

### CORNELIUS CARDEW AND THE FREEDOM OF LISTENING

#### Centre d'Art Contemporain de Brétigny

Experimental British composer Cornelius Cardew (1936–1981) may not be as renowned as his American and German peers, John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen (Cardew studied with the latter), but a recent rise in textual and visual appraisals of Cardew's life and work seeks to clarify his position in this triumvirate of postwar avant-garde music, and measure his influence on subsequent generations of artists. Cardew's short-lived career is marked by three experimental highlights: his 193-page graphically notated score, *Treatise* (1963–67), inspired by Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922); his seven-part composition *The Great Learning* (1968–71), based on the opening passages of Ezra Pound's translation of Confucius's *Tao Hio*; and his creation of the mixed professional and amateur Scratch Orchestra with Michael Parsons and Howard Skempton in 1969. In the early 1970s, concurrent with the disbanding of the Scratch Orchestra, Cardew repudiated individual and collective musical improvisation in order to put his talents to the less-spontaneous service of Communist politics, first in the Communist Party of England, then in the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain, which he cofounded, before he was killed in a hit-and-run car accident at age 45.

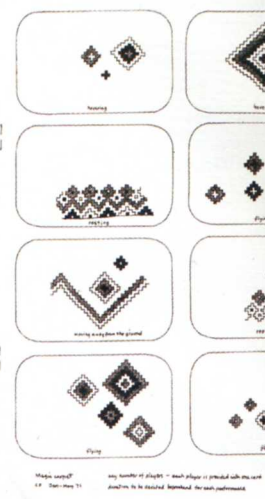
With a life cut short, it's tempting to speculate whether Cardew would have adhered to his political principles as the century progressed. It's also impossible not to wonder how he would react to this concerted focus on the early, avant-garde stages of his musical and political

not reinvent, elements of Cardew's practice (including his foray into the invention of a music for the people).

The exhibition opening saw Michael Parsons's collective performance *Walk* (1969) on the menu, along with an improvised "expanded cinema" screening featuring former Scratch Orchestra member Keith Rowe on electric guitar, and artists Peter Todd and Luke Fowler manning 16 mm projectors threaded with rushes from Fowler's *Pilgrimage from Scattered Points*, 2006. Fowler's film, also permanently looped on a video monitor placed on the floor, is a moving, impressionistic montage of film footage of the Scratch Orchestra on tour in northern England (borrowed largely from Hanne Bönisch's *Journey to the North Pole*, 1971, also shown independently here), with snips of his own Super-8 shots, and interviews with many of the Scratch Orchestra's protagonists. Fowler is a musician himself, and his own investment in this tale of utopian, collective aesthetic aspirations and deceptions is never far from the surface in his sensitive treatment of a subject that still arouses passionate reactions. Videos documenting Cardew-related performances held in France (Nicolas Tilly, *The Great Learning, Paragraph 7*, 2006, and Lore Gablier's *Walk in Fossoy*, 2007) are also available for viewing on monitors.

On the black-painted back wall of the exhibition space, the score for Cardew's *Octet '61 for Jasper Johns*, which states that "each sign is a musical event," inaugurates a mixed-bag patchwork of drawings, photographs, posters, and scores that emphasizes how the development of the Scratch Orchestra's sound was tied to the graphic and visual arts. This processional display terminates in Communist Party posters, whose strident red-and-black type contrasts sharply with the rest of the documentation, and samples of Cardew's sheet music. One song, "The Founding of the Party," ends with the following lyrics: "Away from spontaneity we must turn our hearts and consciously commit ourselves to the revolutionary road." Cardew's trajectory replicates almost to the letter dilemmas faced by the historical avant-gardes between the World Wars, who sought coalitions with organized left party politics and were faced with incomprehension across the aesthetic realm. Despite structurally allying his compositional experimentation to a revolutionizing of collective experience, via improvisation in the graphically notated compositions and the association of musically trained and non-musically trained participants, Cardew, like others before him, cannot believe that a rousing chorus of the "Internationale" would have greater social impact on the masses than his previous research ever could. Whether, as the curators claim, there's any political spark left in the "freedom of listening" as conceived by Cardew and the Scratch Orchestra remains to be proved. At the very least, the exhibition and performances at the CAC Brétigny supplement the oft-told history of artistic-political engagement as a series of aborted attempts and successive failures to marry aesthetic experimentation to an ideological hard line. That this intractable repetition can still appear surprising is one of the most poignant aspects of this show.

—Vivian Rehberg



Carole Finer, *Carpet*, 1971. Paper.

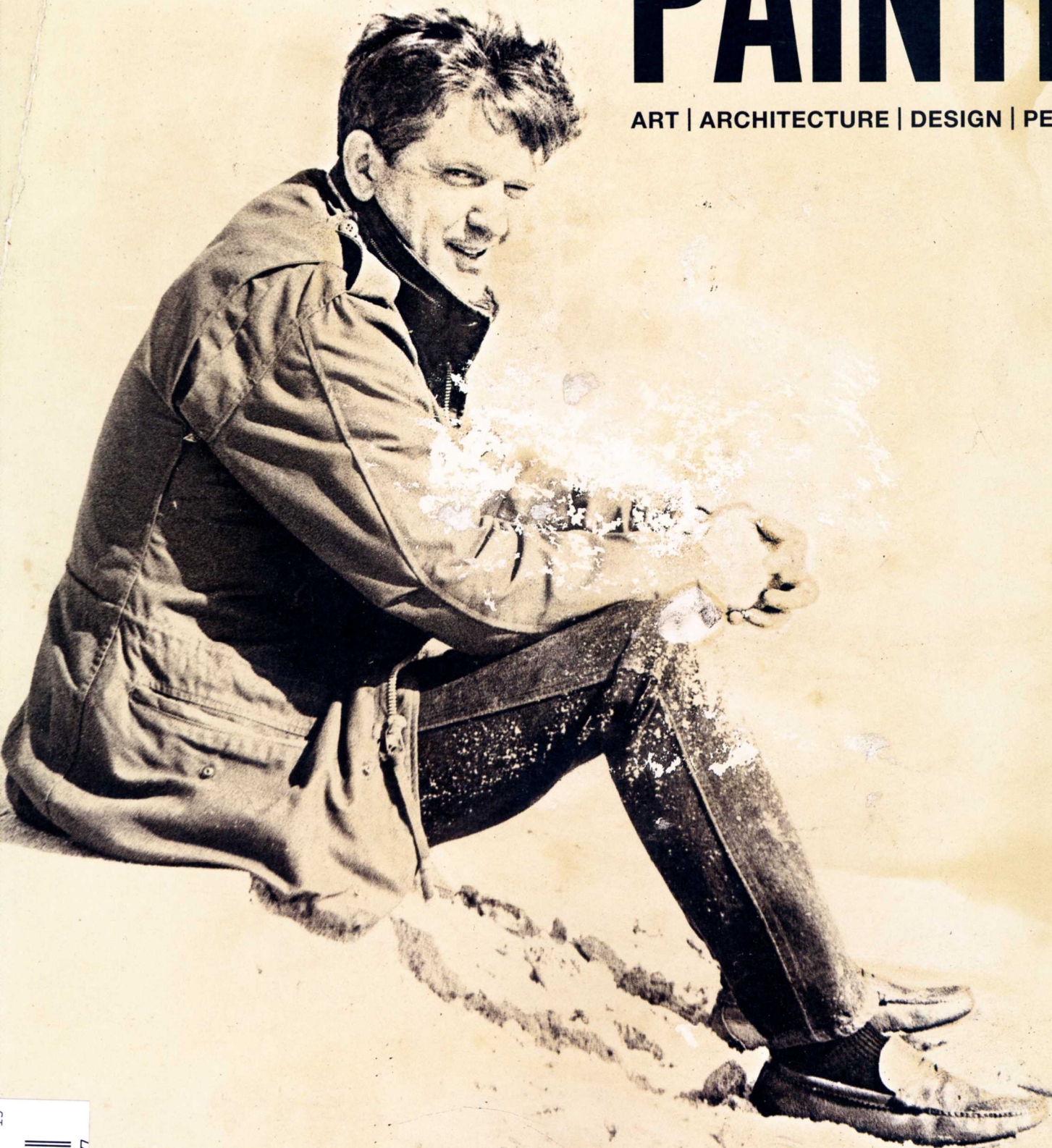
Hanne Bönisch, *Journey to the North Pole*, 1971. Film. Pictured: John performing Hugh Huddell's "Hondini rite"



career. "Cornelius Cardew and the Freedom of Listening," curated by artist, writer, and teacher Dean Inkster and his colleagues from the École des Beaux-Arts in Valence, France, Jean-Jacques Palix and Lore Gablier, holds these questions in productive suspension. Composed mainly of archival materials, including the unfurled *Treatise*, displayed in an artfully nondescript vitrine, the exhibition relies heavily on a series of performances, concerts, and projections for coherence. Over a three-month period, an impressive lineup of international composers, musicians, and artists are to reinterpret, if

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