

## A Brief history of Anti-Records and Conceptual Records

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The following chronological list of recordings hints at the vast range of material included within the realms of "anti" and "conceptual" music. The list emphasizes achievements of the last few years. It would be difficult to define this odd category of music, because the artists' motivations and intentions and the results of their labors are extremely diverse. However, the records in this category have one common bond - they are all self-referential. Shifting emphasis away from the music, they point to their own existence as cultural artifacts and objects to be consumed. These recordings transcend the sound contained within their packaging (often there is no sound at all) to question "extra-musical" elements such as music industry practice, the notion of "quality," the role of the music critic, the role of the listener, etc.

They expand our perception of the phenomenon of music, addressing the processes of recording, manufacture, distribution, playback and perception. The beauty and "value" of anti-records and conceptual records is to be found not in the timbres they reproduce, but in their ability to make us aware of the entire "apparatus" surrounding music. Also included in this chronology are related live performances and a few significant events in the history of sound recording.

**1903** Thomas Edison gets the ball rolling by developing sound recordings on cylinders. This same year, the chocolate manufacturer Stollwerk creates a children's player that reproduces music etched in grooves in chocolate.

**1918** The electric record player begins to develop.

**1920** The first flexi-disc is marketed.

**1922** Darius Milhaud begins experimenting with voice transformations through record speed variation.

**1923** Lazlo Moholy-Nagy recognizes the unprecedented efforts of the Italian Bruitistes to broaden our perception of sound. He expands on their noise-based developments by "reinventing" the record. In an article in *Der Storm* #7, he outlines the fundamentals of his experimentation: "I have suggested to change the gramophone from a reproductive instrument to a productive one, so that on a record

without prior acoustic information, the acoustic information, the acoustic phenomenon itself originates by engraving the necessary Ritzchreihen (etched grooves)." He presents detailed descriptions for manipulating discs, creating "real sound forms" to train people to be "true music receivers and creators". The importance of his work is two-fold - for his creative contribution to the aesthetics of sound and just as importantly for the questions he raises about the relationships (real and perceived) between sound artist, performance, recording medium and listener. Moholy-Nagy bypasses traditional modes of music reproduction and distribution by giving concerts at the Bauhaus school, performing with manipulated discs. In many ways he sets the stage for the vast, diverse lines of development that can be classified as "anti" or "conceptual".

**1930** Paul Hindemith and Ernst Toch recycle records to create sound montages.

**1931** Experiments by Leopold Stokowski lead to a reduction in the standard record revolution speed from 78rpm to 33 1/3rpm.

**1934** Theodore Adorno publishes his influential essay "'The Form of the Record'" in the magazine *23*. This same year, in the film *L'Atalante* by Jean Vigo, an actor is seen playing a record with his fingernail. Karl Valentin and Lesli Karlstadt produce the film *Im Schallplattenden*.

**1936** Edgard Varese experiments with records, playing them backwards, varying speeds, etc.

**1939** John Cage "Imaginary Landscape #1 ", a concert for two record players with variable speed, test records, piano and cymbal.

**1948** Vinyl replaces shellac as the dominant material with which records are made.

**1952** John Cage "Imaginary Landscape #5, a concert for 42 records.

**1958** Early experiments by Arthur Kopke (see 1972).

**1963** Milan Knizak: -in 1963-64 I used to play records both too slowly and too fast and thus changed the quality of the music, thereby, creating new compositions. In 1965 I started to destroy records: scratch them, punch holes in them, break them. By playing them over and over again (which destroyed the needle and often the record player too) an entirely new music was created - unexpected, nerve-racking and aggressive. Compositions lasting one second or almost infinitely long (as when the needle got stuck in a deep groove and played the same phrase over and over). I

developed this system further. I began sticking tape on top of records, painting over them, burning them, cutting them up and gluing different parts of records back together, etc. to achieve the widest possible variety of sounds. A glued joint created a rhythmic element separating contrasting melodic phrases... Since music that results from playing ruined gramophone records cannot be transcribed to notes or to another language (or if so, only with great difficulty), the records themselves may be considered as notations at the same time." (From Broken Music - see bibliography).

**1964** Robert Watts (phono records): "...I made a series of spray-painted records for a Fluxus performance at the Fluxstore on Canal Street. These were played by the audience, and as the paint wore off, gradually the music was revealed." (From Extended Play - see bibliography).

**1966** Ken Friedman "Zen for Record" A reference to Nam June Paik's "Zen for Film" this record contains no sound and offers no suggestion for the production of sound in conjunction with the record. It is silence. Various versions are distributed, with blank records and sleeves and with painted ones.

**1968** Tim Ulrichs "'Schleifpapier-Schallplatten". Thirteen discs are made from commercial sandpaper of various degrees of coarseness. With blank centre labels in place, these are billed as "mono-sandpaper records."

**1969** John Cage "33 1/3", a concert for 12 record players.

**1970** Thomas Schmit "Schallplatte". Schmit's record is a thin strip of wood, about three feet long, labeled, signed and dated. Approximately ten were made. A contribution to sound aesthetics? This same year, Robert Watts continues his phono record creations: "I began experiments with the manufacture of a series of records in different materials such as metals, plastics, wood, clay and latex. Most of these were made on a machine lathe at Rutgers University, and I thought of them as being sound portraits of this machine. The bands on these records were varied in depth of cut, spacing and rpm. I was interested in the various sounds produced in this manner from the various materials." (From Extended Play).

**1972** Arthur Kopke "Music While You Work, Piece #1" On an otherwise traditional disc, spots of glue and scotch tape redirect the stylus, creating fragmentary music and noise. An edition of 150 copies is produced through Edition Block, Berlin.

**1972** Braco Dimitrijevic "Njeqove Douke Glas (His Pencil's Voice) " Yugoslavian Dimitrijevic presents

his record through gallery in Zagreb - a piece of white cardboard, with one side "etched" by a pencil, playable at 16, 333 45 or 78rpm.

**1977** Boyd Rice begins experiments leading to the manufacture of records with looped grooves and multiple centre holes for off-axis playing -- Non "Knife Ladder / Mode of Infection "and "Pagan Muzak." These records are playable at any speed and maximum volume is suggested. Rice states, "In the first record I even wanted loop grooves - I wanted overlapping loop grooves. Theoretically, there would be about three of them, and they'd overlap at certain points, and they might do random things - the needle might go in a pattern for a while and then change. But over the phone, long distance, I couldn't even get the pressing plant to do a loop groove. On the second record I persevered and finally got it." (From Industrial Culture Handbook - see bibliography).

**1982** Piotr Nathan "Absicht einer Revolution" Using a record of speeches by Lenin, Nathan devises a phonographic apparatus and glues thin cables to the record surface to deform the surface sound. Presented first as a gallery installation, the sound is recorded and pressed as a flexi-disc for broader availability. This same year, Martin Turner creates "Ekliptizs-cher Rhythmus", a plexiglass record with one groove in which certain markings are made. Says Turner, "The constellation of the stars of the date of birth is applied ... by means of scratching or hatching, marked as an acoustic event. When played on a record player, a certain rhythm results, which, in itself cyclic recurrent, varies with each person." (From Broken Music).

**1983** R.I.P. Hayman "(Disc Design) ". Never actually realizing his project, Hayman designs an endless random play record that requires complex computer-interfaced equipment to develop the master. Once pressed, however, the discs would be traditional, playable by any record player. This same year Die Todliche Doris releases "'Chore and Soli" in an attempt to liberate their work from the typical pattern of critical comparison to past work- a box set of eight mini-records playable only with an enclosed, battery-operated player (in actuality a device used to reproduce sound in talking dolls). Each album contains perhaps thirty seconds of sound, about the same amount of time it takes to insert the disc in the apparatus. A thousand copies were made. Also in '83, G.X .Jupitter-Larsen, a.k.a. The Haters, releases a silent LP - a blank record with instructions informing the holder that he/she must first complete the record by scratching it before it can be played.

**1984** VA Wolfli "Pferd.Horse.Elastic." An abrasive wheel for a power grinder is stamped and distributed

in a record cover in an edition of 100 (dry grinding, maximum 5100 rpm). Winfried Woff creates an untitled series of records treated with sandpaper, paint and other materials (playable with risk). Psychodrama distributes "No Tape" a cassette shell with no magnetic tape inside. No recording medium, it seems, can escape eventual manipulation by conceptual artists. This same year, Tentatively, a Convenience pays homage to alternative recording and playback models by spray-painting a record as it plays inside an oven during one of the Neoist Apartment Festivals.

**1987** Peter Lardong creates little chocolate records, playable by eating them. This same year John Berndt conceptualizes the record by scratching on a blank record as part of a performance at the Berlin Apartment Festival.

**1988** An incredible amount of anti and conceptual work is produced this year. Peter Fischli and David Weiss create "Schallplatte", a self-made, self-molded record made of Beracryl, a kind of rubber. Playable on a record player with some risk, the sound is of extremely muddled, low-fi disco music. 120 copies are made and distributed in Parkett Magazine, Issue # 17. Christian Marclay releases "Footsteps". a one-sided disc, containing the sound of footsteps, that had carpeted the floor of a gallery exhibit of the same name. A thousand copies are removed from the exhibit, boxed and distributed, complete with dirt and scratches from gallery foot traffic.

Coil releases a one-sided single, titling the blank b-side "Absolute Elsewhere" -- one of many conceptual b-sides to be found. Ron Lessard of RRRRecords releases the first of a long line of important anti-records - "Metastasis" by Andrew Smith, a.k.a. Billboard Combat. Lessard recalls the circumstances leading to this release: "Smith was an art student in Boston. One day he walked into the store with hand-destroyed, hand-altered records he did as a school project. His teachers and fellow students weren't too impressed; they didn't see the point. But I was overwhelmed by both their visual appeal and the potent musical possibilities. I asked Andy to make me 100 copies for release on RRR." The "Metastasis" LPs are embedded with razor blades, nails, pins, needles, glass, etc. Later this year, Lessard's own group, Due Process, produces "Do Nothing", a totally blank LP, and "Do Damage". a record with hand-cut grooves, made on a home made lathe. A hundred copies of each are made available. The Haters approach RRR with "Wind Licked Dirt", a record played by rubbing dirt on it, and RRR distributes 200 copies. Also in '88, The Haters create "Tractor" - a record in the traditional sense, except the grooves on one side start at the center and run out to the edge.

**1989** Yet another fruitful year for things conceptual. The Caroliners release a box-LP filled with street trash. The Dust Breeders create "Home Tape It! (The Killer Inside Mix), A Sandpaper Mantra" This attractive 7" slab of sandpaper, in an edition of only 28, includes a short statement discussing pranks, record market strategy, and John Cage's "Silence," Crash Worship ADRV produces "Flow" The original LP under "Flow" is a compilation of local bands, including Crash Worship, who took part in a recording class of some sort. "Flow" materializes when Crash Worship beautifully silkscreens and etches the vinyl, permanently altering all tracks but their own. Though disfigured with ink and scratches, the tracks can be played, revealing a distant sense of the original music, and visually, the revised record is one of the most stunning anti-records to date. Ron Lessard/RRR continues his label's anti-record series with an anti-version of "Colorado". a traditional compilation LP. Titled "Colorado Anti-Record Edition", Lessard destroyed the Architects Office track on the record by scratching in it the words "Fuck Architects Office". The severe alteration of their song is apparently motivated by an argument. Kapotte Muziek sends RRR 200 copies of their project "Heathen Muzak a 7" tribute to Boyd Rice with hand-cut grooves and extra center holes drilled off-axis. Honeymoon Production releases "Manipulation Muzak", also on RRR in an edition of 100 - a palm-sized chunk of raw vinyl with instructions on how to melt it, flatten it, and cut grooves in it. This year RRR releases the famous "Montage" anti-flexi-discs by AMK. These cut up and recombined flexi's are perhaps the most successful in the RRR anti-series, originally released in an edition of 100, then widely performed and recorded for traditional release on several record labels. Regarding the "Montage", AMK states, "Personally, I never thought of them as anti anything. It's a record. It's meant to be played on a turntable, and it does produce sound. Play it and find out. My reason for starting to make these was sort of a joke I played on GX (Jupitter-Larsen) when he sent me his silent records. I started gluing pieces of flexi-discs to his records, then I started making them just using the flexi's. Lessard asked me to make a hundred to release as an anti-flexi. So that's the story. If anything, these should be thought of as "pro-records". I just cut them up to fraction concepts into more dynamic wholes. With the advent of CD's. the idea of a record is archaic, so the montage has taken the idea to its most illogical conclusion - a flexi (lower grade of an already outmoded record) cutup and recombined. To make matters worse, each one is different, hand-assembled, and every turntable will react to them differently. Great fun. So that's it. When I started out I didn't have any intellectual predispositions about what I was doing. That's never for me to decide. It was really just in good fun." Subsequent traditional recordings of "Montage" performances

are released on RRR, Banned Productions, Sounds for Consciousness Rape and My Tongue Records.

**1990** The Linear Regressionists release "Living on the Regression Line " on RRR, the first anti-compact disc. Only 50 copies are made of this silent CD with holes drilled into it. Clearly subversive in intent, the disc claims adherence to the "POMS Principle" (POMS stands for Pursuit of Market Share). An anti-tape project is also released, "Temorage" by Bruxist. This nicely packaged cassette comes with nails and stickers conveniently glued to the shell. Those who take the time to dismantle the sculpture and play the tape find that it actually plays sound - a brief spoken phrase looped and repeated for the entire length of the tape. This same year, T.A.C., a.k.a. Tom Cox, releases four tapes in an "anti-tape series"- "Short Time Tape", which "drastically alters the function of time"; "One Time Tape", designed to "functionally self destruct on first listening; "No Time Tape", offering "no function unless constructed"; and 'Anti-Tape'. which is a "totally dysfunctional" piece of sculpture. Cox states that his tapes were produced "in an attempt to reorient the audio aspects of experimental tape packages." G.X. Jupiter-Larsen/Haters breaks new ground in '90 with the creation of "'Oxygen is Flammable" a broken piece of plastic packaged in a small box. The enclosed instructions state that the plastic is a record, played by pouring water over it. The instructions call attention to the similarities between the sounds of water falling and of fire rising. GX has this to say about his conceptual work: "In the context of the 'anti-record' the word 'anti' implies that the record is unplayable. As if to suggest that the menu is the meal. All of my records are playable maybe not always by ordinary means, but playable nevertheless. This is why my releases which are played without a stereo are called 'conceptual'. In not wanting to limit my vocabulary, I started to release records which had nothing to do with music - accounts of noise outside of a musical context-noise as motif. Not all trees are oak trees. Not all people are men. So not all forms of audible arrangements should be forms of music. And just because you're not hearing anything doesn't mean you're not listening to something."

**1991** Cole Harris "Slight Music" Broken pieces of records packaged small in plastic envelopes. Looking back to Knizak's work in the sixties, Harris conceives of his work as a musical score, in this case an extension of graphic notation (he calls it "object notation"), to be interpreted and played by musicians. 500 copies are distributed with H23 magazine, issue #3.

**1992** Nicolas Collins "'Broken Light", a concert for string quartet and manipulated CD and disc player.

Telium Group create "Record 1 ", a blank 7" record with hand-screened cover and a silver badge, in an edition of 354 copies on the Magnatone label. The Haters "Shear". G.X. produces a ball of cotton batting packaged in a small box. Wrapped around the contents are instructions on three thin strips of paper, informing the holder that the batting is a recording, played by being squeezed (the sound being a "sharp fluffy slightness" and a "thin fluffy pressed"). "Shear" and the earlier "Oxygen is Flammable" carry the record to new conceptual plateaus by eliminating the materials traditional to record manufacture, blurring the distinction between performer and listener (as the listener must take an active role in the production of sound, more so than placing a needle on a piece of vinyl). At the same time he raises questions about the nature of improvisation. One could argue that a traditional recording of improvisational music undermines the concept of improvisation the moment a particular version of the music is recorded (one of perhaps an infinite number of excursions based on the basic structure of the piece). By recording the music, it becomes fixed, unchangeable, static. GX's recent works, by forcing the listener to perform, create a truly dynamic recording which will vary slightly every time it is played.

This same year, Ron Lessard/RRR releases "RRR-100" Not officially part of the RRR anti-series, this is a compilation of 100 looped grooves by 100 artists squeezed onto a 7" record- Boyd Rice's now classic technique taken to its most extreme conclusion. This superb package creates a new awareness of the listening/playback process by forcing the listener to remain seated by the turntable, subjectively determining the length of each composition and physically advancing the needle to another. Also questioned is the idea of authorship--many of the works are plagiarized snippets of sound, and it is often difficult (with 50 tracks to a side) to determine which piece you are listening to. Tom Cox T.A.C. follows up his anti-tape series with "Cut 2 a tape kit containing an empty cassette shell, a razor blade, splicing tape, and a length of magnetic tape with sounds borrowed from the Kapotte Muziek project "Cut". The listener is required to cut, splice, assemble and playback. Cox also creates only 10 copies of "Linoleum Disc", an actual 12" linoleum disc beautifully silkscreened and packaged in a record sleeve. endwar finishes off the year with an elaborate anti-cassette box set called "Four Windows, One Frame", designed to exploit our "experience in dealing with the cassette as a medium that goes beyond its use as a carrier of music." The box includes a booklet, two "dysfunctional" postcards, and four individually titled cassettes (two modified cassette shells with no magnetic tape and two tapes with one second of sound recorded per side), released on Institutional Projects. endwar states that his project is not



exclusively self-referential, addressing a variety of musical and non-musical influences, and he points out that his conceptual project is one experimental use of cassettes designed to help us consider the infinite extra-musical potentials of the medium.

### **CITED AND RELATED READINGS**

Milan Knizak, Action is a lifestyle (I came across this tide, but I've been unable to locate it or get more complete info).

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Hartford Art School, University of Hartford, A Sound Selection: Audio Works by Artists. Exhibition catalogue, 1980.

Emily Harvey Gallery, Extended Play. Exhibition catalog, New York, 1988.

Marinetti and Masnata, Radia. (A Futurist manifesto on sound, 1933. I've been unable to locate this document, but I've heard its been reprinted in a Futurist anthology recently.)

RE/Search, Industrial Culture Handbook. San Francisco, 1983.

NOTE From THE AUTHOR: I'm constantly revising and updating my files on self-referential recordings, hoping eventually to publish a book of essays and interviews on the subject. Any help you can provide is greatly appreciated. If you know of projects not included in the article, please send as much information about them as you can. I also welcome any related ideas, comments, criticisms, essays, photographs, etc.

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