

PREFACE

The object you are holding in your hands is conflicted. It is a performance yearning to be a document, a book. It is the printed artifact of the three Toni Morrison Lectures I was invited by the Center for African American Studies to deliver at Richardson Auditorium and McCosh Hall at Princeton University. These spaces are intimate, with 880 and 370 seats, respectively. My inclination in all performances is to take into consideration the physical spaces themselves. This personalizes each performance and underlines a basic assumption I have that no time-based event can be separated from the when and where it is done.

The lecture halls never quite became a theater; still they were arenas where many voices—my own being one of them—collided, protested, remembered, confessed, and defied each other. The lecture halls became echo chambers complete with a sound installation that transformed and theatricalized the voices

of which the text is composed. The purpose of this was to create an experience aimed at demonstrating as opposed to describing a manner of thinking, a way of being.

This object, this book, is an effort desiring to communicate directly and still it remains indeterminate in much the same way the dances I create for the stage do. These talks were described as a thought journey in pursuit of “the life of an idea.” It is the record of a needy, angry, and confused man. The need is for a tradition, an intellectual home. The anger is generated from an ever-maturing realization that I never truly had an intellectual home and never will.

This conflicted document exists because of a process very much like the one I subjected John Cage to by reducing him to a strict set of principles and then shaping this reduction into an efigy that is to be pushed and pulled, interrogated and worshipped.

The research that led me to fashion the John Cage effigy was informed among other things by conversations I had with three generous individuals: historian and critic John Rockwell; Laura Kuhn, Director of the John Cage Trust; and Thelma Golden, Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. I am indebted to all three of them. These conversations became the opportunity to use the Cage effigy as a troubling compass, a way through “the forest of signs”: race, identity, aesthetic influences, tradition, spirituality, memory, beauty, intention, and non-intention.

My editor has set himself the task of retrieving a recognizable voice and a narrative from the echo chamber/“forest of signs”—my voice. I, on the other hand, stay committed to a conundrum—this conflicted object as an artifact of “an experimental action,” the value of which is less its originality than its authenticity, less a well-wrought argument than an indeterminate performance.

The elements in this book are my thoughts, quotations from others, short stories I have written, and photos. Both quotes and stories are flora and fauna in the forest of signs.

The photographs, sometimes records of actual performances, sometimes purposefully ambiguous signs, act as players amid the landscape of the text. The different font types, consciously mimicking Cage, are intended to have different weights, colors, and distances from the observer/reader/audience, recalling Sam Crawford’s sound design in the actual lecture halls.

The look and feel of this book, which owe so much to Director of Design Maria Lindenfeldar and Designer Karl Spurzem, are

an invitation to play; to take it as a whole or piecemeal; to reorder it if you will.

The lectures had three parts: *Past Time*, *Story/Time*, and *With Time*.

Past Time and *With Time* were self-consciously about ideas, often confessional and designed for the ear, as I am not a scholar, academic, or researcher, but rather a maker of live performances and a performer. The middle section, *Story/Time*, is a compendium of sixty short narratives, each designed to be read aloud in a one-minute time-frame. Here is a poker-faced plundering of Cage’s *Indeterminacy*, allowing me to be by turns direct, elusive, ironic, sincere, and/or metaphorical.

This section was the most performative of all three events, complete with lighting by Laura Bickford, Sam Crawford’s sound design, a musical composition by Ted Coffey, and Bjorn Amelan’s ever-morphing drawings on a blackboard.

In a conversation with Thelma Golden, she called me out on the unacknowledged anxiety I have in embracing John Cage as an influence. The restating of his *Indeterminacy* in *Story/Time* and as the spirit informing this book is a blatant and defiant retort:

Yes, Cage is my father, but his strategy becomes stranger still because of the divergence and contrast in our personalities; expression of the idea of *Indeterminacy*; and how, where, when, and for whom it is presented. This is for me the latest chapter in the life of an idea!