
By Richard Elliott

The process is magical. A voice, recorded in the nineteenth century, speaks to us in the twenty-first after being passed from container to container in a kind of sonic relay race. The voice doesn't die; we have material proof. But it does mutate: in speech we become strangers to ourselves, and recordings of our voices highlight this process of estrangement. Despite the ubiquity of sonic and visual media in our everyday lives, we are still transfixed by the weirdness of seeing and hearing ourselves replicated, or versioned. In fact, we're arguably more transfixed than ever, as if the consequences of the photographic and phonographic discoveries of the Victorian era have still to fully sink in.

What is most apparent now, however, is not the mystery or the marvel of preservation, but rather the temporary nature of the media brought into existence by photography and phonography. Before, it seemed like we had found ways to set what was transitory in stone; now, we realize it was the media that were transitory, not what they contained. Images and sounds endure by migrating from one host to another, sucking the life from each before moving on.

So what of the dead shells they leave behind? Perhaps they're not so dead after all; perhaps they're able to be given new lives and new meanings. The objects of popular culture have a strange hold over us, demanding that we not abandon them, or that we at least mourn their passing. Records gave voices an afterlife and people, in turn, give records an afterlife.

This afterlife forms the fascinating subject matter for The Record, an exhibition currently on display at Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art, following a run at its original venue, the Nasher Museum at Duke University (future showings are scheduled for Miami and Seattle). The exhibition comprises artworks either made from old records or inspired by records, sleeves, turntables, or a more general "vinyl culture". Exhibits include sculptures made from re-used vinyl, mock-ups of fictional album sleeves and discs, and objects (players and discs) created to play, distort, or even conceal music in strange and thought-provoking ways.

The man behind the exhibition and its lavish accompanying catalogue is Trevor Schoonmaker, a curator at the Nasher. Schoonmaker provides a useful contextualizing essay to the catalogue, in which he explains the motives and interests of the artists whose work is included and gives a brief introduction to the written contributions that accompany the work reproduced in the book, as well as a "record timeline" that charts the invention and evolution of the phonograph and the subsequent uses and abuses to which it was subjected in the name of art. The artists include big names like Laurie Anderson, David Byrne, and Christian Marclay, and lesser known creators such as Alice Wagner, Dario Robleto, and Mingering Mike. Contributors include hip-hop historian Jeff Chang, phonography theorist Mark Katz, and cultural critic Luc Sante.
For those unable to get to the exhibition, the catalogue provides plenty of visual food for thought. The book is square in shape like a record sleeve (albeit a ten-inch rather than the more common twelves or sevens), meaning that the works that take inspiration from cover art reproduce particularly well. These include Wagner's Percussion Series (thread and canvas reproductions of iconic sleeves released by the Command label in the 1960s) and the fictional "records" created by Mingering Mike, the "imaginary soul superstar" whose poignant story can be sampled here but is probably best explored in the Dori Hadar's 2007 book dedicated to his work. These artists' work, along with other sleeve-based work such as Kevin El-ichi deForest's The Record Shop series, lend the catalogue something of the feel of those coffee table books that reproduce classic record cover art, albeit that here the art in question is not attached to any "real" releases, thus problematizing the associative/nostalgic reference point of each. In one of the accompanying essays, Carlo McCormick suggests that the vinyl record cover appeals to visual artists due to its functionality rather than because of its nostalgic or emotional qualities. Perhaps so, but such associations are never entirely divorced from what is, after all, a very specific artistic format.

Reference to functionality invites a consideration of the alchemical and ritual aspects of records, for ritual relies on functional objects and tools to work its transformations. Of the artists whose work is included in the exhibition, Dario Robleto is the one most closely attuned to the alchemical qualities of records. He transforms the material of the record to evoke new meanings and messages. Vinyl is melted down to create buttons, threads, or, most evocatively, match heads that allow the music once etched in the vinyl to "go out in flames". Robleto's deep, conceptual work reminds us how records themselves once promised to conjure life from dead objects. Like the placing of the needle into the groove, the striking of the match is an epiphanic moment in which a secret truth can be revealed.

The essays contain much to chew over as well but they are more hit-and-miss than the artworks. For a short text expounding the importance of the 7-inch single, Piotr Orlov's essay seems to miss the point by eschewing the vital brevity of the single and setting itself up as if it were a longplayer, only to then fizzle out unsatisfactorily, its needle skipping from the beginning to the end of the story, as it were. Here, words fail to do justice to the subject matter at hand, prompting one to speculate that many of the illustrated artworks manage to pose more interesting questions and proffer more disturbing reflections. However, Mark Katz gets the "three-minute" thing just right with his contribution on record collectors, which, in a nice twist, posits the artists being lauded in the exhibition as "sick collectors".

Josh Kun's story about a phonographic message sent from Thomas Edison to Mexican president Porfirio Diaz provides an interesting intro to some reflections on mobile communications, but such reflections are better served by a longer work (such as Kun's fascinating book on Jewish records as memory objects). Much better suited to the space available here is Luc Sante's typically tour-de-force imaginative reconstruction of the lives of record owners. Taking his cue from Felipe Barbosa's work, which makes art from the messages and names scrawled on second-hand record sleeves, Sante provides mini-
biographies for a small collection of found records. The result is a poignant reflection on
the role played by records in so many people's lives, on the ways in which sound, image,
and memory interact, and on transience and transformation.

Given this social role, there may be some questions to be posed about the transformation
of popular culture into high art. While many of the artists featured in this exhibition
would be amongst those associated with the supposed dissolution between high and mass
art brought by postmodernism, it is still the case that the works are placed in art
institutions and attached to single names, a process which arguably maintains a
distinction between elite artistic production and everyday music consumption (a
distinction which can also be found in the anti-populist rhetoric that frequently
accompanies the artistic "misuse" of audio technology). Fortunately, as the phenomenon
that is Sleeface (http://www.sleeveface.com) has so brilliantly demonstrated, the "extra-
musical", associative possibilities thrown up by the phonographic era are recognized and
celebrated by a far broader constituency.

There is no denying the vital inspiration provided by those in the art world, however, and
this exhibition and book provide much to dwell upon. What do we learn from the
transformations imposed upon vinyl by artists such as Robleto? Do they only emphasize
transience? The records that form the base of these reflections were forged from
petroleum-based vinyl, briefly stored messages that were meaningful to certain groups of
people, then became plastic art due to the tangibility of their source material. Does
anything live on in this process, some message to be revived or decoded in the future?
Perhaps the message doesn't need to be heard. Perhaps what matters is that these objects
once contained sound and, even when silenced, their sonic function survives in the
collective memory. These works signify not because they are made of vinyl but because
they are made from records. In this way, they still speak to us: the magic lives on.

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