

# Sound Recordings in the Art Gallery

*Sound recording, and their devices and paraphernalia, as an art exhibit, are a concept that is rarely considered in the context of sound recording preservation or in record collecting circles. The display or presentation of sound recordings in an art gallery or museum presents unique challenges – for the artist, the curator and the viewing (or listening) public. This article, based on the author's presentation at the 2014 ARSC Conference in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, explores the subject in detail.*

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The emergence of art exhibitions working with sound components challenges curators' and visitors' practices, since sound is comprised of invisible waves, temporary disturbances in atmospheric pressure that must be heard instead of viewed.<sup>1</sup> This development requires a real overhaul of art gallery space and management, which historically has focused rather on a purely visual aspect, the gaze. It also questions the way galleries deal with the display of artwork and the context that surrounds the exhibition, such as the catalog, which documents the exhibited works and develops discourses on them. In this study, the gallery is defined as a museum space that displays artifacts and artworks, including galleries having a commercial purpose.

A look back at historical exhibitions indicates that some of them experimented with sound by integrating audio recordings into the exhibition process, an important example being the conceptual art exhibition *Art by Telephone* (Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago, 1969). This case is worth examining as it incorporates the LP vinyl record, which has a direct impact on the physical and discursive environment of the art gallery as well as on visitors' museum practices.<sup>2</sup> The record was originally the catalog of the exhibition. It later became an object to be displayed in the gallery space through two exhibitions based on the original 1969 *Art by Telephone* exhibit. This article's analysis of the impact of the vinyl LP upon conceptual art exhibitions focuses on the various means of deployment of the record by art galleries according to the discursive strategies of the involved institutions. In particular, this case study provides an overview of the contemporary context and use of the LP record in a way that questions how the museum institution regards this old technological recording object, as well as how the record occupies different spaces and serves different functions in an art gallery. The author provides a first overview of these issues, introducing them as a topic for further discussion.

The record of the *Art by Telephone* exhibition was originally a 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ -rpm microgroove vinyl LP record produced in 1968, an analog sound storage medium that was meant to be the catalog of the original exhibition presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art



*Figure 1. XXX.*

of Chicago in 1969.<sup>3</sup> The album contains the entire conversations in which thirty-seven conceptual artists each explained one of their artworks orally and discussed on the telephone with the director of the museum, Jan van der Marck, how to execute its creation for inclusion in the show.<sup>4</sup> On the cover of the LP album, one can read that, under the supervision of the curator, David H. Katzive, the artworks were thereafter fabricated in Chicago by volunteers or local craftsmen strictly following the artist's verbal instructions.<sup>5</sup> These works were thereafter displayed in the exhibition space of the Chicago museum.<sup>6</sup> The director explained that they might be understood as processes, situations or information systems initiated by language. It seems that the museum wanted to find a way to foster conceptual art, a movement that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s that

consisted of questioning the physical existence of artwork and asserting that art lies in ideas, concepts and language rather than in the production of physical objects.

The LP record remains one of the few documents of this exhibition, but it has been revived and displayed decades later as an audio artwork in the exhibition at the Specific Object/David Platzker Gallery held in New York in 2008 and, more recently, in *Art by Telephone Recalled* organized by La Panacée – Centre de culture contemporaine de Montpellier, France, in 2013.<sup>7</sup> We can observe here the multiple uses of the record as a document, as a technological means for archiving and distribution, as well as an artwork in itself displayed in shows.

### ***The Record... as an Object for the Gallery***

It is worth recalling that during the 20th Century, music practices and sound reproducers were intertwined with the sale of music as commercial objects.<sup>8</sup> The physical formats of such commercial conveyances of music changed over time: from the shellac 78-rpm record to the vinyl LP, to the 45-rpm single, the audio cassette and the CD, among others. These formats still exist, but for many people digital music files have replaced them for everyday music listening. Some scholars, such as Jonathan Sterne, have studied the history of listening practices to show the genealogy of sound technology formats. Indeed, a look back into the history of sound reproducing devices demonstrates that during the 20th Century, recording technologies evolved toward an ever smaller format for the sound-conveying device until its complete dematerialization as a physical object.<sup>9</sup> In other words, sound carrying objects as physical commodities have almost disappeared from the visual world, morphing into intangible objects – downloadable digital information that can circulate on the Internet.<sup>10</sup> MP3 digital files and similar downloadable formats have largely replaced CDs, cassettes and LP records as the new means for listening.<sup>11</sup> The MP3 actually redefines listening practices. It therefore can be argued that the tangible analog format of the LP record as well as the other tangible recording ones have become obsolete technologies for everyday listening, as the audio and music industries have shifted toward more intangible formats.

But if recordings embodied in objects are less involved in listening practices nowadays, they have reached another context: the art gallery or museum. Obsolete listening practices used in the 20th Century can thus be reinstated and renewed by these institutions.<sup>12</sup> In other words, it appears that the actual disembodiment of recording contributes to the concept of regarding the obsolete format of the record as a collectable object by, among other institutions, the museum. The record becomes an object for the sense of sight, a product to be looked at.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, it objectifies the recording; the sound itself is challenged by its physical representation, by a visual image.<sup>14</sup> The record within the museum institution takes advantage of its role as an archive, as an artwork or as a collectable object freed from commercial music distribution networks, among others, but now included in another network of distribution, that of the museum world and by extension, the art market.

The *Art by Telephone* LP album exists in only a few copies. The Specific Object/David Platzker Gallery in New York contributed to the notion of displaying of the record and even sold a copy of the original vinyl, which was also the original exhibition catalog, for the price of US\$400.<sup>15</sup> We are reminded that this gallery, dedicated to post-1960 art

and more specifically to conceptual art, aims to provide a platform for and a context to ephemeral artworks, artist publications and other ephemera. Indeed, it reexamined and succeeded in demonstrating the new status of the record, which acts as a document available in limited editions to accompany the exhibition.<sup>16</sup>

### ... as an Exhibition Catalog

By converting the LP record into a catalog, *Art by Telephone* preserved the vocal descriptions of the artworks by artists, innovating the development of the exhibition discourse by means other than the text conveyed by written language, which is the most common format used by art museums for archiving and ultimately for developing a discourse. *Art by Telephone* presented an audible format and thus violated expected museum practices on the representation of exhibition discourses.

Generally, the textual book-style format still prevails in most cases, even for promoting and analyzing the display of intangible or audible artworks. Indeed, recent sound exhibitions provide some examples. We find a book-style catalog of the recent exhibition *Art or Sound* curated by Germano Celant and presented at the Ca' Corner della Regina, Fondazione Prada, Venezia, in 2014. Similarly, the catalog for *Soundings, a Contemporary Score*, appears to exist only in this same book-style format. This configuration leads to an interpretation of artworks with an audible component by a textually described and imaged form. Museums tend to show new practices in art that go beyond the dominance of the "regime of the gaze." However, they fail at adapting the mode of archiving and distributing the artworks; rather they continue to preserve the exhibition works and their discourse as text and image. This highlights a major disparity between sound artworks and their representations. Taking a different path, that of the recording format, the *Art by Telephone* LP record allowed a shift from a reading and/or a viewing experience of exhibition catalogs and artworks to an audible, listening one.

This particular exhibition also challenged the record's main function: it diverted the LP format from a vehicle for the music industry to a presentation of telephone conversations, emphasizing the importance of means of communications used in that time. The telephone thus promoted and established a connection between the artists' ideas, the material artwork and the use of voice through language.<sup>17</sup> The LP record thus raised issues about how the voice and sound data could become an alternative to readable text in the development of discursive strategies and in archiving the exhibition. In a broader sense, the voice and, more precisely, the speech and the language allow understanding. The sound of the voice then leads towards what Roland Barthes calls the *connection between two parts*, which are "I am listening" on one hand and "I hear or listen to me" on the other hand, in an "intersubjectivity" space, where two actors can exchange their points of view.<sup>18</sup> In the case of *Art by Telephone*, the voice provides a description of the artwork and acts as a sound archive. It does not assert theoretical developments, historical positions or exhibition analysis; it only acts as a proof of the process of creation of the works. The sound discourse is implicit and shows an aspect of conceptual art that might be perceived by the visitors of the exhibition to be effective in itself. It follows that it may be worthwhile to explore the further possibilities of developing a museum institution discourse through sound recording formats as exhibition catalogs.

### ... as a Historical Listening Medium

The introduction of the LP recording into the gallery also brings new experiences to visitors when it is displayed: it provides visitors with a specific historical listening experience. The gallery displayed the *Art by Telephone* record in 2008 in a way that had it playing non-stop during the entire exhibition, and the sound was heard throughout the exhibition space.<sup>19</sup> According to this presentation, we should be reminded that the choice of a particular format provides specific appearances and listening experiences, as Jonathan Sterne explains.<sup>20</sup> We should also notice that the LP record was the listening standard at the beginning of the 1950s until it was eclipsed by other competing formats.<sup>21</sup> This *Art by Telephone* vinyl by the Specific Object/David Platzker Gallery engaged the visitor in a way of listening from this analog technology, from a specific earlier time.

The LP record can provide the experience of listening to all of a piece of music (or intentional grouping of songs) on one side of an album without any interruption. On the contrary, digital sound files of today are more inclined to be organized as a playlist comprised of selections from different albums and artists. This practice creates a fragmented listening experience from the back-and-forth between different sources and tracks, similar to a collage or a mash-up.<sup>22</sup> In this way, the museum seems to be bringing back old, everyday life practices of listening to albums and provides the record with a site-specific, contemplative listening context.

By exhibiting LP records, a gallery or museum proposes a historical alternative to the digital technology listening practices in the modern life. In other words, the record in the museum offers an experience that goes beyond immediacy – it revives historical listening practices by reactivating the analog technology of the past, resulting in a physical, sensitive and aural experience for the visitor.<sup>23</sup>

### ... as a Visual and Silent Artwork

The exhibition *Art by Telephone Recalled* held in Montpellier in 2013 used the original verbal descriptions on the LP record to create new artworks. Indeed, the curators, Sébastien Pluot and Fabien Vallos, reenacted for this exhibition the creation of the original 1969 artworks through the help of graduate students from different art schools. They also reactivated the concept by asking new artists to use telephone conversations to describe their works, which works were thereafter to be materialized in the exhibition. *Art by Telephone Recalled* has been presented in institutions in France and the United States. Each time, the artworks were destroyed at the end of the event and rebuilt for the new one.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in every exhibition; archival documents on the artworks of 1969 from the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago were also displayed.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, the vinyl LP of 1969 took part in these exhibitions as an artwork itself. But it was displayed inside a glass box in a way that emphasized the written text of the cover. The *Art by Telephone* record was still used for its original function in the Specific Object/David Platzker Gallery, which was to disseminate sound for listening. However, in the *Art by Telephone Recalled* exhibition, the LP record became a visual artwork. This presentation rendered the artists' voices and the sound of the record silent: in other words, it challenged the original function of the recording since it was displayed as a visual object to be looked at. Consequently, the discursive strategies were set to override the concept of hearing and listening to the original voices in the gallery space.

This exhibition demonstrated the intent of the institution's practices to represent sound as a silent, physical archival object, reminiscent of the "white cube" approach to exhibition of artworks. This concept, which was criticized by Brian O'Doherty in his articles published between 1976 and 1981, emphasized the importance of the optical experience – the neutrality of the white walls, the pristine space, but also the silence characteristic of modernist exhibition spaces.<sup>26</sup> As a counterpart of modernist painting, the museum as a white cube puts emphasis on the pure and disembodied gaze, allowing no sonic cues to educate the ear.

A shift occurred within the preservation of the sound archive here: from a sound wave to a visual object. The embodiment of sound within the silent record displayed in the 2013 exhibition demonstrated the overriding element of institutional power. The audible voice was trumped by museum strategies to exercise control over the way the original voices comprised an essential part of the exhibition. Here, the museum deprived visitors from experiencing the voices from the past and from a past listening practice.<sup>27</sup> It appears that the record displayed as a visual object preserved the museum's authority, where the "voice" that had to be heard in fact became that of the institution.<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, the display of the catalog by the curators of *Art by Telephone Recalled* deprived the visitor of a past listening experience that the David Platzker Gallery had preserved some years before.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the written text is presented, in place of the original aural component, and each work of art is well described and explained on the displayed album cover. In that way one could understand the original intent of the 1969 conceptual art exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago, that used audible language to demonstrate the importance of the creative process leading up to the physical artwork. Consequently, *Art by Telephone Recalled* challenged the role of recordings when they enter the gallery and showed the limitations placed on sound to lead toward the development of a discourse within this institution.

By institutionalizing the LP record, the gallery established a different specific discursive strategy for obsolete analog sound technologies. Indeed, questions are raised that go beyond the modernist aesthetic and the experience of purity, to focus more on the impact of the record and sound itself brought into the art gallery space. Further analysis would need to take into consideration the gallery within a cultural network that allows the circulation and collaboration between different elements to focus on the very contribution of the institution as a political and economic space with respect to sound technologies and more precisely, on the LP record.

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## Endnotes

1. Museum studies have demonstrated the dominance of sight over the other senses. See Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (ed.) (WA: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), pp.25-32.
2. Since 1969, *Art by Telephone* has been an important exhibition for conceptual art practices in the history of the critical discourse of art as it presents new issues regarding curating, among others. Unfortunately, this exhibition has been neglected and understudied since few documents about it are available. Apart from the LP album and the text contained on its album cover, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago has written two descriptions. Because of this sparse documentation, lots of recent texts concerning the original exhibition include several errors..
3. The entire project was influenced by *Telephone Pictures* (1922) by Lazlo Moholy-Nagy. This work consisted of a series of three paintings of identical composition but rendered in different formats as realized by a signs and banners company. As with *Art by Telephone*, *Telephone Pictures* is based on the telephone conversation: the instructions from the artist to the company for the realization of the artworks were transmitted by telephone.
4. The whole conversations are available online: "Art by Telephone," accessed 2 August 2014, [http://www.ubu.com/sound/art\\_by\\_telephone.html](http://www.ubu.com/sound/art_by_telephone.html).
5. No visual representation was allowed. The artists that took part in the show were: Siah Armajani, Richard Artshwager, John Baldessari, Iain Baxter, Mel Bochner, George Brecht, Jack Burnham, James Lee Byars, Robert H. Cumming, François Dallegret, Jan Dibbets, John Giorno, Robert Grosvenor, Hans Haacke, Richard Hamilton, Dick Higgins, Davi Det Hompson, Robert Huot, Alain Jacquet, Ed Kienholz, Joseph Kosuth, Les Levine, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris, Bruce Nauman, Claes Oldenburg, Dennis Oppenheim, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Guenther Uecker, Stan Van der Beek, Bernard Venet, Frank Lincoln Viner, Wolf Vostell, William Wegman and William T. Wiley. Charlotte Moorman and Nam June Paik also participated on the day of the opening. Collectively they brought together some heterogenous artistic practices (Pop Art, Land Art, Fluxus, Conceptual Art, etc), which all have in common the first goal of being initiated by the process of language. For additional details about the event, see Sébastien Pluot and Fabien Vallos, *Art by Telephone Recalled* (La Panacée: Éditions Mix, 2014).
6. Introduction text by the director, Jan van der Marck on the LP jacket. Library and Archives of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.
7. The project *Art by Telephone Recalled* was part of a research program about arts and translation studies developed by Barnard College, Columbia University, the ESBA TALM-Angers and the Cneai. In addition to La Panacée – Centre de culture contemporaine in Montpellier, the exhibition was shown in other places including the École Supérieure des beaux-arts TALM, the Centre national édition art image, the CAPC Musée d'art contemporain/EBABX, the Emily Harvey Foundation and the San Francisco Art Institute. Each exhibition also displayed the archival documents concerning the original artworks of 1969 from the archives of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago.

8. Auslander, P., "Looking at Records," in *Aural Cultures*, ed. Jim Drobnik (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), p.150.
9. *Ibid.*, p.155.
10. Sterne, Jonathan, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Also, plenty of formats exist for digital files, but the MP3 format has become the most common one for the music industry and its distribution. See Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).
11. *Ibid.*, 2012, p.27.
12. *Op. cit.*, 2003, p.18.
13. Attali, J., *The Political Economy of Music* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 1985).
14. Auslander, P., "Looking at Records," in *Aural Cultures*, ed. Jim Drobnik (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004), p.152.
15. The gallery sold one copy of the original 1969 vinyl LP with the original album cover. See the website of the David Platzker Gallery, accessed 20 August 2014, [http://specificobject.com/projects/art\\_by\\_telephone/Art\\_by\\_Telephone\\_Checklist.pdf](http://specificobject.com/projects/art_by_telephone/Art_by_Telephone_Checklist.pdf) and [http://www.specificobject.com/projects/art\\_by\\_telephone/#.U\\_YpsSgl8So](http://www.specificobject.com/projects/art_by_telephone/#.U_YpsSgl8So).
16. The LP record could also reach the art market in that way.
17. It is worth noting that Bell Telecom and Xerox were supposed to sponsor the 1969 *Art by Telephone* exhibition. Even though they finally declined, this fact still demonstrates the connection between American communication companies, new technologies industries, and *avant-garde* art practices of that time. Thus, it also historicizes the contribution of companies' research efforts on the development and promotion of a better understanding of the conversation and the voice. It reminds us that the companies were doing so by reducing the presence of noise and its interference that can modify comprehension of the object of listening ("what is to be listened to"), and by extension, the quality of the language that is being transmitted.
18. Barthes R., *L'Obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III* (Paris: Seuil 1982), p.218 & p.224.
19. On the presentation text for this exhibition, we can see the way the record is displayed: «In this exhibition Specific Object presents the continuous playing of the original, 44 minutes, 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ -rpm vinyl LP record which was produced as the exhibition catalog for the show *Art by Telephone*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 1 November-14 December 1969.» The exhibition lasted from 13 October to 19 December 2008. See the official website: «*Art by Telephone*» (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1969), accessed 29 May 2014, [http://www.specificobject.com/projects/art\\_by\\_telephone/#.U-Bh\\_Sgl8So](http://www.specificobject.com/projects/art_by_telephone/#.U-Bh_Sgl8So).
20. *Ibid.*
21. For instance, sonic devices such as reel-to-reel magnetic tape recorders challenged the LP record listening habits.
22. *Ibid.* It appears that as a consequence, new technologies, music and sound industries focus more on developing multiple copies of digital files, such as MP3 among others. Indeed, these files change the quality of listening as they are compressed and have a small size, so a large quantity of them can be put on hardware, Ipods or other sound carrying devices.



23. Sterne J., *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p.17.
24. The exhibition started at Cneai on 29 September 2012. It first displayed historical artworks, the ones from the *Art by Telephone* original album. Thereafter, 36 artists and 23 graduate students of art schools described their own propositions of artworks in a telephone conversation, which were translated into visual or sound performances, videos, and installations, among others.
25. To learn more about these documents, see *Art by Telephone Recalled*, accessed 2 August 2014, <http://www.artbytelephone.com/>.
26. O'Doherty B., *Beyond the Ideology of the White Cube* (MBACBA: Barcelona, 2009).
27. *Op. cit.*, p.5.
28. Barthes R., *L'Obvie et l'obtus. Essais critiques III* (Paris: Seuil 1982), pp.227-229.
29. Sterne J., *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p.5.

### **Guidelines for Discographies in the *ARSC Journal***

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The content and format of discographies may need to differ according to the purpose of the work, as well as the information available to the compiler, and variations of the new guidelines may be discussed with the Editor. Discographers, however, are asked to make every effort to incorporate as many as possible of the elements that are detailed in the guidelines, which can be downloaded at:

<http://www.arsc-audio.org/DiscographicalGuidelines.pdf>

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The guidelines also appear in Vol. 37, No. 1 (2006)  
of the *ARSC Journal* (pp.14-20).