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Artist's Records: Toward a Definition

Kevin Concannon

When I originally began working on the topic of "Artist's Records" as an undergraduate thesis project, friends and colleagues often expressed confusion regarding the exact nature of my work. "Do artists just let you into their files? What sort of information are you looking for?" Everyone seemed to imagine me plowing through every file cabinet in SoHo. Initial efforts on my part to clarify things resulted in a working title of "Phonograph Records Made By Visual Artist." "This really didn't offer much of an improvement on the original handle as it turned out. "Did Picasso really do the cover for that XTC album?" (No.)

There being no real critical apparatus set up to deal with sound works by artists, the even more specialized topic of artists' records isn't widely discussed in the art journals, let alone the press at large. If an artist makes a record, does it automatically qualify as an "artist's record?" What about *artrock*?

Perhaps a good starting point for a definition of the field would be to think a bit about the medium itself. Sound recording of course is a uniquely modern phenomenon. As such, modernist concerns have been evident from the very beginning of the audio art tradition, generally acknowledged to have had its initial impetus from the Futurist and Dada Sound Poets.

While the Futurists and Dadaists were generally recorded years after the original performances of their works (and thus did not really concern themselves with sound recording as a medium when creating the works), their pieces—not only the Sound Poetry, but the Russolo's Noise Intoners as well—were modernist in the sense that these artists were concerned with the medium of the work's transmission. For painters the flatness of the canvas took precedence over any "recreation" of reality; for the Sound Poets, the qualities of the human voice itself were the stuff of art - not the "message." The voice, in other words, has its own spectrum of expressive and formal possibilities beyond any so-called "meaning" carried by the words. While Marinetti's poems incorporated real Italian words along with the onomatopoeic grunts and moans, the Dada poets banished every last morpheme from this living art. (If you haven't heard the real thing, Hugo Ball's *I Zimbra* is widely available in an updated musical version by Talking Heads on their "Fear of Music" elpee.) Dada Sound Poetry (or Nonsense Poetry) was a distinctly real-time phenomenon, and the recordings which remain of it are documents; these works were created to be performed, certainly not to be recorded. The tapes are no more related to the Sound Poems than slides are to paintings. One reason the Dada poets never really had to think about the issue of a sound recording as a medium is that the medium was in an early, unrefined state, hardly the democratic medium it as become today with the introduction of cheap recording equipment.

To get to the issue of sound recording as an artform, we should, I think, leap forward to the more recent past. The most widely known artist working with sound recording as a modernist artform is Laurie Anderson. Anderson's reputation has by now extended into the domain of popular culture by way of her success on the pop record charts. Her early work, the work upon which her reputation within the art world rests, exploited the mechanics (or electronics if you prefer) of sound reproduction in some very ingenious ways. Her *Tape-Bow Violin* stands out among her early object-works. After removing the strings, a tape-recorder playback head was mounted on the bridge of the instrument. The horsehair on the bow was then replaced with a piece of magnetic tape upon which the word "Juanita" had been recorded. By adjusting the speed, direction and angle of the bow's path across the tape head, she manipulated the voice into several different words and phrases: more or less an audio anagram. The text is distorted into three languages, cleverly revealing the translation factor inherent to the medium of sound recording. In *From the Air* (on the *Big Science* elpee), she makes her modernist sensibility rather explicit when she delivers the line: "This is the time; this is the record of the time." Who would have thought that cheeky modernism would make it onto *Billboard*'s charts? She dances around this issue less blatantly in *O Superman*, a piece built upon a digitally reprocessed, relentlessly repeated "Hahahaha," a single breath enslaved by technology, subsumed by it. The first "real" voice we hear turns out to be a telephone answering machine. Again, characteristics of the medium are central to the subject matter of the work.

As with the field of visual arts, there is a broad spectrum of investigation within the field of artists records, even within such a broad category as modernism. With his famous essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin opened the door for a plethora of photographic criticism in later years. And while Benjamin is constantly cited by critics dealing with photography, his comments regarding phonograph records in that same essay (admittedly brief) seem all but forgotten. And for better or worse, I have taken the liberty of extrapolating from the greater body of photographic criticism which owes such tremendous debt to Benjamin.

Kevin Concannon produces radio broadcasts about artists and writes frequently about sound art and phonograph records by visual artists. He is based in Boston.

The audio recording and the photograph share a number of important characteristics, the most significant of which is their common mechanical reproduction. A typical device of art photographers involves the exploitation of the photograph's assumed verity. Photograph records can also be considered *accurate mechanical transcriptions of reality*. Of course, such an assumption would be naive in either case. (This is the time. This is the record of the time.)

Eleanor Antin has created work in both these media within the context of her ongoing performance work as Eleanora Antinova, the fictitious black ballerina who reminisces about the good times as a member of Diaghilev's Ballet Russe company in its heyday. The photographs show Antinova posing in the costumes of her great roles. To enhance the "illusion" the photographs in her book *Antinova Remembers* are tinted to suggest the patina of a vintage (genuine) photograph. For her contribution to *Revolutions Per Minute: The Art Record* (published by Ronald Feldman Gallery), she adopted the format of what might be considered the audio equivalent of the family snapshot: those oral histories coaxed out of grandparents by their tape-recorder wielding progeny. The audio recording in this case is more than a documentation of the performance piece from which it is extracted. While the artifice of the performance situation sets Antinova up as fiction before the artist has even stepped onstage, the audio format allows the work a better opportunity to be *discovered* as it is experienced. Exploitation of the work's medium is integral to the work itself here in a way that the performance is not.

Of course, this appropriation of critical models serves merely as a starting point toward elucidating the issues in a field still largely undefined. Other factors such as time (real versus tape) and objecthood (or lack thereof) are pertinent to specific works. And sound recording is only one component of the broader mandate of this column: audio art. ■