions Belfond in 1976. Semiotext(e) Magazine and Marion Boyars Publishers obtained permission to publish the book in English in 1978, but it was soon discovered that the original taped interviews – in English – had been lost. This necessitated the very Cagian task of retranslating a translation. Needless to say, the result is not at all a record of actual conversation, but rather our¹ performance (or interpretation) of a John Cage score.² A further intermingling of categories that makes John Cage very happy.

For further accounts of John Cage's personal exploits, see the chapter entitled 'John Cage' in Calvin Tomkins' *The Bride and the Bachelors* (New York: Viking Compass, 1965. pp.69-144), and the collection of pieces, including an excellent bibliography, edited by Richard Kostelanetz and entitled *John Cage* (New York: RK Editions, 1974).

Tom Gora

¹Richard Gardner's translation has been edited by me, Tom Gora, and then again by John Cage. Though tempted to add to the use of brackets (see John Cage's introduction), Cage refrained from so doing, wishing to remain faithful to what appeared in French.

²Actually, the score is by Daniel Charles. Their conversations, Cage's letters to him, articles and books Cage sent him were used as material for the composition of something new.

A PREFACE BY DANIEL CHARLES

In 1972, once he had finished rereading the text of the Interviews, a task he considered essential, John Cage prepared a Foreword and Postface. Concerned with clearly expressing to the reader the reasons and circumstances behind these Interviews, he asked in addition that I open the projected book with a preface where I would clarify the pre-suppositions which I had at the time (the very end of 1970) when I interviewed him. The same day, he chose the title of the work. This choice, he told me, was informed merely by the pleasure he got out of a pun on his own name.

The end of 1976: *For the Birds* is at the printers.¹ I have the feeling, just as I did five years ago, that these texts comprise a multiple and unique gloss of Chuang-tze. In any case, the sole aim of my questions was to bring out what, for brevity's sake, I call John Cage's Taoism. A page from Octavio Paz recently reassured me that this plan did not at all escape John and that even the title he suggested points in that direction. Therefore I shall borrow my preface from the author of *The Bow and the Lyre*.

'When Chuang-tze explains that the Tao experience implies a return to a sort of elementary or original frame of mind, where the relative meanings of language are inoperative, he resorts to a play on words that is a poetic riddle. He says that this experience of a return to what we are originally is like "entering a cage of birds without making them sing." *Fan* means "cage" and "return"; *ming*, "song" and "names". The sentence, therefore, equally means "to return to the place where names are superfluous," to silence, to the kingdom of the obvious. To the place where names and things melt into one: to poetry, the kingdom where naming is being.'

My desire was and remains that, despite the imperfections for which I alone am responsible, *For the Birds* may make such a return possible.

Daniel Charles

¹The Belfond French edition, which preceded the English language edition (Translator's note).

AN INTRODUCTION BY JOHN CAGE

The following text, which I wrote as a preface for an earlier English translation by another translator of part of this book (*Semiotext(e)*, Vol. III, no. 1, pp.24-35), is, it seems to me, still relevant.

Pour Les Oiseaux finally appeared in Paris in January 1977, but without its author's name, only mine on the cover! Many years before, at the request of the publisher, Pierre Belfond, Daniel Charles and I engaged in many conversations which were recorded on tape. For one reason or another the project of making a book out of this material was shelved year after year. There was too much material, or not enough that was up-to-date, etc. When I eventually read galleys (not of this version but of an earlier one), I found that I did not always recognize myself in a passage ascribed to me. Some tapes apparently had been damaged or lost or inadvertently erased, so that it had sometimes been necessary for Daniel Charles to compose my responses to his questions. Instead of 'correcting' his work, I suggested the use of two different typefaces for my responses. One would indicate that I could hear myself speaking, the other that I couldn't. (In the present printing, square brackets have been used instead of italics to indicate I couldn't hear myself speaking.) This idea was accepted but still the book was not published. In fact, in order to please the publisher, Charles later made a new version, in some cases an abridgement of the earlier one, in others having new material, 'conversations' written by Charles himself, following new articles or letters or tapes of lectures that I sent to him. I made no changes in the final version. When I was asked to suggest a catchy title, I said: Call it *Pour Les Oiseaux*. Though Pierre Belfond accepted this, he asked me somewhat nervously after the publication of the book whether my title was merely a joke. I said: No. I am for the birds, not for the cages in which people sometimes place them.

I was given the opportunity of going over the typescript of the translation of Daniel Charles' book (Charles' name, I am glad to report, appears with mine on the cover of the Italian translation), and making any changes I wished, so that it would sound like me (which now, of course, it doesn't in any sense at all). After a few labored alterations, I found myself reading all the way through, more entertained than I would have been had I been recognizing myself. And then I went back to the beginning and put the word 'stet': that is, keep it as you have it. The

ideas, so to speak, have changed their clothes but they are healthy. I decided not to do anything to them. Let them live their own lives. They are certain to change in further unpredictable ways whenever someone takes the time to use them.

John Cage

SIXTY ANSWERS TO
THIRTY-THREE QUESTIONS
FROM DANIEL CHARLES