

**Captain Cook's First Voyage:
an Interview with Morton Feldman**

by Richard Wood Massi

R. Wood Massi conducted the following interview at the University of California, San Diego, on 3 March 1987. It was originally published in *Cum Notis Variorum* (No. 131, April 1989).

How did you become identified as a group together? Why was it Feldman, John Cage, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and David Tudor, instead of Feldman, Stefan Wolpe, and somebody else?

Wolpe wanted to be included. He was upset.

That's one question. The other is who specifically were the painters that each of you were associated with? John has written a lot about Robert Rauschenberg.

Well, let's take care of the painters, because it's easier.

OK. I know that you said at one point that Philip Guston was a friend of yours in the early fifties.

Originally I met him at John's place. We became buddies. Guston and I would talk for days, not for hours.

You said, in your jacket notes for the recording Feldman-Brown (Mainstream 5007), "the new painting made me desirous of a sound world more direct, more immediate, more physical than anything that had existed before." When you talk in those terms, are you talking mainly about Guston, or others as well?

No, everybody.

I don't really have a sense of how the give-and-take worked between the painters and the musicians. Was it more aesthetics - that Guston might say to you, "Well, I think that we should reflect more of the process of painting.."?

Guston, no. Guston is a unique situation.

What was it that passed between you concerning art? Did he listen to your music?

Oh yeah, they all listened to the music. De Kooning was nuts about us. He gave us a green light. But people are conventional. When I first met Rothko, he said, "You know, Morty, my favorite composer is Mendelssohn." Actually

that's what the Japanese philosopher [D.T.] Suzuki said to John Cage - that his favorite composer was Mendelssohn.

Was Guston, of all the painters in New York at that period, the most important to your work?

Well, he's the one that I talked to extensively as my closest friend. I had more talks with him than anybody else.

Even more than any other musicians?

Well, I had this out with John Cage. I said we didn't talk. John felt we did talk. But I thought when we did talk, it was just kind of creating a caste system, so to speak, of who was doing the real work.

How so?

Well, just by the enthusiasm. It was all very mysterious what the criteria would be for me in the beginning. John is twelve or thirteen years older than me. He wanted to paint, you know, when he was a young man.

I remember reading that.

I saw an early picture of his, and it was somewhat Georgia O'Keeffe. When I met him he already had strong relationships - I don't know the condition of the relationships, how personal they were - with the painters in and around the Surrealists.

Max Ernst?

Very good friend of Ernst. I met Ernst through him.

How about Roberto Matta or André Breton? They were in New York at that time, right?

Yes, Matta was there. Then there were the Surrealists around. I never heard any mention of Breton. But there was mention of a sculptor by the name of David Hare, who I think was married to Breton's wife soon after whatever happened. So, David was a friend of his. [Robert] Motherwell was also; Motherwell knew all the Surrealists. And then there were the West Coast people that I met at his house.

Morris Graves and Mark Tobey?

I never met Graves at his house. I met Tobey.

Cage published that one issue of a magazine with Motherwell. I know Peggy Guggenheim had a major influence in introducing Cage to a lot of people in the art world, but I wonder....

It's very hard to get to who knew who. I became quite close to Motherwell. I think that they might have had some kind of intellectual or artistic falling out. John never talked about Motherwell.

Cage had a very peculiar reputation. He was very well liked, and was to some degree disturbing to a lot of people. Not that the work was radical. Christian Wolff's mother called John a charlatan. Guston loved him, but referred to his routines as a nightclub act. So, there were problems there. Although everybody cared greatly for him, and they weren't overly critical, I would say there was an anti-homosexual bias.

Against him?

Well, not only against him, but against the younger people who began to be associated with him: Rauschenberg, and Jasper [Johns], and Cy Twombly. Cage never mentioned [Charles] Ives; and I think it had to do with Ives's treatment of Henry Cowell.

After Cowell was busted?

Yeah. Cage never mentioned those composers. He never mentioned [Edgard] Varèse, for example. Again, I think it was the homosexual thing. I'm sure it was.

Varèse was homophobic or anti-homosexual?

Well, I think he was kind of the last *man* I ever met. I mean he was like Gary Cooper. Really, he was masculinity personified, almost to the point of a caricature. But I think it was that anti-homosexual bias. I remember at the Club, there was a kind of naive attitude. For example, chess was frowned upon in the Club, because it was [thought to be] a kind of communistic activity, for some reason. "Communists played chess," and that kind of business.

Really?

Well, they *did*. Communists were more involved in chess. And homosexuals came around.

Was Cage in a lovers' relationship with Merce Cunningham by that time? Was he identified as being a gay person?

Yes.

Since I'm gay myself, I'm very interested in this topic; and it's impossible to find anything written about it. Was there a group of just the homosexuals - where they gathered together as gay people who were also artists, painters, and musicians - that included, maybe, Cunningham and Cage?

Cunningham and Cage associated with homosexuals like Tobey, landed-gentry types. John Ashbery, the young poets, Frank O'Hara - they cruised around. If I went to a party at Frank's, I could have straight friends, or tough Jewish intellectuals like me - Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg.

Within the gay culture, O'Hara has an aura about him now. He's very well respected, an ascending star.

Did you read my obituary on him - one of the best pieces of writing I ever did?

Where's that?

It's in *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, a whole collection. The line was from a poem by F. Scott Fitzgerald, "past times and future hopes." It's one of the best writings I ever did. It's in two anthologies, actually.

So, was there a group, an artists' group, that was predominately homosexual? Or did they just blend in with other groups?

They were with Johnny [John Bernard] Meyers's gallery, the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which had very classy women like June Wilson and [Jane] Freilicher. They also had Larry [Rivers] and John Button. Johnny Meyers was a very important Diaghilev type. He published; he put on plays. He supported all of Frank's plays, and had connections perhaps with the whole literary world at that particular time. A lot of homosexual poets made a living as critics. They worked for *Art News*. John Ashbery finally became editor of *Art News*, I think. There was a very pervasive homosexual world in New York in the fifties. I would say that the anti-homosexual atmosphere was not overt. I felt it. There's always, in any environment, a kind of hard-hat aspect. Other than that.... I don't want to exaggerate this point, because John was very sensitive to it. I remember

there was a little gathering in a Chinese restaurant, and Jackson Pollock was taunting John.

Oh my.

Jackson was another raving heterosexual. There were some people who created a bad atmosphere. Other than that, everybody lived in love and peace and harmony. Guston certainly had a relationship with the poets. He was very literary. Frank was his very, very close friend, and Bill Berkson, and a whole bunch. Most of the painters who were close to me didn't have those attitudes. But New York had its establishment homosexual community in terms of being a metropolis, and then the world of the dance, and so forth and so on. It was growing, and it was very, very strong. I think to this day the irony is that perhaps three of the most original of that group emerging, in a sense: Jasper Johns, Bob Rauschenberg, and Cy Twombly....

I didn't realize Rauschenberg was gay.

Oh yeah; in fact when I first met him he was living with Cy Twombly and something happened. He was married at first. He met - I don't know where - he met Cy Twombly. Then he met Jasper Johns.

A moment ago, you mentioned the Club.

I'm talking about the Eighth Street Club - not the first one that Bob Motherwell started. It moved to various places.

And [Jackson] Pollock was in on that original club?

Pollock lived in the country. He would come in and come out; he wasn't really part of.... I don't know what the hell he was part of.

When I read about that period I get the impression that he was very important; but then he seems to have been separate from everyone a lot.

Well, he never opened up his mouth. It's as if you were going back to the French Revolution and hearing Robespierre saying that he never had a conversation with Danton.

The Eighth Street Club was a group that met every week or something?

In a loft. It met on a Friday night. There was a mystique in those days where one had to become

tuned in to what it was. Do you remember the movie *A Place in the Sun*, with Montgomery Clift and Elizabeth Taylor - Theodore Dreiser's *American Tragedy*? Well, there is a scene where George Stevens has the social-climbing, Stendhalish theme; where he comes in a suit and everybody is wearing tuxedos. The next time he comes in a tuxedo, and they are wearing white jackets. He comes in a white jacket, and they are wearing full-dress. He can't really figure out the nuances - when and where you do this. I would say that the Club was essentially.... either you were tuned in to what was happening, or you weren't. It was fascinating,

And you, and John, and Christian....

Christian never came. John on occasion.

How about Brown?

On occasion.

How often did you go?

I was a regular.

Who else were the regulars?

Among the musicians, I was the only one.

How about painters?

No, the regulars were.... Well now I would say the homosexual situation was.... It didn't keep them out. Frank O'Hara became very close to.... John Ashbery was there all the time. Larry Rivers was there most of the time. Frank was a regular as much as anybody could be a regular.

Were the homosexuals tolerated?

I would say [it was] the way Schoenberg wrote about the Bauhaus as having an anti-semitic atmosphere.

But despite the bias, these artists were able to....

They didn't care. In the Club there was a kind of formalized talking. There were panels: Existentialist One, Existentialist Two. The talk in the Club was, more often than not, planned lectures on themes. I gave my first talk about my own music at the Club [which was] very responsive. My first exposure to the artists' world was [through] John Cage. I would say that we are

always going to get back to John as a fantastic catalyst. I don't know anybody who knew so many people. You can imagine after thirty-five or forty years, everyone that's accumulated. I don't think it helped. But anyway.... My first piece was played in John Cage's apartment.

Your first performance?

Maybe my second. Maybe David Tudor played some piano pieces, which no one plays any more, in a museum or some kind of room someplace. I think it was at the "Y."

You introduced Tudor and Cage to one another, right?

Because of Wolpe - that was the connection.

Wolpe knew Tudor?

Tudor was part of the Wolpe world; he studied with Wolpe's wife.

And you studied with Wolpe, and that's how you met Tudor?

Yes.

And then you introduced him to Cage?

I introduced him to Cage because William Masselos didn't want to learn the Boulez Sonata. It was a little too difficult.

And Cage wanted to have that done when he came back from Europe - or before he went to Europe, I guess it was.

The whole thing was in the works for months and months and months. And it's interesting that it was not done on the ISCM, which was the radical group. It was done on a League of Composers' concert.

Wasn't the League of Composers more conservative, with Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson?

It was kind of chic.

Milton Babbitt - was he in the League?

No, he was in the ISCM. Now they're joined together.

Weren't the composers in the ISCM more like Henry Cowell and Varèse?

No.

I have the impression there were three groups, is that right?

There was the neo-classical group, which was essentially the League of Composers. And then there was the ISCM that did the hard-core stuff out of Webern, Schoenberg.

So that would have been Babbitt, and...

Whoever were around, all kinds of people, young people. One of my first big performances was on an ISCM concert. I knew Babbitt quite well.

So would you say that the ISCM as a group got along better with you guys than the League of Composers did?

No. John had performances at the League. He had connections in a much more social world, rather than the academic world that was the ISCM. I remember I went to hear John's *Sonatas and Interludes* performed at the League. Except for myself, it could have taken thirty-five years before the ISCM ever played Cage or someone like that.

Even though they were the more radical group?

John was not considered radical. He was considered suspect. John was associated with [Marcel] Duchamp. The ISCM just stuck to their own, and then became a very insular kind of ivory tower.

Was Columbia University, with Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachensky, more associated with the ISCM?

No, I would say the League. Because their work was innocuous.

Most of the serialists?

The serialists.

And of course, Roger Sessions. But by that time, he was somewhere else, right?

Well, Sessions in 1950 was a very strong figure. He is still.

I have been trying to figure out exactly what happened between Virgil Thomson and John Cage as far as their falling-out with each other was concerned.

The falling-out was very simple. John was writing the book on Thomson [with Kathleen Hoover]. John came to me and said that he was having trouble, that the more that he gets into the book, the more he doesn't find Virgil to be very interesting,

John had some scathing things to say about Virgil's music.

And that was the end. And justifiably so, I think, on Virgil's part because he had written three or four consecutive articles on John Cage - I think 1950 to 1952 - in the Sunday *Herald Tribune*. It was the talk of the town. No one remembered [that there had ever been before] one issue after another issue about a [single] composer. I'm quite sure Thomson never put them in his collected writings.

Thomson was with the Herald Tribune until 1954, right?

Yes, until he reviewed a concert that he wasn't at.

So it was just purely a musical thing, a professional thing: John Cage didn't praise Thomson's music enough when he wrote the book with Kathleen Hoover about Thomson; and that annoyed Thomson because he felt Cage should be more, uh ...

Whatever.

Thomson later said a lot of bad things about Cage in an article. It shocked me when I finally got around to that, because I had read the earlier articles.

That purely had to do with the book.

Can you give me some sense as to why you, John Cage, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and David Tudor are always associated together, besides that there are some similarities in notation, experimentation, and of course your invention of graphic music?

Well, I think it's justified.

What did you do together that made it that way, besides your theories? What actions?

I think that John Cage brought a notion - that didn't influence me. He never discussed it, but I think that the Surrealists paved the way for Cage, insofar as automatic writing is concerned. He's not out of Dada, he's out of Surrealism. I feel he's a combination of being Schoenberg's student and Surrealism.

Surrealism even more than Abstract Expressionism, which came later?

He's proto-Abstract-Expressionist; he's not Abstract-Expressionist. I think that John's basic philosophy is like [that of] most of us. He had certain beliefs when he was young, and he never gave them up. The whole Surrealist point of view was that they didn't own anything. They were very much interested in an open structure. And I think that this feeling that you don't own anything, that things are open, by way of philosophy - Meister Eckhart, the pragmatism of Gertrude Stein - was more of an influence on Cage than perhaps any single person.

How does this translate into actions which identified you five people as a group, separate from other groups?

Well, let's take Boulez and myself: I feel that my music is open. I feel that his music is closed; he's making objects. Part of the mystique is that if it looks like an object, throw it out. There has to be that atmosphere that even if it's an object, it's not an object.

So that's one thing that ties you five together?

No, I think that's what ties the fifties together.

How is it that you guys are separated out from that as a group? Who started putting all of you in the pot together?

We gave concerts together.

Were those in John's loft to start with?

No, we gave some concerts in a place called the Cherry Lane Theater. Those Cherry Lane concerts had a lot of press. John Cage introduced the first real public thing as a group. Merce Cunningham was very hot. He was a new, young Nijinsky. He packed Hunter College in a very important dance concert. The evening opened with two musical offerings - one by Christian, one by me - and then the whole evening of dance by Cunningham.

So, you would have meetings at Cage's, and some one would say, "Well, let's try to do this concert here," or somebody would come up with a hall?

I think that John was the prime mover. I can remember once I said, "You know, John, nobody knows what to do on New Year's Day," and that was the genesis of a concert, one of our best.

What year?

1953 or '54. And everybody said, "What do you mean New Year's day?" I said, "Everybody's at odds. They want to do something on New Year's Day." And we were turning people away. It caught on. I think it was at 5:30 - perfect time. And it was fabulously successful.

John would get an idea: "Let's give a concert, and we'll charge twenty-five dollars," or some outlandish price like that.

That's quite an idea.

Oh, you know when he was selling stock?

No.

It was very serious. He was very busy with it. He was selling stock where someone could buy into his immortality. He had a lot of fun. They were buying shares and things.

This was in the fifties, too?

Yeah. I remember a concert at Cherry Lane where Aaron Copland and Varèse came, and other people. Our audience was the architects. My grid thing actually influenced some important Chicago architect; I think his name was Goldberg. He did a housing project using the grid.

The grid was fixed, but the placement was random. Larry Poons - I don't know if you know his early work with the dots - was influenced by my work. There was the grid - but the dots were fortuitous. To this day we're giving concerts at Francesco Clemente's studio in New York. It was a vast world. It was New York. No one *really* had any definition of experimental music until we came along. It was like a word. They would play a bunch of tone-clusters, and that was supposed to be experimental? But we were truly experimental, because it was faceless. Now, of course, it's permeated the culture and society. And if you play my early pieces you'll say, "What's someone getting so excited about?" I mean, it doesn't have the pizzazz of a kind of music which essentially is not experimental, like Boulez's. He's fabulous, but he's not an experimental composer. But he has pizzazz. It's a marvelous pizzazz. Someone said recently it's hyperactive chic.

But this doesn't give you any sense of the society, because the society was absolutely vast. I remember that Boulez once told me that when

Christian was at Harvard and Boulez gave his famous lectures there, Christian never made an appointment to see him. Occasionally they'd see each other in the yard, walking, and greet each other.

Wolff seems to have been sort of peripheral to the group.

I'm with him. I'm seeing him Thursday night. But I can't figure out what his concerns are - never could figure it out.

Did he have any interactions as Brown did with Alexander Calder and you with Guston?

You have to remember that Brown's relation to the group was also peripheral.

Even though he's constantly associated with you and Cage?

Yeah. But it was a package deal with his wife Carolyn Brown, one of the most magnificent dancers that New York ever saw on stage. I find Earle was a kind of bridge between Europe and America. And I think that as a tangible influence, Brown, by his notation and by his plastic forms, has influenced Europe more than the rest of us. In an obvious way, I feel that [Luciano] Berio in the notation of, say, *Circles*, comes out of Earle Brown. The loops of [Witold] Lutoslawski are out of Brown. I think he's been ripped off more than any of us, in an overt way. The rip-off of Cage is, to some degree, disguised. And the rip-off of myself to some degree gets into the world of a philosophical approach that might influence somebody, rather than the music itself. Philosophically, that seems to be the consensus of European people.

Getting back to us as a group, I never had any conversations with Christian. I just dedicated a very important, four-hour flute, piano, and celesta piece to him. An early string quartet of his is dedicated to me for no reason whatsoever.

There's that early choral piece that you dedicated to him, too.

Christian Wolff in Cambridge. That's being done next week at Harvard.

That's a beautiful piece. But you don't feel there was that much interaction among members of the group?

No, we never had a conversation.

Wolff ended up associated with you via John Cage?

Well, he was there, he came. We're doing concerts in April. We just did a concert. I mean we see each other, but Christian is not a talker.

Occasionally he'll make some nice remark of great interest; but we never sat down and talked about aesthetics or concepts. It's like the weather. What was the reason, for example, that the movie industry grew up in L.A.? The weather. Well, the intellectual weather was just right, what was happening. Everybody was just emerging in New York. It was unbelievable, incredible. It was not like it is now, where you can't get a taxi in SoHo. It was a sensational environment, just on the periphery of becoming well known - I would say, intensely intellectual. No show-business aspect; everybody delighted to be alive, to be an artist.

There were certain things you couldn't do. If you were a painter - as in some aspects of early [Arshile] Gorky - you couldn't do it with background and foreground. The whole idea was the flat surface being brought finally to its end. So if you saw a picture, and it had to do with all those kinds of values, it couldn't be good. And in truth, it wasn't a question of style. It was a question of your belonging some place else, like Baltimore. I mean they just were out of the search for new forms and new shapes.

To show you the difference: the reason Cage, and I, and Christian - less so, Earle - were important to that scene is that nothing has happened since. There must be a reason why nothing has happened.

I believe that a lot of it is that you had a fabulous art community, which finally became a cultural community. It spread out into people making a living out of it. It spread out into the record industry, into this and that. In other words, now they're just making packages: put this dance with this one and then this one. Everybody wants to be an artist now, in terms of a life style. At that time, everybody *was* an artist. In other words, it was an artist public. It was an inside, with the same kind of excitement as when you see hundreds and hundreds of people on the stock market floor yelling and screaming. That was the image that I had of the art world at that time, where you got hundreds and hundreds of people just very excited that they were alive and they were artists at that particular period. A lot of Europeans came over - famous Europeans. They just ate their hearts out in relation to what was happening in Paris. They wondered whether they should stay here. Now they stay here. A lot of Italian artists

are staying here. A lot of German artists are staying here. I'm not putting down the cultural manifestation, but try and think of that world in a sense without the culture, without the hype.

So, in a way it was a more innocent time.

Totally innocent. It was Captain Cook's first voyage. It was quite something.

It sounds wonderful.

I just sold a Rauschenberg collage I bought for seventeen dollars.

Somebody told me that they offered you five hundred thousand dollars for that.

I told them, "Six, and we have a deal."

Such a deal.

They were over at the house the other day, and the guy was looking at it. There was a lot of newsprint; a lot of information was covered up. We started talking about Captain Cook's first voyage, because four or five years later when [Rauschenberg] did the same series in red, he opened up the newspaper so you could see it. I wouldn't say the piece was corrupted, but it certainly was more attractive with the information, while mine is just black, and painted over, with just a little newsprint showing. The "first voyage." Not that we get corrupt, but....

You become established in a way.

Well, you could take Frank [O'Hara]. He was a [Vladimir] Mayakovsky to some degree. He was everything. We had no idea that he would become a prototype.

That he would be a hero of the gay culture, for instance.

Yes, well if anybody should be a hero, he was a hero then and there. When he walked into a room, a star walked into that room - the charisma of Frank.

Do you think part of your identification as a group has to do with the fact that you guys were somewhat out of the establishment? You were not supported by the League so much; you were not their first choices.

The analysis of it is very interesting.

James Cook's first voyage circumnavigated the globe in the ship Endeavour, giving the botanists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander the opportunity to collect plants from previously unexplored habitats. Although the Endeavour voyage was officially a journey to Tahiti to observe the 1769 transit of Venus across the sun, it also had a more clandestine mission from the Royal Society to explore the South Pacific in the name of England. The two botanists on the expedition returned with a collection of plant specimens including an estimated 100 new families and 1,000 new species of plants, many of which are currently housed in the U. S. National Herbarium. Joseph Banks, who would later become Sir Joseph Banks and president of the Royal Society, was a wealthy young scientist. Title: Morton Feldman says : selected interviews and lectures 1964-1987 Available at Marriott Library LVL 1: General Collection (ML410.F2957 A5 2006) Creator: Feldman, Morton, 1926-1987. Villars, Chris.Â Feldman : conversation without Cage, July 1984 / Michael Whitticker -- Darmstadt lecture, July 1984 / Hanfried Blume and Ken Muller -- Conversation with Morton Feldman, July 1984 / Kevin Volans -- Captain Cook's first voyage, March 1987 / Richard Wood Massi -- The note man on the word man, March 1987 / Everett C. Frost -- A Feldman chronology / Sebastian Claren.Â Tomorrow I plan to make a trip up to the Marriott Library at the U of U campus to inspect some Morton Feldman books and also figure out some scholarly articles. R. Wood Massi conducted the following interview at the University of California, San Diego, on 3 March 1987. It was originally published in Cum Notis Variorum (No. 131, April 1989). How did you become identified as a group together? Why was it Feldman, John Cage, Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and David Tudor, instead of Feldman, Stefan Wolpe, and somebody else? Wolpe wanted to be included. He was upset. This was the first of Cook's three voyages, which all lasted for years. When all was said and done, Cook ended up dead on a beach in Hawaii, but he lives in memory as one of the greatest explorers in human history, particularly for his map drawings.Â Map showing the three voyages of Captain Cook, with the first version in red, second in green, and third in blue. The route of Cook's crew following his death is shown as a dashed blue line. (Courtesy of Jon Platek and Wikimedia Commons). Interview Highlights. On the places Cook discovered for the Europeans. "Some of the places had been previously visited, such as he went to Tahiti to take some astronomers to do the transit of Venus that had previously been visited by another English captain.