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Zen for Record

Ken Friedman

with Craig Dworkin
Hanna B. Hölling
Robin McGinley
& Christof Migone

ZEN FOR RECORD

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Fig. 1. Detail from Hieronymus Bosch, *Ship of Fools* (1490–1500)

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FLUXUS & COMPANY



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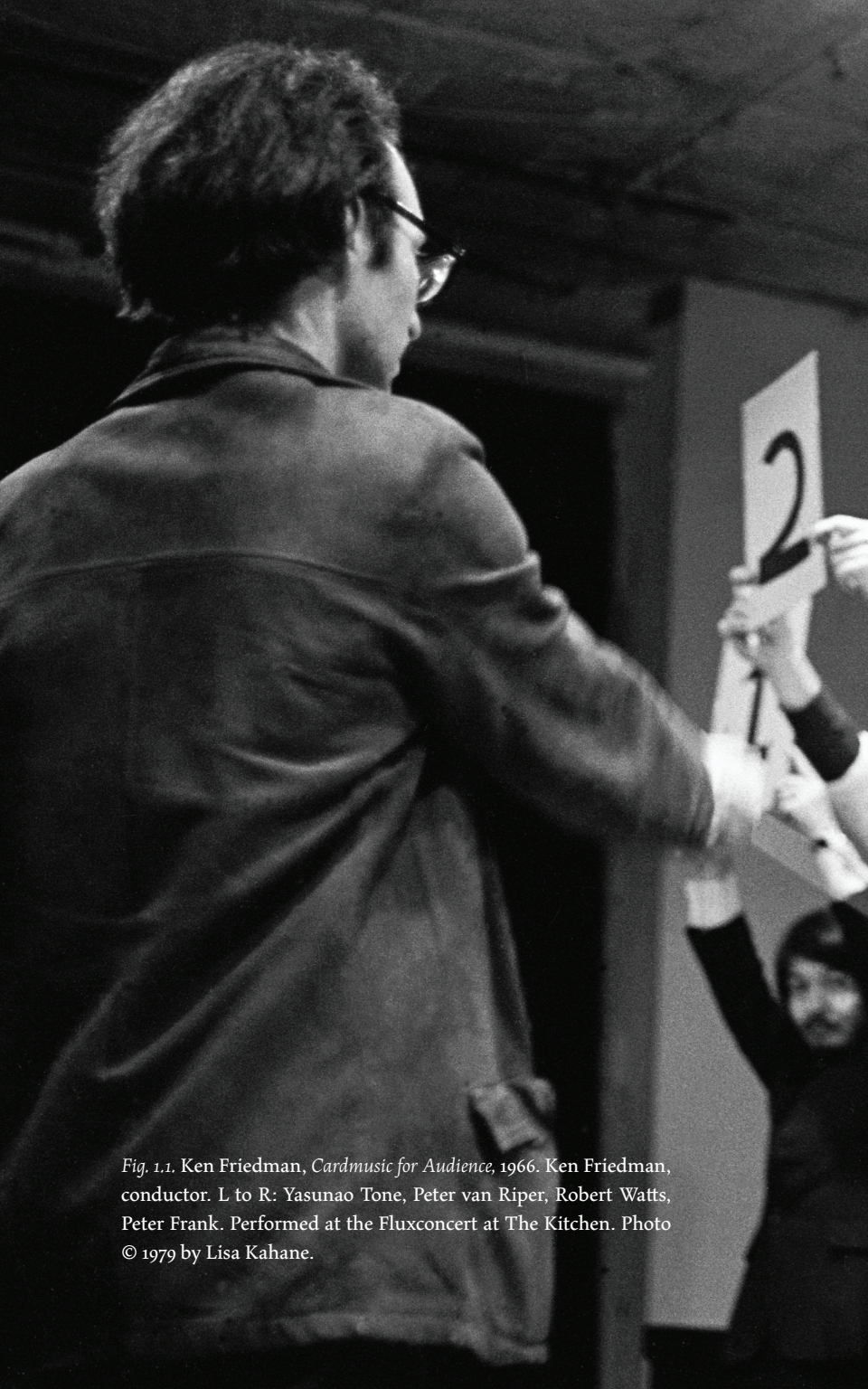


Fig. 1.1. Ken Friedman, *Cardmusic for Audience,* 1966. Ken Friedman, conductor. L to R: Yasunao Tone, Peter van Riper, Robert Watts, Peter Frank. Performed at the Fluxconcert at The Kitchen. Photo © 1979 by Lisa Kahane.


3
1

Zen for Record

Ken Friedman

Produce a phonograph record with no sound on it.

KF 1966

The first version of *Zen for Record* was a single, blank record with grooves but no sound. I found it when I was working at ESP-Disk Records in New York in September and October of 1966.[1] It may have been a defective recording. At any rate, I had no idea what purpose the record had or why anyone would make a record with no sound on it.[2]

In 1966, I was new to Fluxus. George Maciunas was producing my multiples and I was planning more projects. I thought of making a multiple edition of blank records. In keeping with the Fluxus idea, I hoped to make an LP edition at a cost low enough to sell the records for the price of an ordinary phonograph record. My career in the record industry was short-lived, and I never produced the LP.

---

1 Jason Weiss, *Always in Trouble: An Oral History of* ESP-*Disk, the Most Outrageous Record Label in America* (Wesleyan University Press, 2012).

2 The original score to *Zen for Record* was a "blank phonograph record with no sound on it." The title of the record is an homage to Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*.

It was George Maciunas and Dick Higgins who introduced me to Nam June Paik's work. I loved his *Zen for Film*.[3] Nam June and I saw each other often when we both lived in Los Angeles. He taught at California Institute of the Arts and I worked nearby as general manager of Something Else Press. We ate lunch or dinner together from time to time. About once a week, we'd take my car to a sushi bar in the Little Tokyo district of Los Angeles. Often, we'd eat with Fluxus colleague and video pioneer Shigeko Kubota and with Nam June's collaborator on the video synthesizer, engineer Shuya Abe. Sometimes, we'd eat at Nam June's house and Shigeko would cook.

In 1971, Nam June commissioned me to write his *Third Symphony*.[4] I never completed it. In 1974, I published the scores to Nam June's complete symphonies in issue 11 of *Source Magazine,* the famous final issue. *Source* was an innovative music magazine edited by composers Larry Austin and Stanley Lunetta. Each issue was spectacular, typified by imaginative scores, rich illustrations, and delightful artifacts. One might find machine-gunned pages for the score to Dick Higgins's *Thousand Symphonies,* tactile pages for a haptic score, or a letter from Joseph Beuys explaining why he did not have time to contribute. There were three guest editors over the years. John Cage was the first, Alvin Lucier the second, and I was the third.[5]

---

3 Hanna Hölling, *Revisions: Zen for Film* (Bard Graduate Center, 2015), and Hanna Hölling, "Re: Paik: On Time, Changeability and Identity in the Conservation of Nam June Paik's Multimedia Installations," PhD thesis, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2013. See also the discussion of Nam June Paik and Zen in David Joselit, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (MIT Press, 2007).

4 Nam June Paik, "My Symphonies (1973)," in *We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik,* ed. John G. Hanhardt, Gregory Zinman, and Edith Decker-Phillips (MIT Press, 2019), 72. See also Ken Friedman, "the third synfonie of nam june paik," *Source: Music of the Avant-garde, 1966–1973,* ed. Larry Austin and Douglas Kahn (University of California Press, 2011), 363–64.

5 Larry Austin and Douglas Kahn, eds., *Source: Music of the Avant-garde, 1966–1973* (University of California Press, 2011), 347–69.

Richard Maxfield was a pioneer of electronic and digital music.[6] He took over teaching John Cage's course at The New School when John stopped teaching. Richard worked with La Monte Young, George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, and many others. Early in 1967, I got a postcard from Dick Higgins telling me that Richard had accepted a post at San Francisco State University. Dick urged me to attend Richard's courses. I did. It was a wonderful experience. Richard and I worked together on several projects. We grew close, and I often went to Richard's home to read scores, talk about music, and to think. I was probably the last artist or composer to work with him closely.

Richard was too adventurous for the conservative music department at San Francisco State University. They terminated his employment despite protests from students. He moved to Laguna Beach, where he lived with his mother for a while before moving to Los Angeles. I went to see him a few times. He was depressed and unhappy, working a menial job to live at the same time that interest in electronic music grew dramatically in America's universities and music schools. In 1969, when Advance Recordings released an LP of his compositions, he asked me to write the liner notes. Soon after the last time I saw him, Richard took his own life.

There are two codas to the story. While Richard is best known for electronic music, he wanted me to learn standard music notation to work with him. I learned to use standard notation, but I was never good at it, and I never used it after I finished working with Richard. Nevertheless, I saved the scores for many years, together with several boxes of sound tapes. These were tapes from my radio show in Illinois, tapes I created as music director for Karen Ahlberg's dance troupe in San Francisco, and tapes of the concerts I played when screening the Fluxfilms. One day in 1986, I listened to the tapes and read the scores. I decided that I was a terrible composer and I destroyed the entire collection of scores and

6 Gerald Hartnett, "Automation Enchanted: Oscillations, Chance, and Cryptography in Richard Maxfield's Early Electronic Music, 1956–1959," *Resonance* 7, no. 3 (2026).



Fig. 1.1. Ken Friedman, "*Zen for Record*," in Ursula Block and Christian Marclay, *Extended Play* (Emily Harvey Gallery, 1988).

tapes. It was this act of destruction that opened my soundscape to a deeper and more symbolic understanding of silence.[7]

7 It is still possible to find a few of my old scores in John Cage's papers at Northwestern University. See "John Cage Collection," *Northwestern University Libraries*, https://www.library.northwestern.edu/libraries-collections/distinctive-special-collections/music/collection/john-cage-collection.html.



Fig. 1.3. One of the shrines at the Gekū, one of the two main shrines in Ise, 2026. The rebuilding site of the shrine building in the foreground is marked with the small wooden structure. Photo by Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei.

Over the years, I realized several variations on *Zen for Record*.[8] One used blank, empty record jackets that contained no records. In the late 1980s, I prepared a set of records with no sound by spray painting them to render them blank, without grooves, removing the sound.

Today, there are three unrealized editions of *Zen for Record* I would like to produce.

In the 1990s, a record company was considering a production of my work. The first *Zen for Record* project was a series of editions that took the piece through a range of recording media from old to recent. I would have enjoyed creating a series of different kinds of *Zen for Record,* moving through such recording media as player

8 Ken Friedman, "*Zen for Record,*" in Ursula Block and Christian Marclay, *Extended Play* (Emily Harvey Gallery, 1988). See also Ursula Block and Michael Glasmeier, *Broken Music Artist's Recordworks* (Gelbe Musik, 1989), 137.

piano roll, music box, wax record, wire recording, recorded tape, Dictaphone band, phonograph record, compact disc, and so on.

For the second project, the same company was interested in producing a limited edition multiple for the CD. I thought of a heavy, square wooden box constructed of massive blocks of wood that would hinge together to form a large cube. The cube would open out in two massive halves. Each half block would contain a small, shallow shelf on the inner face of the half block. The shelf would be just deep enough to accommodate the CD version of *Zen for Record,* with the CD sitting to half its depth in the face.

The idea for this project emanates from the Ise Shrine (fig. 1.3). The Ise Shrine is a Shintō shrine built on one of two adjacent sites. Every twenty years, the priests take down the shrine and build it anew on the adjacent site.[9] One face of the open block would embody silence in the physical recording. The other face would embody silence in the empty space.

The third unmade version of *Zen for Record* was my favorite. It emerged from a conversation with Nam June at the time of his 1982 retrospective at The Whitney Museum of American Art. Nam June and I met at the museum one day, and he invited me out for coffee. I had been reading a copy of *Art News* with a richly illustrated article on the exhibition that he had not seen. I gave it to him. He thumbed through the article quickly, then put it down, and went back to talking about ideas. Among other things, we talked about *Zen for Film* and *Zen for Record*.

The third unmade edition would have been a soundless phonograph record with a white label carrying simple sans-serif type stating title, date, and composer. The jacket would have been white, with the title and composer in sans-serif type at the corner

9 Cassandra Adams, "Japan's Ise Shrine and Its Thirteen-Hundred-Year-Old Reconstruction Tradition," *Journal of Architectural Education* 52, no. 1 (1998): 49–60, and Felicia G. Bock, "The Rites of Renewal at Ise," *Monumenta Nipponica* 29, no. 1 (1974): 55–68. See also Jonathan M. Reynolds, "Ise Shrine and a Modernist Construction of Japanese Tradition," *The Art Bulletin* 83, no. 2 (1983): 316–41, and Mark Teeuwen and John Breen, *A Social History of the Ise Shrines: Divine Capital* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

of the jacket. On the back, the liner notes would have been a blank space without words, signed by Nam June.

For years, I tried to find a record company to publish this edition. None did until Jan van Toorn at Slowscan Editions decided to produce a small EP version in a limited edition.[10] A while after the EP appeared, I received Craig Dworkin's beautiful essay on *Zen for Record*.[11]

Over the years since I first planned *Zen for Record,* I have given a great deal of thought to the ways that absence activates presence and emptiness creates space. This is the heart of Zen. What's not there is the beginning of what is. The process that destroys one Ise Shrine builds another.

At the center, there is nothing. The creative void is the beginning of all that is.

Cold Mountain is a house
Without beams or walls.
The six doors left and right are open
The hall is blue sky.
The rooms all vacant and vague
The east wall beats on the west wall
At the center nothing.

— Han Shan[12]

Today, artists and composers who work with silence owe a debt to Nam June Paik and John Cage. [13]

---

10 Slowscan Records, Vol. 40, 2018. Silkscreened wooden box with records by Charles Amirkhanian, George Brecht, Albert M. Fine, Ken Friedman, Joe Jones, Pauline Oliveros, and Adriano Spatola. Produced in 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands in a limited and numbered edition of 100.

11 Around that time, Craig Dworkin wrote a delightful essay published as "Signal to Noise," in *No Medium* (MIT Press, 2013).

12 Han Shan, "Cold Mountain is a house," in Gary Snyder, *A Range of Poems* (Fulcrum Press 1967), 39.

13 Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press, 2010), and John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage,* 50th Anniversary Edition (Wesleyan University Press, 2011).

Nam June Paik and John Cage owed their debt of silence to Zen masters stretching back over the centuries.

> I live on the mountain
> no one knows.
> Among white clouds
> eternal perfect silence.
>
> — Han Shan[14]

Over the past six decades, *Zen for Record* has gone through a process, moving from a phonograph record to an empty record jacket to a never-produced CD. Then it went on to an LP from Slowscan Editions that didn't become an LP but did appear as small EP record. Now it is finally here. I produced the LP edition myself. I worked with Disc Republic, a Swedish record production company in Växjö, a city surrounded by forests about a hundred kilometers from my home in Kalmar. Robin McGinley did sound production for the single soundless track. The Konst-Ig bookstore in Stockholm sells the record – and with only one hundred copies to buy, Konst-Ig is the only place where people can buy *Zen for Record*.

14 Han Shan, Shih Te, and Wang Fan-chih, *Cold Mountain Poems: Zen Poems of Han Shan, Shih Te, and Wang Fan-chih*, trans. J.P. Seaton (Shambhala, 2013), 72.

Figs. 1.4–5 (opposite and overleaf). Nam June Paik performing at George Maciunas and Billie Hutchings's wedding and Fluxus Erotic Cabaret, February 25, 1978, Jean Depuy's loft. Photo by Hollis Melton.




AUTHENTIC
MEXICAN
WEDDING GIFTS!!!


FLUX
1. Nam
2. Maur
3. Stefanie
4. Yoshimasa Wad
5. Vytas Bakanas & Sharon
6. Dick Higgins- twenty
7. Steve McCaffery- b
8. Noel Howes- snake da
9. Martha Fishkin- 4
10. Jackson Mac Low-
11. Larry Miller- thrill
12. Steward Sherman-
13. George Maciunas & Billie
14. Jean Dupuy - Tableau
15. Ben Patterson: lick (Carn



Fig. 2.1. Ken Friedman, *Zen for Record*, 1966 (2026). Photo © 2026 by Anja Karolina Furrer.

Signal to Noise[1]

Craig Dworkin

> I hope only for silence.
>
> —Félix Fénéon

> Perhaps after all there is no message.
>
> —John Cage

1966: The Beatles' last concert. Maria Callas's last concert. The final year of the ONCE Festival. The launch of the Monkees. Four Herb Alpert albums in the top ten. A series of singles from Simon and Garfunkel. The best-selling song in the United States all year: Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler's "Ballad of the Green Berets." There was nothing to listen to.

1966: A blank record might be heard as an elegy for the times, an epitaph, a cenotaph, *un tombeau.*

1966: Nothing to listen to. Not in the sense that there was nothing worth listening to: the Beach Boys release their unshakably strange (if not quite listenable) *Pet Sounds*; Frank Zappa debuts with *Freak Out!*; Cornelius Cardew joins AMM; the AACM issues *Sound*; Herbert van Karajan records the first installment of his

1 First published as "Signal to Noise," in *No Medium* (MIT Press, 2013).

Ring cycle; Miles Davis has his second great quintet in order; the Coltrane quintet is distending "My Favorite Things" to an hour of atonal improvisation; Steve Reich is phasing two tape players slowly out of sync; a mercurial quintet named The Hawks, later known as The Band, is warming up the tubes in their amps.... But with Ken Friedman's *Zen for Record* there is really finally nothing to listen to. After all the sheep bleating and bleary psychedelia; Sadler's jingoist snare drums and Zappa's deskilled jingles; Malachi Favors's "little instruments" and Simon Dupree's Big Sound; after Dylan's electric Judas kiss in Manchester and Rashid Ali's steel brushes shredding in Tokyo; after all the easy and difficult listening that year, you could have put on Friedman's disc and listened to nothing.

1966: But we might have guessed it, more or less. The title already dates the work squarely to its cultural moment and the intellectual climate of the postwar counterculture, with its distinctly Americanized understanding of Zen. More specifically, the title points to the pervasive alignment of Zen with Fluxus, that loose group of artists with whom Friedman was then in intimate dialogue. In part, the association between Fluxus and Zen was perhaps both inevitable and coincidental, given the congruous aesthetics of the "event score"—often presented in a haiku-like triplet—and the koan. Ranging from a single word to a few paratactic sentences, the telegraphic noun phrases of the event score masquerade as imperatives, establishing a series of dynamic contrasts: between everyday vocabulary and the imaginative acts it might provoke; between the condensed language of grammatically contracted forms and the broadly abstract categories named; between the restricted verbal means of the score and the open-ended possibilities for its performance. In short, between minimal gesture and maximal potential; specificity and ambiguity; constraint and permission. "Permission granted," as John Cage was fond of saying, "but not to do whatever you want."[2]

2 John Cage, *A Year from Monday* (Wesleyan University Press, 1967), 28. Liz Kotz provides a far more comprehensive account of the event

Zen for Record might be thought of as a koan in the form of a phonograph disc: is it a version of the event score, or its performance? (The sound of the blackbird singing, or just after?)

1966: By now, however, Zen was also a quite explicit reference point for Fluxus, following the model of John Cage, who didn't meditate but for decades had mediated Daisetsu Suzuki's teachings of Zen, and who found a "taste of Zen" in anything that exhibited "the admixture of humor, intransigence, and detachment."[3] Nam June Paik, who had a far more contrary and critical understanding of

---

score in *Words to Be Looked At*. Importantly, for the claims I am making here, Kotz's patient and perceptive argument finds the origin of the genre of the event score in John Cage's *4'33"*. Moreover, she finds Cage's "silent" piece in turn derived from the specifics of media; Cage's "complete rethinking of the nature of sound" was "made possible by the new technologies of amplification, microphony, radio, and magnetic tape" and his rethinking of the nature of the musical score was abetted by "the introduction of electric, electronic, and computer-based means into experimental music" so that "anything from circuit diagrams to punch cards to simple drawings and verbal instructions could arguably function as scores or notational devices" (Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* [MIT Press, 2007], 31, 5). Most importantly, perhaps, "Cage's work with audiotape altered his understanding of the nature of sound and time, and decisively transformed his use of notation" (43), but Kotz also locates his "license to free up the relationship between simultaneous elements in order to permit unplanned superimpositions and chance encounters" in the material properties of magnetic tape media (specifically, their inability to synchronize with precision) (46). For another sustained consideration of the event score that also reads it in relation to the tension between singularity and abstraction, see Julia Robinson, "From Abstraction to Model: George Brecht's Events and the Conceptual Turn in Art of the 1960s," *October* 127 (2009): 77–108. Robinson's conception of "seriality without repetition" (108) would be another way to understand the chronological dimension of *Zen for Record* discussed above.

3 John Cage, "An Autobiographical Statement," *Southwest Review* 76, no. 1 (1991): 59–77.

Zen than the sunnily disposed Cage, had entitled a series of works with a formula that Friedman's record echoes: *Zen for Head, Zen for Street, Zen for TV, Zen for Film*….

1965: Friedman writes *Zen Is When,* an event score that reads, in its entirety:

> A placement.
> A fragment of time identified.
> Brief choreography.

Which may be the koan, or the answer to the koan, depending on how clearly we hear *Zen for Record* as the performance of this score: the record placed on the phonograph, the needle placed in the groove, the duration measured by the playing time, the jitterbug dance of the needle and the circular sway of the disc.

1966: Another of Friedman's scores, like the contemporaneous *Zen for Record,* puts sound and silence into paradoxical play; the work reads, simply:

> The sound of one shoe tapping.

Entitled *Zen Vaudeville,* the poem cleverly collapses form and content, not only suggesting vaudeville's main dance genre ("tap") but also enacting vaudeville's blunt punch-line humor with a slapstick pun. *Zen for Record,* again, makes a fine dance partner for this piece; its putative silence is easily imagined as a recording of "one hand clapping," and its actual sounds are more rhythmic than melodic: a high cymbal vinyl hiss and percussive phonograph pop, the mechanical taps of the turntable's idle.

Indeed, much of the interest of *Zen for Record* emerges precisely from that dialectic between the promise of pure silence and the minute particulars of surface and system noise. Or, in other words, between theory and practice.

In the context of its title, the album suggests the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā*: the dharmic silence of the fundamental void. But in the context of a turntable, that silence is always unattainable. Indeed, with *Zen for Record* the noises generated by the network itself are all the more pronounced. On the one hand, the expectation of a uniform experience (whatever you imagine the experience of silence to be). On the other hand, the reality of electric hum and mechanical rumble, the disruptions of unforeseen clicks and the startle of occasional popped reports. *Zen for Record* remains unenlightened, in this respect, a bodhisattva heretically proclaiming the illusion of illusion, the fact that we never get beyond the facts. In the context of the contact between two types of carbon—the diamond of the stylus and the chlorinated petroleum of the disc—it insists on the brute resistance of the material, the inescapable weight of even the most finely tuned and precision balanced world.

(But then again, perhaps Friedman's record wasn't ever so far from Zen to begin with. For all the images of emptiness and silence in some meditative void, Zen always had its noises too; beyond the bells and raspy flutes, you never knew when you might be startled with a suddenly shouted "Mu!" or when the crack of bamboo splints would sound the unsuspecting back of some drowsy disciple's skull.)

At the same time, the title may be more mimetic than anything else, and, like *Zen Vaudeville,* an enactment as much as a description. *Zen for Record*: the phrase itself is musical and classically weighted. Unemphatically trochaic, breaking into even feet, each with a short *e* and longer *or,* the words move forward and backward in the mouth, with the consonant *c* and *d* of the second half lending the phonetic sense of an ending, or the invitation to repeat. *Zen for Record*: a damped tapped beat; a soft tic-toe, tic-toe; the needle at the end of play sounding the cardiac shellac with a pulse of diastolic capture and release (a record always returns to the heart [Latin *re* (again) + *cor* (heart)]); centrifugal drift and quick collision; waver and knock; a clock set to thirty-three and one-half revolutions per minute.

Which brings us back to Cage. The point of his infamous 1952 composition *4'33"*, at least according to one of the readings Cage himself encouraged, was not of course the timed "silence" of the musician sitting for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, but rather the audience's realization during the performance that in fact "there is no such thing as silence."[4] Silence is always ideal, and illusory. Silence is a thought experiment, provocative and unverifiable. Although it is almost certainly apocryphal, Cage loved to tell the story of how he supposedly came to realize the fiction of silence while visiting the anechoic chamber of a Harvard laboratory and unexpectedly hearing sounds—a low pumped thump and a high electric whine—in what was advertised as a perfectly soundproof room. When he emerged, perplexed, the technician explained that Cage had heard his own heartbeat and the hum of his nervous system, recording itself recording.

Had Cage played *Zen for Record* he would have had no need to travel to Harvard, or to invent any stories, because its lesson is the same: all inscriptive relays leave a trace of their own configuration. In other words, one can never find a perspective on a message free from the medium of its conveyance, because in the process of transmitting a message the network of recording and playback mechanisms always produce an account of their own instantiation as well. The media are always legible in the message (if not quite, *pace* McLuhan, the message itself). Michel Serres makes the same point when he declares that "noise is part of communication."[5] As does Wolfgang Iser, when he restates one of the basic axioms of information science: "There is always noise in the channel."[6] The same postulate might have been extrapolated from the tenets of Slavic Formalism, which understood poetic language as a language of diminished reference, oriented away from the commu-

4 John Cage, *Silence* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 51.

5 Michel Serres, *The Parasite,* trans. Lawrence R. Shehr (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 53.

6 Wolfgang Iser, "Why Literature Matters," in *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature,* ed. Rudiger Ahrens and Laurenz Volkmann (Winter, 1996).

nicative function and toward its other aspects (context, medium, structure, et cetera).[7] Indeed, *Zen for Record* is a perfect illustration of what the Russian formalists called *zvukopis'* звукопись: the noise emitted by the surface texture (*faktura* фактура) of a work; pure sonic inscription; the essence of "soundwriting" (a *phono-graph*). The strict formalism of an attention to the materiality of the media, regardless of any content, should not be mistaken as apolitical, however; Theodor Adorno extrapolated an entire ideology of musical reception from the "slight, continuous and constant noise" perceptible in the hum of the groove, the static of broadcast radio, and the dust and scratches of a cinematic soundtrack.[8] These a priori conditions of the medium, Adorno wrote, were "a sort of acoustic stripe," branding every mediated performance as a convict in the prison house of amplified sound.[9]

Under the sign of Jan Mukařovský, *Zen for Record* might be heard as an essay in linguistic theory. Under the sign of Serres, it might be heard as the field recording of rats rustling behind the kitchen door. Under the sign of Cage, it might be heard as a compilation album, with several equally good performances of *4'33"* run back to back (listeners with a stopwatch can figure out the interval between each performance). Under the sign of Paik, it might be heard as the soundtrack to *Zen for Film.*

1964: *Zen for Film.* The version I've seen, part of the *Fluxfilm Anthology* compiled by George Maciunas, opens with the title and signature, flashed in rapid blocky letters against a black ground. Otherwise, the work simply consists of a strip of clear 16mm leader. The dynamic is thus precisely the same as in *Zen for Record*. On the

7 See, for instance, Jan Mukařovský, *On Poetic Language,* ed. and trans. John Burbank and Peter Steiner (Yale University Press, 1976).

8 Theodor W. Adorno, "Memorandum: Music in Radio," Columbia University archives, Paul F. Lazarsfeld papers (June 1938), 30–31, quoted by Richard Leppert, "Commentary," in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music,* trans. Susan H. Gillespie et al. (University of California Press, 2002), 219.

9 Ibid.

one hand, the premise holds out the prospect of a blank screen and the enlightened promise of seeing "nothing." On the other hand, actually screening the film instead brings to light all of the "visual noise" of cinema: any tremor of the projector; the slightest misregistration of image and screen; the barely perceptible blurring of the shutter's flicker; the sympathetic blinks of one's own strained eyes; all the opacities of dust and acetate. Above all, imperfections in the film or errors in optical printing—as well as any subsequent scratches—perform a magnified and animated dance. With an unpredictable foudroyance, like the flare of fleeting phosphenes, they start and twitch across the screen, erupting and disappearing as quickly as the eye can register them.

Zen for Film is sometimes described as an endless loop, sometimes as an hour long, or twenty minutes, often as an even ten. The version included in the *Fluxfilm Anthology* I saw runs to no more than eight. The discrepancies are surprising, because time, in Paik's work, is all to the point, and his film is a precision clockwork. Like *Zen for Record,* with its thirty minutes of long-play, Paik's film measures a certain duration at whatever length (even looped it establishes the duration of the cycle). Both works are thus related to the contemporaneous music of composers such as Cage and Christian Wolff, who were pioneering the use of time brackets in their scores: durational frames within which a variety of unspecified events might take place. The film also measures time in other ways, well beyond the frame of its running length. To begin with, it records the viewer's attention span at both a gross psychological level—how long until you get bored, look away, start to do something else—and a very local physiological level: the time between involuntary blinks or the spasms of the ciliary muscle. Moreover, the material of cinema inscribes time as well. The mechanism of the projector worries and wears the filmstrip, slowly disintegrating the film with each screening.

As Paolo Cherchi Usai points out, any particular print has a limited number of runs through the projector—barely more than

three hundred—before it must be abandoned as unusable.[10] The viewing of cinema is therefore inextricably intertwined with its slowly timed and inevitable destruction. The Fluxfilm edition of *Zen for Film* is an alarm set for forty hours. Long before the destruction of the print, however, the material of film inscribes time in a way that is particularly noticeable in Paik's work. The equation is simple and direct: the more often the film is screened, the more scratches and creases appear. Noise, in the technical sense, increases over time. The same is true of *Zen for Record,* which we might hear as a kind of audible chronograph, becoming noisier and noisier the more it is played, as scratches accumulate and the stylus slowly textures and widens the smooth groove of the lathe-cut channel, pocking the vinyl and etching miniature filigrees of dust and grit.[11]

Zen for Record thus teaches an important lesson about media. One could argue that Friedman's record and Paik's film are simply two different editions of a single work. Or, if not two formats for one and the same work, then at least that each is closer to the other than to the respective versions that might appear on DVD and CD. Indeed, the relation of *Zen for Record* to something like an imagined *Zen for Compact Disc* is worth considering. The comparison immediately raises a number of questions: would the CD consist of a digital recording of one play-through of a particular copy of *Zen for Record*? Or a PCM data file with all of the binary values set to one of the numbers reserved for null? A disc without any data recorded to it at all? The answers matter, because they decide between the technology's use as an archival preservation of sound (or silence) and its use as a source of sound, between the absence

10 Paolo Cherchi Usai, *The Death of Cinema: History, Cultural Memory, and the Digital Dark Age* (British Film Institute, 2001).

11 The same telos awaits more durable media as well, only over a longer time frame. Richard Kostelanetz, with a measure of either humor or pretension, states that his "two volumes of ostensibly blank books [...] could not be publicly exhibited, because pages so white cannot be fingered." Richard Kostelanetz, "Fictions in My History," in *The Old Fictions and the New* (McFarland, 1987), 7–8.

of sound as a cancellation of the disc's ability to record something else and the absence of sound as an indication of pure potential (the formatted but unrecorded CD, like an unpressed phonograph record, could hold any number of possible sounds).

Under the sign of Hegel, *Zen for Record* might be heard as an example of *Aufhebung*: a simultaneous preservation and cancellation.

That distinction between a record of an event and the means by which to record an event, or between the recording of events too small to register and the medium for their recording, brings us back to the issue of time: is the blank disc an index of the past, or an index of the future? In either case, the status of time in our imagined *Zen for Compact Disc* would be substantially different than in *Zen for Record*. One side of a standard compact disc (120 cm resolved at 16 bits and sampled at 44.1 khz per second) holds about seventy-four minutes of music—more than twice the thirty minute limit of a 12-inch microgroove record. Moreover, although compact discs are far from eternal (the foil pits and chips, the film separates, the plastic brittles over time), time does not accrue to compact discs in the same way that it does to phonograph records, and the decay is measured at a very different rate. Of course many other distinctions between the compact disc and the phonograph might also inflect an attempt to read a work such as *Zen for Record* allegorically, to relate its "form" and "content." Does it matter, for instance, that the CD measures the totality of its potential time without the interruption of changing sides, like the LP (or a sheet of paper)? Or that its data are read outward from the center, rather than spiraling in? Or that its data are discrete rather than continuous? But instead of pursuing such distinctions here, I want to emphasize a more general point about the lessons that Freidman's disc—with its profound affinity to a film and its significant distance from a CD—teaches us about media.

First, it teaches us that "medium" is as unrealizable as "silence." The point becomes clear as soon as you try to locate the medium of *Zen for Record*. You could of course single out the disc of polyvinyl chloride, but to understand it as *a medium*—to make it legible as a medium *as such* and to distinguish it from home

siding and credit cards and plumbing pipes and other instances of PVC—already inserts it into a network of material and technical supports that immediately disperse the notion of "medium" across an inextricable aggregate of distributed and differentiated forms: stylus, player, speakers, and all of their composite parts and points of connection (circuits and wiring, electromagnetic coils and regulating discs, foam and flexible membranes and resonant housings). Rosalind Krauss makes a similar point, directly applicable to *Zen for Film,* when she asks: "Is the 'support' of film the celluloid strip, the screen, the splices of the edited footage, the projector's beam of light, the circular reels?"[12] Such complex webs of overlapping technical support, as Krauss argues, fatally complicate any account of a single, pure, essential medium.[13] There are only ever media.

At the same time, as I have tried to demonstrate here, *Zen for Record* makes clear that even the most abstract and cerebral works of conceptual art cannot be separated from those material and technical supports. There is no single medium, to be sure, but media are inescapable. Friedman's record lays bare the structures that other audio works might seek to conceal, but which they can never elude or avoid. This is an important lesson, because after all the talk of the "dematerialization" of the art object in the 1960s, and after the futile challenge made by "idea art" and "information art" to the institutions they opposed, conceptual art has been too often imagined as immaterial (in both senses of the word).[14] *Zen for Record* proves both positions wrong.

Between these poles, *Zen for Record* resonates as ideal desert island listening, as music marooned or gone on holiday: a combination of cold deodorized intellect and the heat of machinic friction, a piece of obsidian sea glass polished from a message-sealing

12 Rosalind Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," *October* 116 (2006): 55–62.

13 See Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (Thames & Hudson, 2000).

14 For the popularization of the phrase, see Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Praeger, 1973).

bottle tossed by waves of listed periodic motion and lofted by the wash of surface hiss.

2026: *Zen for Record* is the best album you've always never heard.

Nez

Spinning the Now of Nowhere

Christof Migone

It could not be put any simpler: "Produce a phonograph record with no sound on it." The perfunctory instruction of Ken Friedman's *Zen for Record* (1966) to manufacture a soundless record is doable, it's within the realm of the possible, it poses no technical challenge whatsoever. It's not at the pragmatic level that the challenge lies. The lasting question is the "why" of it, for a record implies an imprinting, and the content being printed is presumed to be a *some*thing. The assumption is based on the added value that is being inscribed on the substrate—it is, after all, a product. It costs something to buy something, that makes it a consumer good to be consumed. When *no*thing is on the menu, when it acquires a price tag, when it enters the logics of production and consumption, when it replaces *some*thing, a disjuncture occurs: a failure or mistake is surmised. Also, a perplexity might be conjured, perhaps the objectification of nothingness is the quintessential tantalizing gesture—the degree-zero commodity as ersatz essence. However, the simplicity the work aspires to is fraught with fractures throughout the work's three components: title, instruction, narrative. The following discussion will be fittingly circular rather than linear. The grooves of this record do progress,

but they can also get stuck and thereby produce punctuations in temporality's flow.

It is no accident that both Nam June Paik's *Zen for TV* (1963) and *Zen for Record* are founded on accidents. In the case of the latter, one could say that the piece preceded its conception. It was pre-extant. The original score: "A blank phonograph record with no sound on it" describes rather than instructs. The object was first found and only then the framing was devised; it is therefore very much in the lineage of the readymade. Letting the object simply *be* could have been another response, but our framing and narrativizing drives are difficult to dispel. The attraction to name recurs and persists. These drives can sometimes be tempered by history (*Has this already been done?*), but only partially, and even then sometimes with differing effects: Precedents can fuel resurgences and homages as readily as they can dissuade by outlining a path already well-trodden—riding between this dichotomy is the ever iterative and generative tangent.

Returning to the happenstance of the found object, perhaps that fortuitous record was the ur-record, the proto-record, the Original, the one that sets the conditions of possibility for hearing—echoing here Craig Dworkin's quip about *Zen for Record*: "the best album you've always never heard."[1] My take on that phrase is that it is the best album you've always heard (i.e., *the best album you've always been hearing*). This sentiment syncs up as well with the role Gilles Deleuze ascribes to Bartelby's famed formula (*I would prefer not to*): "to make the whole confront silence, make it topple into silence."[2] The somewhat terse tone these instances share is not necessarily the only way to translate such entropic impetus, a contrasting example can be found in Pauline Oliveros's "Some Sound Observations," where she recurringly reminds the reader of the writer's present moment via an abundant accounting of the sounds that surrounded her at that moment.

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1 This volume, 40.

2 Gilles Deleuze, "Bartelby; or, The Formula," in *Essays Critical and Clinical,* trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 72.

> As I sit here trying to compose an article for Source, my mind adheres to the sounds of myself and my environment. In the distance a bulldozer is eating away a hillside while its motor is a cascade of harmonics defining the space between it and the Rock and Roll radio playing in the next room. Sounds of birds, insects, children 's voices and the rustling of trees fleck this space.[3]

These are contrasting ways to subvert the default linearity of the narrative—in one Bartelby implodes, in the other Pauline explodes. Oliveros's listening log is implicitly part of this record replete with nothings, albeit more verbose. The record is both the prior and post stages of the gush of words. It sits spinning, ready for you to listen—not to it per se but to your own surroundings, your own present; ready for you as listener to complete the picture. I use the visual word "picture" intentionally in order to also connect to Hollis Frampton's notion that "a still photograph is simply an isolated frame taken out of an infinite cinema."[4] This record, given its blankness, signals to everywhere but itself, it's a gateway. As such, its contours are both finite and infinite, the grooves spin outward even though visibly they go inward. Jean-Christophe Ammann celebrated his museum's acquisition of Nam June Paik's *One Candle* by declaring that "what I have at heart is not the formula's applicability, but the formula in and of itself, in its boundless beauty and *plainness*."[5] All these examples point to the fact that the paradoxical state of resolute indetermination is the desired state; and if it is not achievable, at least a compulsive drive aims squarely in that direction.

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3 Pauline Oliveros, "Some Sound Observations," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music,* ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (Continuum, 2005), 102.

4 Hollis Frampton quoted in Allen S. Weiss, *Varieties of Audio Mimesis* (Errant Bodies Press, 2008), 57.

5 Jean-Christophe Amman, "One Candle," in Nam June Paik, *Eine Kerze—One Candle* (Portikus, 1989), 11. Emphasis added.

The title, *Zen for Record,* says it all by saying nothing. Its implicit promise is nothing. Nothing as a marker for the grander state of nothingness perhaps. A stepping stone, but not one on a path, a more haphazard approach is called for, a drop of the needle here and there so that leaps are required between one and the next. The linear notion of one following another is thwarted at every step. Even that expectation of an "every" with respect to "step" has to be suspended. Another way to put it is that when no-thing becomes some-thing the abstract becomes materialized. Does "no sound" necessarily mean "silence"? It's a failed silence at best. The reality is that a silent record will never play silently. The material and the mechanism conspire to sound no matter what. Plus, if you crank up the volume of your speakers, they will invariably feed back into the stylus of the record player in a glorious confirmation that it's alive despite our best attempts to produce and exhibit an inert negation. Silence meets noise: they are no longer at opposite ends of a spectrum, but a pair entwined in a rhythmic—as aptly depicted by M. NourbeSe Philip in her poem "Dis Place—The Space Between":

> silence is
> silence is
> silence is
> the sound, the very sound between the words,
> in the interstices of time divided by the word
> between
> outer and inner
> space/silence
> is
> the boundary[6]

Such a poignant encapsulation could be all we need; nothing more needs to be said. But there are nuances and intricacies between all of these betweens. For now, let's shift to the noise of

6 M. NourbeSe Philip, "Dis Place—The Space Between," in *Blank* (Book*hug Press, 2019), 251.

Zen for Record that is also present in the narrative that accompanies the piece. The account of the trials and tribulations in getting the various iterations realized is both voluminous and scant. Here is an instance of the former: a tangential string of anecdotes leads to the self-determination that the author is a failed composer all the while also recounting the suicide of a close friend. And in an example of the latter, the 1982 unrealized version mentions a "blank" record but does not mention how that blankness is actualized. My intent here is not to nitpick at deficiencies or inaccuracies, but on the contrary to point at the inherent slippages that silence seems to thrive on. There is a significant benefit in not being provided with all the answers, to be left in the dark. One is thereby free to meander through the silence aimlessly and endlessly—its terrain is imprecise, nonspecific. The ambivalent situation paradoxically enables a resolute freedom. Throughout the selectively synoptic account, however, the core idea is steadfast in its ask: produce a soundless record. However, it quickly becomes clear that this can manifest in myriad ways: grooves or no grooves, tracks or no tracks, cover without a record or record without a cover, LP or CD, etc. There is a tension however between the territory and the quest. The latter is at best inconsequential with respect to the former, and at worst, wreaks havoc by its colonizing demarcations. That being said, the operation at work here is not reducible solely to such dichotomies. The embrace of the antinomic impulses to both make something out of nothing and make nothing out of something has validity.

The back and forth between *no*thing and *some*thing connotes contortions that from the onset pique interest. Actually, arguably what is happening in this piece is more a removal than a reversal, what is removed is the "making." Or at least here a kind of conventional notion of making is contradicted; when content is emptied out, when not-making *is* the activity, the only task that is left is everything else (and that is *not* nothing). The reversal at play here throughout is less literal, its tone is introduced from the opening of this essay with how the Nez ("nose" in French) in the title points

obliquely rather than overtly to Zen.[7] To follow one's nose hinges on peregrinations and divagations—impulses and intuitions are driven by scent (the nose knows). And while haptically engaged on this intuit way, the move to displace default methodologies opens doors heretofore wedged shut, resulting in the kind of far reaching consequences that Laozi captures in "Celebrating Mystery":

> Look at it: nothing to see.
> Call it colorless.
> Listen to it: nothing to hear.
> Call it soundless.
> Reach for it: nothing to hold.
> Call it intangible.
> Triply undifferentiated,
> it merges into oneness,
> not bright above,
> not dark below.
> Never, oh! never

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7 In October 2022 while walking through the Toronto International Art Fair I chanced upon a booth where one could commission a poem on the spot. The poet, Tilly H. Glick, asked for a starting point, I mentioned zen and nez. A few minutes later I was handed the following typewritten poem:

zen - nez

palindromes become
idioms depending on
the language, jokes become
koans depending on
how you say them, inflection
is everything, i was
meditating mindfully
when my nose got away
from me, as if stolen
clean off of my face

—khg (@TheSpontaneousProseStore)

can it be named.
It reverts, it returns
to unbeing.
Call it the form of the unformed,
the image of no image.
Call it unthinkable thought.
Face it: no face.
Follow it: no end.[8]

In the introduction to Laozi's *Daodejing,* which includes the above, Ursula K. Le Guin describes her intent as the translator to render the text "accessible to a present-day, unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps unmale reader, not seeking esoteric secrets, but listening for a voice that speaks to the soul."[9] The foregrounding of listening and the repeated deployment of the un- prefix activates and invigorates. It's useful to reread Laozi's celebration with Le Guin's advocation in mind. The stakes have now been made clear: A great undoing is afoot, or at least its possibility is palpable. Does the undoing start with a blank record? I would venture to say that any endeavor that pays attention to silence and listening has the capacity to actualize Le Guin's call. The attribution is not automatic by any means, and I'm not here to pronounce a determination either way. For now, I'd rather dwell in the in-betweens, the contradictions, the missteps, the ambiguities; I'd rather foreground the to and fro of circuitous exploration.[10] In other words,

8 Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching,* trans. Ursula K. Le Guin (Shambhala Publications, 1997), 18.

9 Ursula K. Le Guin, "Introduction," in ibid, x.

10 The circuitous is implicitly embedded in the zen–nez intertwined pairing, which is less a duo and more of a double-sided coin. In that sense it also reverberates sympathetically with one of the central tenets of Zen Buddhism which is its nonduality. For this last point I am indebted to Michael Freeden who made this observation during the Q&A following my online presentation of this essay on June 18, 2025 as part of the presentation series organized by Ejvind Hansen and Melani Schroeter for the Network of Silence Studies, https://silencestudies.net/.

there is a pronounced predilection here "to stay with the question" as Cynthia Cruz aptly puts it in her praise of *not-knowing.*[11]

Let's now consider variations on the instruction. A more succinct version of "Produce a phonograph record with no sound on it" could read: "Produce a phonograph record without sound," but that may be interpreted as requiring silence at the stage of the production—intriguing proposition, can the act of producing ever be silent? The more tautological "Produce no sound on a phonograph record with no sound" could perhaps interestingly help clarify the ambiguities that arise when one tries to get specific regarding how no sound is being inserted in a manufacturing process that is normally predicated on sound at every step. Come to think of it, could the instruction simply be to put any record on and not turn the volume up? Yes and no. The tactic would work, what would be missing is the object. This particular object has taken care of the volume for you. Although, as explained earlier, amplifying a signal devoid of signal does not result in silence: the electrical and electronic circuitry, plus the acoustics, will make something out of that supposed nothing if given sufficient time and volume. This claim assumes the playback is analog (vinyl), in the digital realm it would be more difficult to create this kind of feedback, though not impossible. The variables of someone's setup can alter the playback that the artist intended. Another scenario, one quite likely in this instance, is that the record will never be played, its presence in the stacks will suffice. Instead, all its accoutrements will serve the purposes of information and consumption, while the record itself will stay pristine and the spindle will remain idle. Unplayed not because it is unplayable but because it is a collectible. Furthermore, aside from the mercantile component, and as alluded earlier, it does not need to be played because it is always already playing. Here I am intentionally slipping from the "always heard" to the "always playing," not quite collapsing the two together, but letting them intermingle so as to correlate the conversation always at play between emanation and

11 Cynthia Cruz, *Disquieting: Essays on Silence* (Book*hug Press, 2019), 27.

reception. We are nudging toward the sine qua non of art as a type of ecology. Ken Friedman puts an optimistic spin on the stakes of such a system: "Art can be considered as *spirit-energy* made manifest, our works, discursive preludes to the unfolding future. If the discourse is informed, intelligent, the response as keen as the offering, the offering worthy of the response, all will unfold well."[12]

On to the title: *Zen for Record* is part of a lineage, a series, a chain; as a formula *Zen for…* has propulsive force, it purposefully proposes. The preposition's polysemic play tends towards a utilitarian or causal goal. We usually ascribe purpose and directionality to the preposition "for." By contrast, art writ large has the ability to temper and parody that type of instrumentalization by uttering statements that may mimic a straightforward proposition but instead is mischievously committed to derailing, or at least skewing, any such expectation. Concept and context are at their most productive when production and product are not the sole goals—let's throw outcomes out the window. As Dick Higgins puts it in "Games of Art": "There are those for whom the beauty of Nothing is simply an inherent thing, for whom it needs no function […]. The apparent unassumingness of emptiness is what gives it its charm."[13] He goes on to qualify that this stage should by no means be conceived of as an absolute, and that it may be best described as being in a state of *invitingness*. He found the term "clumsy but clear," I think he downplayed its fittingness. The presence of gesture is implicit in the notion of invitingness; alongside, a repleteness of choices. Laudable? Yes. Revolutionary? Perhaps. Fraught? Alan Watts certainly would make that argument. Here is his scathing assessment from 1958 of such practices: "Today there are Western artists avowedly using Zen to justify the indiscriminate framing of simply anything-blank canvases, totally silent music, torn-up bits of paper dropped on a board and stuck where

12 Ken Friedman, *1973 Events,* 1973, Ken Friedman papers 1931–2006, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, "Friedman 1973 Events Nelson IC Gallery UC Davis.pdf." Emphasis added.

13 Dick Higgins, "Games of Art," *The Something Else Press Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (1966).

they fall, or dense masses of mangled wire."[14] The statement begs to be deconstructed, especially as to the application of "justification" and "indiscrimination" in an art context. What's missing in Watts's statement is the sense of play, humor that befits Zen; in lieu, on display is plenty of judgment and hubris. This sort of self-appointed and un-self-aware stance speaks more of Watts's biases than anything else. That being said, there is of course validity in raising the question of cultural appropriation. This is echoed by Nam June Paik's similarly dismissive first impressions of John Cage: "He looked to me like a superficial American Zen Modernist, of which there were many then, and even now."[15] Appropriation is a thornier question than what is deemed to constitute art and what is relegated to what Watts disparagingly dubs "a group session in audiotherapy [...] not yet art."[16] My contention is that *Zen for Record,* thanks to its *plainness* (Ammann) and its *invitingness* (Higgins), is able to not only "stay with the question" (Cruz) of appropriation (amongst others) but also activate, amplify, and pluralize the questioning—there are questions aplenty. It is in fact tempting to say that the grooves of this record are replete with nothing but questions.

Now contemplating the silent record itself: For one, it obliquely ups the ante of Derek Bailey's thought experiment of this sui generis scenario: "If you could only play a record once, imagine the

14 Alan Watts quoted in Dick Hebdige, "Even unto Death: Improvisation, Edging, and Enframement," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (2001): 339n3.

15 Nam June Paik, "B.C./A.D. John Cage," in *We Are in Open Circuits: Writings by Nam June Paik,* ed. John G. Hanhardt, Gregory Zinman, and Edith Decker-Phillips (MIT Press, 2019), 36. Originally published in *World New Music Magazine* #03 (1993).

16 Watts, in Hebdige, "Even unto Death," 339n3. Boarding an airplane last October someone across the aisle from me noticed the book I had on my lap, *The Way of Zen* by Allan Watts, and asked me if that was indeed Watts. I confirmed by showing him the cover, and he said "Wow, that's a blast from the past." I smiled, he seemed to enter a fond personal reminiscence, and our conversation stopped there.

intensity you'd have to bring into the listening."[17] How does the notion of *onceness* here intersect with the aforementioned *presentness* and invitingness that that the silent grooves exude? Through silence, temporality oscillates between the ephemeral and the eternal. Presumably, the intensity Bailey imagines is devoted to a desperate attempt to accurately inscribe the record to memory given its single spin. Memory, mood, and imagination affect listening, so do weather conditions for that matter—the grooves are never truly empty. As Daniela Cascella puts it: "The conversation is not only with people, but with places, atmospheres, radio waves, dreams."[18] What seems to be emerging is the realization that such an edge case publication facilitates playback not only via the conventional physical means but also in the speculative sense. It congeals the abstract. It lets air meet aether. It makes the unknown tangible. Its immateriality amasses objectness. None of the last four claims are true in the absolute, they are aspirational. It seems obvious to state that a record is made for listening, but here that purpose is redoubled. It is akin to John Cage saying that for him *4'33"* was an ever-*presentness* event: "I listen to it every day. I don't sit down to do it; I turn my attention *toward* it."[19] To be clear, Cage is not listening to a recording of his composition here, it is his surrounding environment that he is tuning in to—the spinning is internal, the grooves are synaptic, the framing is circumstantial—we could even posit that this particular record functions as a kind of Mother.[20]

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17 Derek Bailey quoted in David Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Duke University Press, 2014), xi.

18 Daniela Cascella, *Nothing As We Need It* (punctum books, 2022), 58.

19 John Cage quoted in Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4'33"* (Yale University Press, 2010), 186. Emphasis added.

20 "After removing the silver deposit and passifying, the metal master was then electroplated (electroformed) to create metal positive matrices, or 'mothers'. From these positives, stampers (negatives) would be formed." *Wikipedia,* s.v. "Production of phonograph records," https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Production_of_phonograph_records.

Cascella's recent theorization of chimeric writing could seamlessly be transposed to the kind of attentive listening that I'm delineating here. In her book *Nothing As We Need It* she describes this mode of writing as being "all, nothing, oscillating between meanings found in sound, hearing in writing that ripples the surface of these pages, yearning for other ways of reading."[21] A chimeric listening, could therefore be necessary in order for us to properly hear *Zen for Record*. Cascella continues: "I want to study such [chimeric] yearning in its rotational spin; to hold a desire for words that make me speechless, and to prove that this desire for nothing to say is the most profound site of attention."[22] It seems confounding to ascribe such power to an object, especially to a record that defies recording, a record in name only, an ersatz record. But it is in that record's *reductio ad absurdum* that its expansive capacities lie. A further alignment to Cascella's chimeric theory can be drawn from Dick Hebdige's depiction of improvisation in his essay "Even unto Death: Improvisation, Edging, and Enframement":

> [A]nything is sayable within the improvisational space—anything at all—because that space is absolutely empty. It is empty of absolutes because it is a black-box space, an infinitely generative grammatical machine; its only obligation is to the hard truths it produces through the grinding of its gears; its only obligation is to rigorously, ferociously play with the permutations that happen at any given moment.[23]

To present *Zen for Record* simply as an improvisation offers a concise way to loosen the sometimes stultifying hold of objecthood in order to enfold listening and convey the *spirit-energy* mentioned earlier that Friedman himself extols. In other words, and it should be clear by now, this record is not just a record. It has more in common with the air around it, always moving, always

21 Cascella, *Nothing As We Need It*, 80.

22 Ibid., 91.

23 Hebdige, "Even unto Death," 337–38.

circulating—spinning *sans* axis. It's a record that operates as a "temporary social architecture whose substance is not sound but *air,*"[24] a "social gravity" that produces "intense vibrations but the speakers emit quietness."[25] A nexus comprehensible only via a nez that intuits and listens. A manifest record that is fully nowhere and thereby utterly of the now.

The now of nowhere. The nowhere of now. The nose now knows. Fittingly, "Nowhere Air" by Osip Mandelstam is our closing track:

> Like water trickling from the highest ice
> Its bracing ache, its brain-shard sweetness,
> Its nowhere air of utter now,
>
> So my sigh has lost its source,
> And I live by meanings I cannot comprehend,
> For every instant I must taste the instant that I end.[26]

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24 "[W]hen one enacts an instance of audio, [...] it results in a temporary place, a temporary social architecture whose substance is not sound but air and this air is only partially constituted by sound and only partially encountered with the ear." Micah Silver, *Figures in Air: Essays toward a Philosophy of Audio* (Inventory Press, 2019), 101–2.

25 "The ideal place to listen to a lecture or a poem is a contact improvisation in which touch is mediated by the fabric of before spacetime [...]. To have intense vibrations but the speakers emit quietness. To feel the sound, make the language part of the fabric! Social physics: some combination of a physics experiment and a social experiment. Social gravity. Gravity and Fabric." Fred Moten and Wu Tsang, *Who Touched Me?* (If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to Be Part of Your Revolution, 2016), 31.

26 Ossip Mandelstam, "Nowhere Air," in *Stolen Air: Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam,* trans. Christian Wiman (HarperCollins, 2012), 43.

How to Make a Silent Record

Pop Artifacts, Artists' Projects, and Production Techniques

Robin McGinley

Introduction: Texts from Nothing

Ken Friedman's original event score for *Zen for Record* encompasses a single proposition: "Produce a phonograph record with no sound on it." Such a statement immediately places discussion of this work in the present tense, with a simple injunction to *do* something. The score initiates a mechanical or production process, which implies a subtle subversion of the usual approach involved in the manufacturing of a record. The parameters of production are thus transposed, and a familiar and culturally resonant carrier of sound, becomes a carrier of silence—an anti-record, of sorts.

As it transpired, Friedman's call for silence was not a solitary one, and the purpose of this writing is to consider and contextualize the idea, conceptual impact, and realization of *Zen for Record,* in relation to the broader arc of silent record production which has emerged, somewhat at the fringes of several contexts, since around the middle of the twentieth century. As is the case with many a good idea, the notion of making a silent record appears

to have occurred to several different individuals and groups, for a range of different purposes. This text, therefore, approaches the silent record as variously an artist's project, a comedic proposition, a political act or maneuver, or as a slightly askew pop-cultural object or another form of defiant gesture within the otherwise fairly quotidian realm of commercial music.

From this last perspective, it is significant that Friedman states that this work, subsequently titled as a form of audio analog to Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962–64) and encoded in the text of the event score, began life as a found object.[1] A soundless vinyl 12" LP, which Friedman discovered while working for ESP-Disk, an eclectic, independent New York experimental and free jazz record label and assumed was likely defective. "If not, I have no idea why anyone would make a record with no sound on it."[2]

Various reasons and responses to the question of "why make a silent record?" are explored throughout this text. Of equal importance, however—if one returns to the impetus in the wording of the *Zen for Record* event score—is *how* one creates a silent record, considering that the choices made and the strategies followed in the production of such recordings have a definitive (if perhaps subtle) effect on the results. This is somewhat irrespective of the mode of recording or the type of sound carrier employed, choices of which, in the intervening years, have migrated far from the grooves of a vinyl record, given advances in audio delivery technologies (and perhaps back again, with the resurgence of vinyl since around the early 2010s). Such concerns come into focus in the later stages of this text, when selected examples are subjected to analysis in terms of the actual nature, materiality, and manifestation of their apparent lack of auditory content, thereby opening up questions of what is actually recorded when one makes a silent record, what procedures may be employed to achieve the desired effect of "nothing," and how "nothing" (i.e., the absence

1 Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film (1962–64)* consists of the projection of 16mm "blank" film leader.

2 Ken Friedman, *99 Events: 1956–2009* (The Stendhal Gallery, 2009), 77.

of sound) is actually manifested, in this way perhaps also questioning, whether, in fact, all silences are created equal.

Beyond such questions, however, the impact of the idea of a silent record seems to have lost none of its potency. Furthermore, the ability for the concept to animate the mind and (as we shall see) excite all manner of comment in the world's media, appears to be as strong now, as it was when the first examples emerged in the 1950s.

Silent records were back in the news in 2019, for example, when Palo Alto resident Eric Antonow and his 15-year-old son Ben launched a campaign on the crowdfunding site *Kickstarter* in order to raise funds to produce a silent record, which was ostensibly to be created as a meditational aid. The initial idea for this venture materialized in a record store, and Antonow describes the genesis of this project as follows:

> *Silent Meditation* was an unexpected project. My son got a record player for Christmas, and was excited to buy his first albums. We went digging through used record stores and he came across an album he thought I would like, "The Art of Meditation." It was made in the 1970s with dreamy cover art, and it was only 6 bucks. As a fan of meditation, I bought it and took it home to play. The first part was an explanation of why meditation was good for you, then came a few sternly guided meditations. It wasn't at all what I wanted.[3]

Antonow quickly realized that his ideal meditation record would consist of nothing but twenty minutes of complete silence, on both sides of a clear, translucent LP. Subsequently, over the course of a month, at the beginning of 2019, just over two hundred backers from around the world seemed to agree and crowdfunded the project to the tune of around $6000. The chosen means of production was equally impromptu and spontaneous, utilizing the only

3 Eric Antonow, "Silent Meditation on Vinyl," *Kickstarter,* https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/silentmeditation/silent-meditation-on-vinyl.

digital audio tools to hand, in the form of the standardized editing software which ships with every Mac computer. As Antonow explained to news and entertainment site *Mashable*: "I opened up Garage Band, and I dragged the levels down to zero, and I hit record. And I recorded 20 minutes. The exact same file was copied, with both being designated 'Side A' and 'Side B.'"[4] A small custom vinyl production firm in North Carolina was enlisted to manufacture the first hundred copies at a per unit price of $12:

> So, we emailed and asked if they could press a silent record. They responded, "Sure, we can totally cut silence. Do you want the sound of amplifier hiss?" We replied "Just silence—we can send you the files." They told us that probably wasn't necessary, but we could send the files if we really wanted to.[5]

In some respects, this was an unbeknown and inadvertent realization of Friedman's event, accomplished through the application of online protocols, and even incidentally claiming a conceptual framework somewhat adjacent to the Zen of Paik's original. It is also pertinent to note that this project also found for itself possibly the ideal way to achieve completely silent content, as no-input digital silence can be effectively thought of as mathematical zero. This naturally changes once one brings vinyl pressing into the equation, but, as the vinyl press technician seemed to know in the quote above, you are much better off cutting a blank lacquer directly with the lathe, then modulating the grooves with any input, or additional stage in the process whatsoever, which will just add more noise. The *Silent Meditation* LP later found wider distribution through Seattle-based catalogue label, Light In The Attic Records. Priced at $20 a copy, their online shop page also

4 Harry Hill, "Would You Buy a Vinyl Recording of 20 Minutes of Silence?," *Mashable,* March 20, 2019, https://mashable.com/article/kickstarter-silent-meditation-vinyl-record.

5 @silentmeditation, *Instagram* post, May 9, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/BxOoqZ2F_CP/.

includes the note: "This does not require a record player to be fully enjoyed. Technically, it does not even require this record."

Another recent project, born of the internet and involving the production and release of a silent recording, is an initiative mounted by funk rock band Vulfpeck from Ann Arbor, Michigan, with the express aim of gaming the audio streaming service Spotify and their artists' royalty payment system. On March 4, 2014, the band released *Sleepify,* a ten-track album with each track consisting of 31 seconds of silence and a total playing time of five minutes, and track names ranging from "Z" to "Zzzzzzzzzz." The album was released as a wry comment and cunning work around against Spotify's business model of paying artists a relative pittance per stream of individual tracks of music available on the online service. As Maria Eriksson et al. have commented in their 2019 study of Spotify's tactics and product orientation:

> One of the major controversies regarding the transition to music streaming services, has centered on payments to artists. With revenue (in USD) increasing into the billions in 2017, music streaming is now the beating heart of the music business, yet many artists struggle with reduced royalties. A heated discussion has focused on the issue of whether or not music streaming will be able to generate sustainable income for musicians. Statistics on streamed royalty payouts vary and are difficult to find, since agreements and contracts are exclusive and proprietary. Estimates, however, state that a payment for a played track runs as low as $0.005 at Spotify. Within the music industry, this has led to considerable debate.[6]

Vulfpeck band leader Jack Stratton's opening salvo in this ongoing debate, via a YouTube video posted one week after *Sleepify*'s release, utilizes the same figure of half a cent remuneration per stream, as mentioned above. The proposition to fans of the band was that if they streamed *Sleepify* on repeat—all night, every

6 Maria Eriksson et al., *Spotify Teardown: Inside the Black Box of Streaming Music* (MIT Press, 2019), 76.

night, while they slept—it would generate $4.00 in revenue for the band (for 800 listens). If this could be done in significant numbers, Vulfpeck would reciprocate by using the proceeds to fund a tour the following autumn, offering free entrance to the audience.[7]

Spotify's initial response was to issue a statement saying, "This was a clever stunt, but we prefer Vulfpeck's earlier albums. *Sleepify* seems derivative of John Cage's work,"[8] alluding to Cage's quintessential silent work *4'33"* (1952) (see section 2 below). *Sleepify* remained on the streaming service for seven weeks before the band was asked to remove the album, prior to Spotify deleting the offending digital silent record themselves under a terms of service violation. Nonetheless, *Billboard* subsequently reported, according to a royalties statement that Stratton had shared with them, that *Sleepify* "generated about 5.5 million plays [...]. At payouts that varied from $0.0030 to $0.0038 per play for the short tracks, the band's final take from Spotify was $19.655.56."[9]

Both of these recent examples from the 2010s highlight tendencies that can be traced throughout the history of the silent record release and its positioning with regards to the wider arena of commercial music: the half humorous/half serious intent, as well as the placement and orientation of the silent record as a disruptive or insurgent act in and of itself.

1. Early Examples

The idea of getting something for nothing is another trope that has been fairly persistent in terms of the cultural conversation

7 Vulf, "SLEEPIFY /// The Spotify Funded Vulfpeck Tour," *YouTube,* March 11, 2004, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KXvncV79LXk.

8 Rauly Ramirez, "Inside Vulfpeck's Brilliant Spotify Stunt," *Billboard,* March 17, 2014, https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/inside-vulfpecks-brilliant-spotify-stunt-5937612/.

9 Paul Bonanos, "Vulfpeck's Half-Joke 'Silent Album' Made Some Serious Cash," *Billboard Pro,* July 22, 2014, https://www.billboard.com/pro/vulfpecks-half-joke-silent-album-made-some-serious-cash/.

around silent records. This holds especially with respect to the earliest examples of the phenomenon, which generally involve the insertion of silent 45s into jukeboxes in the 1950s, thus also tapping into responses and reactions to the emergence of rock 'n' roll and the nascent youth culture.

In March 1959, for example, *Life* magazine ran an article featuring Mike McCann, then the student union president at the University of Detroit, who had just purportedly set up in business to produce and sell silent jukebox records with a label called Hush Records. Apparently, patrons of the student union bar were becoming increasingly frustrated about the inability to hold a conversation over the incessant music, a state of affairs which led McCann to take the innovative step of introducing silent records into the jukebox, such that students, for the price of a nickel, could obtain three and half minutes of the required respite and take the chance to converse at more civilized levels. According to the *Life* article, there were four silent records available on the student union jukebox, bearing such titles as *Silence to Converse By, The Very Best of Hush, Shhh—Go Way,* and *The Silent Chimes.* McCann was apparently also "selling them at $4 a piece [and], they have raised $1,600 towards a new wing on the student union building," once again approaching the notion of setting a price on silence in the sense of some form of commodity.[10]

I became intrigued that this story had seemed to generate widespread coverage from major news outlets at the time, and yet I could find no evidence regarding the actual existence of the Hush Records label or the commercial release of any of the records mentioned. I therefore decided to attempt to contact Mike McCann and was eventually able to contact him at his Milwaukee home to talk to him about the episode. Edward Michael McCann eventually became a prominent and highly respected lawyer and served as District Attorney for Milwaukee for thirty years. Now in retirement, McCann confirmed to me that, in fact, there never

10 "Silence on a Platter," *Life,* March 9, 1959, 59, https://books.google.se/books?id=D1IEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PP1&hl=sv&pg=PA59#v=onepage&q&f=false.

had been any company. Indeed, the whole thing had been a PR stunt devised by Bill Rabe, who at the time was head of the marketing department at the University of Detroit.[11]

Bill Rabe seems to have initiated a number of canny and highly successful publicity schemes whilst on the staff at the university. Continuing the Hush Records saga, the following year, Rabe designated the week of January 5–11, 1960 as Silent Record Week. Again, with coverage syndicated nationwide. *Wisconsin State Journal* covered the story, reporting on the climactic concert of the event in the following terms:

> The theater was so quiet you could have heard every voice in the chorus—if anybody had been singing. Conductor Don Large raised his hands, and the University of Detroit chorus opened their mouths to sing nothing but the finest silent notes [...]. The chorus didn't sing, the band didn't play, and Master of Ceremonies Henry Morgan made an admirable effort to keep quiet. [...] Later, as the university band went up and down the aisles playing "The Anvil Chorus," the only sound was the thump, thump of rubber hammers on well-padded anvils.[12]

However, despite all of this celebration around the anniversary of the introduction of jukebox silence, the correct attribution for such an invention may rightly lay elsewhere.

Six years earlier in 1953, Dorothy Harrington (and associates) released *Three Minutes of Silence,* a 7" vinyl single, consisting of silence on both sides, on a label called Donham Records in New York (fig. 4.1). A copy of this record turned up in the collection of Adam David who, together with theater and music programmer Patrice Caillet and artist and sound arts researcher and assistant professor at the University of Paris Matthieu Saladin forms part of Silent Entertainment, a Paris-based collective committed

11 Edward Michael McCann, telephone conversation with the author, September 7, 2022.

12 "Concert's All Silence and Success," *Wisconsin State Journal,* January 12, 1960, 19, https://www.newspapers.com/image/397120744.



Fig. 4.1. Possibly the first silent single: Dorothy Harrington, *Three Minutes of Silence* (1953) released on the mysterious Donham Records, New York, presumably for intended use on jukeboxes. Private collection. Photo: Adam David.

to exploring silent recordings from a range of perspectives, from silent interventions in exhibitions to silent DJ sets for a range of events and contexts, based around an extensive collection of silent records (see section 3 below).[13]

13 For further information on the work and activities of the Silent Entertainment collective, see "Elena Biserna," *Diffusing Durable Art,* https://diffusingdurableart.org/exhibitions/silent-entertainment/, and Matthieu Saladin, "Férié," *Mattieu Saladin,* July 6, 2017, http://www.matthieusaladin.org/silent-entertainment/.

Three Minutes of Silence is the earliest record in their collection, and preciously little seems to be known about its origins. Taking to the internet, often an abundant repository of antique vinyl esoterica, we find the following brief note on the release's corresponding page on audio recordings database *Discogs*:

> Reportedly a 1953 recording made by two CBS recording engineers, Hamilton O'Hara and Don Foster. Dorothy Harrington married O'Hara in 1951. Likely targeted for use in jukeboxes so patrons fed up with having to shout above the sound of music in their local bar could pay to play it and get a brief respite.[14]

Exactly who is doing the reporting here is unclear. However, the fact that the record has an enlarged center hole would seem to support the claim for its intended usage in jukeboxes. Furthermore, the above quote seems to be a summary of a discussion thread on another audio database site, *45cat*.[15] Here, it is also speculated that Dorothy Harrington was, at the time, a local stage actress from Gilbertsville, New York; that the company name DONHAM is an amalgamation of the "composers'" names; and that the given catalogue number may also be something of an in-joke (45-00000). This may be the sum total of the information we can gather about this modest, although potentially quietly monumental release. One wonders, however, if it ever actually made it on to a jukebox somewhere? Apparently, yes—as one finds in the pages of *Billboard* in March 1957, as an apparent fracas breaks out over a silent jukebox record on another university campus, this time in Boulder, Colorado:

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14 "Dorothy Harrington—Three Minutes of Silence," *Discogs*, https://www.discogs.com/release/10187559-Dorothy-Harrington-Three-Minutes-of-Silence.

15 "Dorothy Harrington—Discography," *45cat*, https://www.45cat.com/artist/dorothy-harrington.

> **SILENCE NOT GOLDEN FOR COLO. JUKE**
>
> BOULDER, Colo.—A record titled, "Three Minutes Silence," which gave just that, was removed from the jukebox in the Indian Grill at the University of Colorado Memorial Center.
>
> It was done by student members of the center's board of directors because they said grill patrons to the number of 99.5 per cent wanted music with their coffee.
>
> Joseph Cohen, professor of philosophy and Chairman of the Committee for Occasional Silence, the group which sponsored the installation of the record, lamented that the student board was more interested in making money, than in the "cultural aspect of the university."[16]

The veracity of all of this is, quite likely, impossible to confirm at this distance in time. Furthermore, given that doubt has been cast over the exactitude of the reporting in *Life* by Mike McCann, and the ways in which these silent jukebox stories seem to have lit up the news wires and been echoed around both national news agencies and local outlets at the time, there may potentially be some degree of "poetic license" being exercised. However, an intriguing addendum to this story also surfaced in the Caillet, David, and Saladin silent record collection in Paris as, in 1956, a French version of this release emerged on the Pathé label (fig. 4.2). This time featuring the popular singer Anny Gould, possibly accompanied by Jean Constantine and his orchestra (who presumably didn't play on the A side, but are in place for a rendition of *L'Illusioniste,* on the flip side). Helpfully, this version also includes announcements (in French) marking the start and end of the titular occurrence.

Furthermore, this version seems to have had more longevity than its US predecessor, and thanks to the Bibliothèque nationale de France and their digital archive releasing program, this

16 "Silence Not Golden for Colorado Juke," *Billboard,* March 9, 1957, 82, https://books.google.se/books?id=LyAEAAAAMBAJ&printsec=frontcover&hl=sv&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q=silence&f=false.



Fig. 4.2. Anny Gould, *Trois Minutes de Silence* (1956). Private collection. Photo: Adam David.

recording is still widely available on streaming services worldwide, thereby transcending its original function in the receding, coin-operated phonograph machines of yore and projecting the idiosyncratic cultural footnote of the silent jukebox record into the twenty-first century and beyond.

One further example will suffice here to situate the early, extant specimens of silent records on a shifting continuum between artist's project and marketing ploy. Originally from Louisville Kentucky, Al Crowder (1904–1981) was, by turns, a touring musician, a radio host, and a music store owner, who eventually set up a whimsical and somewhat eccentric company selling a range of willfully inscrutable, impractical, and apparently purposeless



Fig. 4.3. Al Crowder, *Companion to Television: from the Original Sound-Track of the Urban Eclipse film "The Fatal Love"* (1957). Private collection. Photo: Adam David.

consumer products. Under the auspices of the mysterious firm, Orville K. Snav and Associates, which traded out of Snav Towers (actually his house in Mason City, Iowa), Crowder's activities had generated a level of national notoriety by the late 1950s with a product line which was a numbered series collectively designated under the term "BunaB." These items were later described in Richard Kostelanetz's *Dictionary of the Avant Gardes*, in the following terms: "Each BunaB was actually an example of primitive conceptual art. Conceived as a form of humor (which is the most that conceptual art can hope for), these BunaB were generally small



Fig. 4.4. Al Crowder, *Companion to Television: from the Original Sound-Track of the Urban Eclipse film "The Fatal Love"* (1957). Side 1—with label showing designated television program types that the record is intended to accompany. Private collection. Photo: Adam David.

pieces of machinery that Crowder/Snav distributed with arcane and ridiculous instructions and warranties."[17]

This is no truer than for *BunaB #5*, which took the form of a 12" vinyl record with silent grooves on both sides. Entitled *Companion to Television: from the Original Sound-Track of the Urban Eclipse film "The Fatal Love"* (1957) (figs. 4.3–4), the record claims to have been expressly developed to be listened to while also watching television. In fact, both sides of the record are labeled to designate

17 Geof Huth in Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *A Dictionary of the Avant Gardes,* 2nd ed. (Schirmer Books, 2000), 144.

which types of programming they are intended to accompany, with Side A being suited for "Dramatic, Mystery, Adventure and Afternoon Serials," whilst Side B is suggested to be appropriate for "Panel Shows, Interviews, Discussions, News, Weather and Sports." The liner notes, in Crowder's typically verbose and grandiloquent fashion, also inform the listener that:

> In the entire history of recording the general public has never before been granted an opportunity to obtain a disc which may be played at all speeds (33⅓, 45, 78 and the now obsolete 80 revolutions per minute favored by Mr. Thomas Alva Edison, the inventor of the phonograph) with the assurance that regardless of playing speeds, there will result no discordant auricular deviations.[18]

With what may have been a slight nod toward anything as mundane as reality, the liner notes go on to give the recording location as the Accordion Studio at Carleton Stewart Music Company, the local music shop in Mason City where Crowder was also engaged as an instrumental teacher.[19] Producing the record may have been a fraught and challenging process, however, as Crowder related to *Playboy* magazine in 1958: "You can realize the problem of keeping 50 musicians quiet for more than half an hour."[20]

2. Recordings of John Cage's *4'33"*

No consideration of silent records would be complete without at least cursory inspection of approaches to recording of the most

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18 Al Crowder, liner notes for *BunaB #5: Companion to Television: from the Original Sound-Track of the Urban Eclipse film "The Fatal Love,"* Orville K. Snav & Associates, BunaB#5, 1957, 12" LP.

19 John Charles Peterson, *The True-Life Adventures of Captain Wa Wah* (Katydid Publications, 2009), http://www.captainwawah.com/?p=bunab.

20 Bernard Asbell, "The Little World of Orville K. Snav," *Playboy,* April 20, 1958.

notorious, influential, and ubiquitous silent musical work, John Cage's *4'33"*, premiered by pianist and composer David Tudor at Woodstock, New York on August 29, 1952.[21] The work, a performance of which consists of performer(s) making no sound for (at least) the time frame stipulated in the title, was eventually recorded several times. The first recording, from 1974, involved visual artist Gianni-Emilio Simonetti performing the piece directly in a recording studio, with the three silent movements on that occasion being divided up as 30", 2'33", and 1'40". The transitions of each movement are punctuated by the "closely miked sounds of the keyboard lid in motion."[22] The contradictions of recording the work are perhaps manifold, especially given Cage's intentions with respect to the disciplined execution of a live performance situation and his attitude toward commercially available sound recordings in general. David Grubbs reminds us that,

> Cage's disdain for records was legendary. He claimed not to have any in his home and repeatedly spoke of the ways in which records were antithetical to his work. In 1985, he told an interviewer, "I don't use records, and I give the example of someone who lives happily without records." He went on to describe records as "destroy[ing] one's need for real music. [They] make people think they are engaging in a musical activity when they're actually not."[23]

These sentiments have nonetheless been productively disregarded by those who have subsequently committed performances to tape or digital audio, over the last half century. Two such examples will be mentioned for the purposes of the current text, not only because they offer another viewpoint on approaches to silent record production, but also because each example operates at the

21 John Cage, *4'33"* (Tacet version) (Henmar Press/Edition Peters, 1960).

22 William Fetterman, *John Cage's Theatre Pieces: Notations and Performances* (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), 82.

23 David Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Duke University Press, 2014), 10.

interstices of popular, political, and creative engagement, the cultural sweet spot where many silent record projects appear to have located themselves. In some ways, *4'33"*, as a work, is also emblematic of this tendency, given its comparative ubiquity in the popular imagination (in relation to other examples of experimental music from the period) and also its synonymity with respect to the legacies of John Cage and his oeuvre. Cage asserted to Jeff Goldberg in 1974 that "I think perhaps my own best piece, at least the one I like the most, is the silent piece."[24] In concurrence with this, in terms of contemporary awareness, it could almost be described as his "hit single."

In terms of approaches taken to recording the work, Kyle Gann offers a useful taxonomy, grouping strategies such that they may be considered in series. There are also compelling parallels to be drawn here in relation to silent record production as a whole and the ramifications and consequences of choices made in the recording and manufacture of these records. Gann states:

> To record the piece [*4'33"*] forces one to choose an aspect from which to consider it. One can issue a recording of total digital silence and allow the listener to enjoy the sonic phenomena of his or her own home; this most treats the work as a philosophical idea. More common, one can perform the piece in front of a microphone, permitting just enough ambient or accidental sound to document that one actually made the gesture; this approach acknowledges the piece's theatrical nature, the mutual awareness between performer and listener. Or one can record four and a half minutes in an intentionally non-silent environment, allowing the listener to vicariously experience a space other than the one he or she is actually in; this emphasizes the sensuousness of Cage's appreciation of environmental sound.[25]

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24 John Cage interviewed by Jeff Goldberg (1974), quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage* (Routledge, 2003), 65.

25 Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's* 4'33" (Yale University Press, 2010), 188–89.

This taxonomy should be borne in mind in relation to the examples given in this section but may also prove instructive when considering the audio analyses of selected silent record examples in sections 3 and 4 below. As stated, these three strategies in some ways mirror how artists and other practitioners have approached the making of silent records.

Another aspect that Gann relates, and of particular note here when considering the development and impact of *4'33"* in relation to recorded media, is Cage's apparent awareness of the previously mentioned widely publicized antics around silent jukebox records. Stopping short of actually suggesting that Cage was in any way influenced by such media noise, Gann, in his 2011 study, remarks that Cage saved a news clipping from the *New York Post,* giving the date (perhaps erroneously) as January 16, 1952. The article, which Gann quotes at length, mentions both Dick McCann [sic], president of the student union at the University of Detroit, and his silent records and also a silent track entitled *Three Minutes of Silence.* Gann states his source as "Cultural Politics of *4'33*"" by Philip Gentry, where it is claimed that: "Among Cage's papers [at Northwestern University, Illinois], in a folder of miscellaneous news clippings and concert programs from the year 1952 is a clipping of a short human interest story from the January 16th *New York Post.*"[26] Following a question raised on the John Cage discussion list, *Silence,* Gentry offered further information: "I saw the article in the Cage papers at Northwestern, it was just a newspaper clipping, in the 1952 Miscellany folder with [...] I think a date scrawled on it? It's been a little while."[27] Although the date mentioned here is quite obviously mistaken, it is nonetheless interesting to note in the present context that this story caught Cage's attention and he held on to it (and also possibly misfiled it).

Let us return once again to what has been termed the "celestial jukebox" of contemporary online streaming services and digital

26 Philip Gentry quoted in ibid., 133.

27 Philip Gentry, "[silence] Re: a problem with a Cage related article," *silence@virginia.edu,* October 1, 2012, https://lists.virginia.edu/sympa/arc/silence/2012-10/msg00001.html.

music stores and yet another replay of the silent recording as anti-record or subversive maneuver trope, this time also involving and utilizing Cage and the popular cache of *4'33"*. In 2010, an online campaign through Facebook attempted to get Cage's particular brand of silence to the Number 1 spot on the official UK singles chart, in time for Christmas that year.[28] In terms of the UK music industry, getting a Christmas number 1 single is a particularly coveted and prestigious achievement. This initiative was established by London-based artist Dave Hilliard and was a response to a similar and ultimately successful attempt to get a rerelease of Los Angeles rock band Rage Against The Machine's 1992 hit "Killing in the Name" to UK Christmas number 1 the previous year. Both of these attempts involved using social media to encourage the purchasing and download of a digital track and were essentially a protest against the end-of-year charts being dominated by finalists from the television reality and music competition show *The X Factor,* as had been the case for several years previously.

The *4'33"* attempt, dubbed "Cage against the Machine," involved Hilliard inviting his popular musician friends and associates into a recording studio to specially record a new version of the work, which essentially utilized the second approach in Gann's taxonomy by assembling musicians in a space with open microphones to capture an act of silent performance. The digital single was released to online platforms in December 2010, thereby reawakening (by that time) age-old debates in the media over what it means to purchase silent recordings (although the campaign was accompanied and offset by a collection drive for music-related charities). However, the attempt, although gaining a level of visibility, fell short of the top spot and eventually realized Number 21 on the Christmas charts. This still represented a remarkable and unlikely result for a silent single.[29]

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28 John Cage's 4'33" for Christmas Number One 2010, Facebook profile, https://www.facebook.com/cageagainstthemachine/.

29 "4 33 (CAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE VERSION)," *Official Charts Company,* https://www.officialcharts.com/songs/john-cage-4-33-cage-against-the-machine-version/.

As of this writing, the most recent appropriation of *4'33"* in the context of popular music is also, arguably, the most capacious. To celebrate the fortieth anniversary of British alternative record label Mute Records, founder and label boss Daniel Miller released an elaborate five-disc box set, containing no less than fifty-eight separate performances of *4'33"*, lasting a total playing time of four and a half hours and entitled *STUMM433,* in line with the label's cataloging system. Each of the newly recorded versions performed by an artist or band either currently or previously signed to the label, including Depeche Mode, Einstürzende Neubauten, Wire, New Order, and A Certain Ratio, amongst many others. With reference to Gann's taxonomy, many of these versions display a tendency towards types 2 and 3, either being recordings of bands or artists mute in recording studios, or similar internal spaces (empty theaters, hotels, municipal buildings, or domestic spaces). Or otherwise auditory documentations are offered of silent observance in various natural or urban settings, somewhat in the manner of audio vérité or field recordings.

Thus, Daniel Miller himself (under band name The Normal) records the ambience outside his former parental home on Decoy Avenue in Brixton, South London, the location where he originally started the label in 1978. Australian musician Mick Harvey sits alone in front of a Crumar organ in a studio space crowded with instruments (as seen in an accompanying video) to perform Cage's final version of the *4'33"* concept, *One³ = 4'33" (0'00") + (treble clef)* from 1989.[30] Irwin Schmidt, keyboard player from German experimental rock band Can (and former student of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Cage associate) gives a fairly traditional ren-

30 *One³ = 4'33" (0'00") + (treble clef)* (1989) was Cage's final version of the 4'33" idea, and was performed by him in Kyoto, Japan in 1989 and New York in 1990. The score exists as handwritten notes on a sheet of lined note paper and a faxleaf in the John Cage Music Manuscript Collection at New York Public Library Music Division. Further details and a facsimilie of the score can be found in Dieter Daniels and Inke Arns, ed., *Sounds Like Silence: John Cage/4'33"/Silence Today 1912–1952–2012* (Spector Books, 2012).

dering at the piano. Other tactics include British prog-folk band Miranda Sex Garden sitting in silence in the champagne bar at London's St. Pancras train station, while Danny Briollet records the ambience at Mogadishu airport in Somalia.

Listening to this protracted series of *4'33"* renditions, rerecordings, and reperformances, one has intimations of the ubiquity and pervasiveness of Cage's silent piece, over seventy years after its original conception and performance. The release also offers a veritable myriad of examples delineating what recorded silence might be or can mean. Furthermore, and similar to the "supergroup" approach to recording, taken with the Cage Against the Machine project, part of the gag/marketing angle in this instance is the potential of hearing popular musicians keeping quiet, within and beyond their natural habitats.

Perhaps the final word on *4'33"* rerecording, at this juncture, should reside with Matthieu Saladin and his 2008 mini-CD-R release involving a rerecording of Gianni-Emilio Simonetti's 1974 premiere recording for Italian prog and avant-garde label Cramps Records. As Saladin explains:

> Basically, I bought an original pressing of the Cramps record on Discogs or another similar website. Then I recorded it on my computer, and just amplified the track to the very maximum. So, another hidden harsh noisy landscape appeared. It was as a performance of *0'00"* (composed by Cage in 1962 and titled also *4'33"* n°2), which consists of doing an everyday action and to amplify it to the maximum before feedback, but using here with the very first recording of *4'33"*. Later (2012 maybe) a "sound installation" version was shown at HMKV in Dortmund, during an exhibition on silence curated by Dieter Daniels.[31]

31 Matthieu Saladin, email communication with the author, November 24, 2022. Saladin also refers here to the exhibition *Sounds Like Silence: John Cage/4'33"/Silence Today 1912–1952–2012* at Hartware Medien-KunstVerein (HMKV) Dortmund, August 25, 2012–January 6, 2013.

By so doing, Saladin unleashes a fluctuating, stark, raucous, and immersive wideband roar, hidden within the illusion of quiet, beneath the noise floor of the original recording. Furthermore, mirroring this mode of recording, the listener is duly instructed to play the disc at high volume, to most fully experience its blaring impact. And the price? €4.33.

3. Artists' Projects

Whenever a new commercial media format is introduced, it does not take long for artists to begin appropriating, utilizing, subverting, and testing its limits. Germano Celant, in the catalog essay to his ground-breaking exhibition surveying artists usage of the phonograph record, *The Record as Artwork: From Conceptualism to Futurism,* which opened at Fort Worth Museum, Texas in December 1977, outlined a trajectory of artists' involvement with records from the 1960s onwards and observes:

> In line with the reductive theories of the time, the record contributes to the isolation of one component of the art work—sound—while on the other hand it enriches the array of linguistic tools available for the task of exploding the specifically visual, and pushing back the limits of the art process. The record thus extends and enhances artistic precepts. It can serve to expand a work acoustically, and at the same time contribute to the quantitative diffusion of art.[32]

Following Celant, a number of other group exhibitions had a similar focus, deepening and updating the status of artists' record projects. These included *Extended Play* at Emily Harvey Gallery, New York in 1988, curated by Ursula Block and Christian Marclay, which included a newly created edition of Ken Friedman's *Zen for Record*. Following this, Broken Music at the DAAD in Berlin was also curated by Block and gave rise to a highly influential catalog

32 Germano Celant, *The Record as Artwork: From Futurism to Conceptual Art* (The Fort Worth Art Museum, 1977), 16.

surveying record artworks.[33] In more recent years, exhibitions such as *Records by Artists 1958–1990* curated by Giorgio Maffei at Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna in 2013 have continued the trend.[34]

One of the works common to many of these exhibitions is among the first forays of an artist into the realms of record production. A mysterious footnote in the output of Yves Klein, *Prince of Space/Musik der Leere* is a silent 12" vinyl record made in collaboration with artist, commercial designer, photographer, and filmmaker Charles Wilp. Perhaps in line with much of Klein's oeuvre and the fascination for and exploration of the void and of absence, establishing facts or certainties in relation to the development and production of this record has proved somewhat challenging. Even the actual date of release appears to be a matter of dispute, with the listing in the collection at MoMA giving a date of 1959 for the work.[35] However, other sources (including *Discogs*) list 1965 as the year of production.[36] There is no date on the original pressing itself.

Matters did not improve when consulting the Yves Klein archive in Paris, as they had no holding of the original release (although it did have its release date listed as 1965). The only sliver of information they had available was a brief description of the work which, it later emerged, was from an eccentric web-based "label" run by Brandon Wilner and Willy Smart, fakemusic.org, which functions as a repository of information, through a series of PDFs, on historical examples of what the pair term "musical fakeness."

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33 Ursula Block and Michael Glasmeiser, *Broken Music: Artists' Recordworks* (Gelbe Musik, 1989; rpt. Primary Information, 2018). Ursula Block also ran the legendary record store/gallery Gelbe Musik in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin for many years.

34 Danilo Montanari, ed., *Records by Artists 1958–1990* (Viaindustriae Publishing, 2013).

35 Yves Klein and Charles Wilp, "Prince of Space / Tanz der Leere" (1959), *MoMA,* https://www.moma.org/collection/works/184016.

36 "Yves Klein, Charles Wilp—Prince of Space, Musik Der Leere," *Discogs,* https://www.discogs.com/release/1741061-Yves-Klein-Charles-Wilp-Prince-Of-Space-Musik-Der-Leere.



Fig. 4.5. Yves Klein/Charles Wilp, *Prince of Space/Musik der Leere.* Cover of 2022 re-issue, a faithful replica of the original (1965?) release. Private collection. Photo: Paul McKay.

The PDF entry for *Prince of Space* reads:

> Yves Klein paired with Charles Wilp in 1965 to produce and release "Prince Of Space, Musik Der Leere," echoing the silent second half of Klein's 1947–48 Symphonie Monotone-Silence. Wilp conducts the previously unrecorded Outer Space Philharmonic Orchestra with Cosmos Berthold Finkelstein as the soloist.

> As the title suggests, this is music of emptiness; the record is pressed but entirely silent. This emptiness cannot be preserved or reissued.[37]

Although this brief entry also lists a date of the collaboration as 1965, one must conclude that the actual recording may have taken place around 1959 and was only released in the mid-1960s (as Klein died in 1962). More helpfully, mention is made here of Klein's *Monotone Symphony,* an orchestral piece conceived in 1949 and later orchestrated by composer Louis Saguer for chamber orchestra and SATB choir. Following twenty minutes of a singular, sustained D major chord, the second section of the work is performed in complete silence, thereby prefiguring the general orientation of the later *Prince of Space* release. Furthermore, as something of a rejoinder to fakemusic's claim above of the inability of this emptiness to be "preserved or re-issued," the album was indeed reissued early in 2022 in a limited edition of one hundred by Play Loud!, the record production arm of the Charles Wilp archive in Berlin. Dieter Post, who runs the archive, confirmed to me that the master tapes of the album have been irrevocably lost years ago, and so the approach taken for the 2022 reissue was to rerecord a copy of the original vinyl release (fig. 4.5).[38]

Listening to silent vinyl records, one realizes almost immediately the essential impossibility of capturing, encoding, or apprehending complete silence in this medium, mainly due to its mechanical and material qualities. There are always faint (and not so faint) traces of whatever production or manufacturing techniques were originally utilized and often also a foundational wash of intermittent pops and crackles of surface noise due to imperfections in the cut, static, or the accumulation of dust in the grooves, and so forth.

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37 "Fake Music Re-Anticipations: Yves Klein, Charles Wilp—Prince Of Space, Musik Der Leere (FMR-004)," *FAKE MUSIC,* http://fakemusic.org/mp3s/fmr004.pdf.

38 Dieter Post, telephone conversation with the author, November 14, 2022.

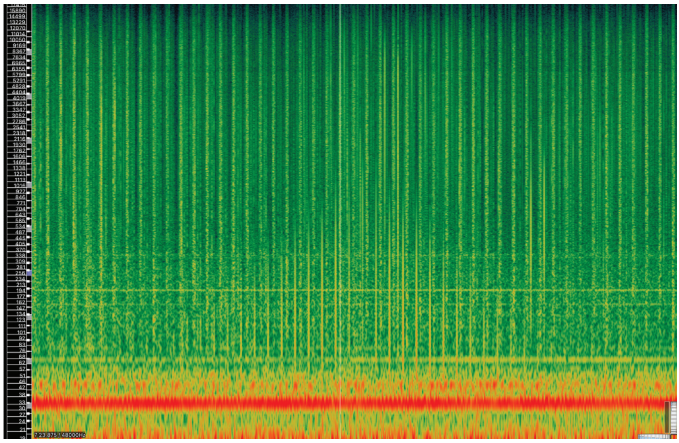


Fig. 4.6. Spectrogram of a one-minute excerpt of the audio output from the 2022 vinyl re-issue of Yves Klein/Charles Wilp: *Prince of Space/Musik der Leere.* Spectrogram by Ricardo Atienza.

This reissue of Klein and Wilp's *Prince of Space* presents us with another kind of situation, as what we are listening to is a newly produced vinyl record, which captures, enshrines, and replays the mechanical noise and crackling of an original copy, now nearly sixty years old. The primary silence is certainly here, but it exists under a sedimentation of sonic layers, which includes the initial recording, its playback on antique vinyl copy, and its rerecording and subsequent replay on a new vinyl disc.

Questions still remain, then, as to how the initial recording of silence was produced in this case, and what is left after all these additional processes and postproduction? We can perhaps best consider these questions by looking at a visualization of an excerpt of the output of the new recording. Fig. 4.6 presents this in the form a spectrogram, depicting an excerpt of around one minute, displaying frequency range in relation to time.

Somewhere within all of that noise there may just be the imprint of an actual space. On multiple listenings, I have almost convinced myself that I can faintly hear the resonance of a relatively large hall or studio, although this also may be an illusion

brought on by interference potentially due to the warp and deformation of the original vinyl source. Listening at slightly above "normal" amplitude brings out a continuous noise around 200 Hz (and faint multiples thereof) which is probably electrical and ascribable to some part of the (historical or new) production process.

The liner notes on the new release give scant information about how exactly the record was made, remarking:

> In 1952, John Cage had already recorded silence in his piece *4'33"*. The musicians didn't perform a single note throughout the entire playing time. All you can hear is the atmosphere in the room where the musicians were sitting. Wilp and Klein removed the musicians entirely and recorded "silence" directly onto vinyl.[39]

As previously established, Cage never himself made a recording of *4'33"*, and the first vinyl release appeared over two decades after the premiere. The liner notes then add a note of contradiction, as to whether or not there were any musicians present, by asking, "Was it a homage to Cage? No. Ingrid Freifrau Droste zu Hülschiff [Wilp's widow] says: 'According to Charles, at one point you can hear the sound of a helicon. I met the musician. He confirmed it.'"[40]

The musician in question would presumably be the enigmatic Cosmos Berthold Finkelstein, listed as helicon soloist on the record sleeve, with the accompaniment of the Outer Space Philharmonic Orchestra under Wilp's direction. Having listened several times, I can discern no trace of a helicon, and there is nothing on any spectrogram to suggest the presence of one.

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39 Dieter Post, liner notes for Yves Klein/Charles Wilp, *Prince of Space/ Musik der Leere* [2022 re-issue], PlayLoud!/Charles Wilp Archive, 2022.

40 Ingrid Freifrau Droste zu Hülshoff quoted in Dieter Post, liner notes. She was contacted for the purposes of the current text, but no further comment has been forthcoming.

In this instance, we therefore have a new release, which poses as many questions as it answers—and perhaps this is how it should be. In preserving a historical vinyl recording anew, we also have a slightly strange objectification of the initial artifact which, similar to Matthieu Saladin's replaying of *4'33"*, offers a recording of a recording of a recording. There is also perhaps a confirmation here of the previously mentioned claim as to the impossibility of preservation of Klein and Wilp's emptiness and, indeed, of Cage's famous dictum that even in the case of silent records "try as we may to make silence, we cannot."[41]

Several contemporary artists have approached the idea and realization of making a silent record in various different ways in the intervening decades. The discography in the present publication includes a fairly exhaustive list of such examples, and it will suffice to mention a few of them here.

A complete deconstruction of the manufacturing and playback process itself can be found in a series of works by Christof Migone, whose *Record Release* projects from 1995 onwards have partially focused on the inert, raw material of vinyl record production itself, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) pellets, with these tiny elements initially being arranged in large heaps and agglomerations in installation contexts for exhibition spaces. In 2012, Migone initiated the *Record Release (12-inch)* project, which weighed a quantity of pellets equaling 180 grams (the usual weight of a modern audiophile 12" vinyl record) and then proceeded to release all 6,642 pellets, through a process which saw them "either sold, gifted or placed in public space."[42]

The dissemination of these pellets was documented through a range of media, including a series of photographs of the initial quantity arranged in the shape of a 12" LP, slowly diminishing over time. These were accompanied by a further image of a single pellet in the hand or possession of its new owner or in its public

41 John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Weslyan University Press, 1973), 8.

42 Christof Migone, "Record Release (12 inch)," *Christof Migone,* https://christofmigone.com/RecordRelease12inch/.

placement—in subway stations, stores, museums, on the street, and in many other urban areas.

By atomizing a vinyl record into thousands of minute fragments and deploying them individually through a form of slow-motion social distribution (which actually took until 2019), Migone challenges not only notions around vinyl manufacture, ever more visible in recent years, with global vinyl sales soaring, raw material shortages, and the increasingly apparent environmental impacts of production. The project also destabilizes the act of releasing itself, whilst maintaining the silence, as the fragments, once widely scattered, can never be reconstituted.

Intervening in the materiality of the vinyl record also characterizes Carsten Nicolai's project *Random Groove* (2015) for London's Vinyl Factory, a combination of arts organization, label, pressing plant, and curatorial platform.[43] On vibrant fluorescent pink vinyl, Nicolai cuts a series of locked and repetitious randomized grooves into the surface of a 12" LP with no discernible audio input. Again, turning the experience of surface noise on its head and, in some ways, making a benefit from what is usually considered to be unwanted interference or disruptive distortion. Many of Nicolai's grooves are cut into one another, resulting in a range of beat-like formations of clicks, pops, and scratches or rhythmical patterns. The release also constitutes an interactive or generative potential, of a record that will never play the same way twice.

The previously mentioned method of the rerecording, processing, and re-encoding of previously recorded silence is raised to the level of a curatorial paradigm, again by Matthieu Saladin, in collaboration with silent vinyl collectors Patrice Caillet and Adam David (of the aforementioned Paris-based Silent Entertainment collective), with the 2014 release of the compilation *Sounds of Silence: The Most Intriguing Silences in Recording History* (fig. 4.7). The album assembles together slivers, excerpts, and fragments from a bewildering array of sonic contexts, then rerecords and

43 "Carsten Nicolai/noto—Random Groove," *The Vinyl Factory,* https://thevinylfactory.com/product/carsten-nicolai-random-groove/.



Fig. 4.7. Patrice Caillet, Adam David, Matthieu Saladin, *Sounds of Silence: The Most Intriguing Silences in Recording History* (2014). Private collection. Photo: Paul McKay.

sequences them into a single, long-form listening experience. The artists explain:

> Cette liste comprend des œuvres d'artistes connus, mais aussi des créations silencieuses rares et foncièrement mystérieuses. En écho, le disque consiste à « rejouer » ces silences d'après leur support d'origine, conservant toutes les imperfections liées à leur matérialité propre (vinyle, flexi, CD) et leur histoire spécifique, sans toutefois négliger le postulat d'une certaine satisfaction d'écoute chez l'auditeur. Cette approche documentée révèle les motivations effectives ou présumées de ces

> «silences», tout en s'aventurant dans des correspondances ou des interférences inédites.[44]

The release offers an insight into a heretofore relatively occluded history, including several examples which populate the present text. The experience of listening to these fragments, although devoid of discernable musical or sonic content, nonetheless retain auditory traces, associated to the medium or materiality of their primary carriers, and ensuring that, even when taking an historical perspective, that which passes for silence, often does so in concept or name only.

4. Comedy/Political

Two further examples will serve to illustrate another tendency within silent record production, again located at the intersection of pop-cultural artifact, subversive commercial intervention, or creative/artistic project. The records of humorous or political intent are necessarily comments on or products of their own time, but they nonetheless retain a certain resonance today and also add a playful or jocular dimension to the potential meanings and readings of recorded and widely disseminated sound (as silence).

Released in 1970, *The Best of Marcel Marceau* was the brainchild of Michael Viner, at the time a fledgling record producer, who would later become an executive for MGM Records and achieve

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44 Patrice Caillet, Adam David, and Matthieu Saladin, liner notes for *Sounds of Silence: The Most Intriguing Silences in Recording History,* Alga Marhen ALGA 046LP, 2014, 12" LP. English translation: "This compilation includes works by well-known artists, but also rare and fundamentally mysterious silent creations. Echoing this, the album consists in 're-playing' these silences according to their original medium, preserving all the imperfections associated with their own materiality (vinyl, flexi, CD) and their specific history, without however neglecting the postulate of a certain listening satisfaction for the listener. This documented approach reveals the actual or presumed motivations of these 'silences,' while venturing into new correspondences or interferences."



Fig. 4.8. Michael Viner, *The Best of Marcel Marceao* (1970). Private collection. Photo: Paul McKay.

a peculiar form of notoriety by founding and producing The Incredible Bongo Band, a loose affiliation of studio musicians in Los Angeles. Their 1973 single *Apache,* a cover of an instrumental track which was previously a hit for The Shadows in 1960 would later become, in the early 1980s, a cornerstone of the emergent hip-hop culture, with the "Apache break" being sampled by literally hundreds of musicians, DJs, and artists. As David Toop claims, it is, "The record on which everybody concurs—the quintessential hip-hop track."[45]

45 David Toop, *Rap Attack 3: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* (Serpent's Tail, 2000), 114.

The Best of Marcel Marceao was essentially Viner's first attempt to break into the music business (fig. 4.8). Named for and referencing Marcel Marceau (1923–2007), the world's foremost mime artist at the time, the release purposefully changes the surname to avoid potential legal action. The LP comprises two sides with exactly the same content, as the label information attests: nineteen minutes of silence followed by one minute of an audience going wild with applause.

As is the case with many of the examples discussed in this text, and certainly in comparison to the column inches and comment devoted to *Apache* over the years, the available information on the silent *Marcel Marceao* release is particularly scarce. Therefore, one must again trawl the cultural marginalia to get a sense of how it came together.

In an obituary piece for *Rolling Stone* following Viner's death in 2009, Michaelangelo Matos cites an unpublished 2006 interview where Viner apparently remarks that, "I think it cost $50 to make [...]. Someone kidded [MGM chairman, Mike] Curb that I had an album on the charts, and I hadn't."[46] The result was that Viner was eventually offered a production deal. To find further comment from Viner, one must reach even further back into the annals to find another one of these semihumorous news stories on the curious "something for nothing" economics of silent records production, syndicated across the US by news agency UPI. Thus, on August 15, 1970 the *San Francisco Examiner* trumpeted, under the headline "40 minutes of silence on an LP," that, "Insanity, at last, prevails in the land of nut and palm. A man is making money selling a record titled 'The Best of Marcel Marceao.'"[47] The article claims that the record has sold four thousand copies through

46 Michael Viner quoted in Michaelangelo Matos, "Remembering Michael Viner," *Rolling Stone,* August 14, 2009, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/remembering-michael-viner-the-man-who-recorded-apache-248055/.

47 Michael Viner interviewed in "40 Minutes of Silence on an LP," *The San Francisco Examiner,* August 15, 1970, 9, https://www.newspapers.com/image/460434981/.

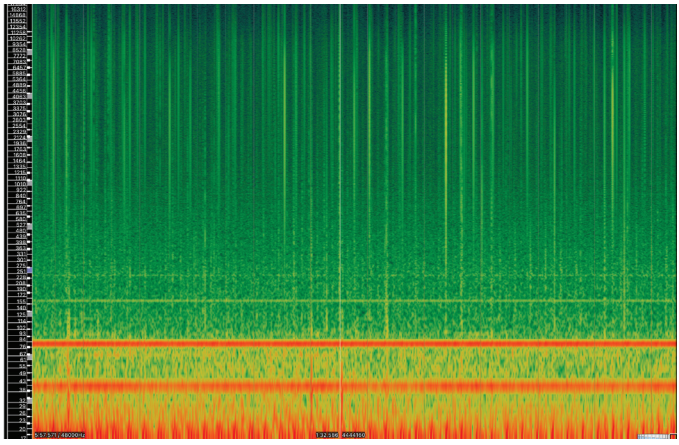


Fig. 4.9. Spectrogram of a one-minute excerpt of the audio output from the 1970 MGM Records vinyl release of *The Best of Marcel Marceao.* Spectrogram by Ricardo Atienza.

an MGM Records imprint with the somewhat droll designation Gone-If Records—*gonniff* being Yiddish slang for a thief or dishonest individual. Viner comments:

> The thing that amazes me is that we haven't had a single return [...]. Most people know who Marcel Marceau is, and buy the record anyhow. A lot of movie and recording people out here have bought it for laughs. I wanted to start a record company, but I didn't have any money. Naturally, it doesn't cost very much to turn out an album with only 30 seconds [sic] of applause.[48]

In the intervening decades MGM Records gradually merged with larger entities, with its catalog now owned by Universal Music Group. In an attempt to find out if any actual documentation exists around the release, I contacted the UMG archive in Los Angeles, who were most intrigued by the request and duly assigned two

48 Ibid.

of their archivists to do a deep dive into their holdings to see what, if anything, might be extant.

The search eventually turned up very little in terms of additional or related documentation. However, they were able to locate the two original master tapes, dated November 1970.[49] The finding of these tapes does, nonetheless, disclose something about the production process involved—by dint of the fact that a master tape exists—which, for a silent record, does not have to be a prerequisite at all. Although, for this release, that the final tracks on each side are a recording of audience applause would seem to suggest the necessity of an initial audio carrier medium. So, what was recorded on the tape? In order to contemplate this, we can inspect, once again, a spectrogram of an excerpt from the recording (fig. 4.9).

The vinyl on my copy of the record is relatively quiet with regards to surface noise, with intermittent and sporadic bursts of pops and crackles—which is particularly impressive for a disc that is now over fifty years old. Although one would surmise that it has not exactly been played that often. However, when the gain is fairly significantly raised on the output, the spectrogram clearly shows a series of steady-state humming signals: the first at 40 cycles, with attendant harmonics at 80, 160, and 235 Hz. For our purposes, whether these usually occur beneath the noise floor with respect to "normal" playback amplitude is irrelevant, as what we are looking for here are potential acoustic signatures of the production process employed in creating the silent recording, and it is therefore relatively safe to conjecture that what we are seeing here are the characteristic signatures of the equipment that was employed in producing the *Marceao* recording. Whether they are from the master tape recorder, the master tape player, the lacquer cutting lathe, or any intermediate amplification or stage in between, they are certainly there. Since we know from the archive at Universal that a master tape exists, we can ascertain that this is the case. Even if the first nineteen minutes of the master are blank

49 Chris Walch, Universal Music Group Archive, email communication with the author, October 26, 2022.

tape, the random arrangement of ferrous particles on a "blank" magnetic tape will induce an electrical signal when passing a play head. In analog, you can't have zero.

All of this was completely immaterial for Michael Viner's conceptual project, of course, and his liner notes (fairly typically for such a release) details a series of responses from when, "The album was previewed to some typical representatives of the American public." A selection of which includes:

> Spiro Agnew called this album the quintessence of euphony, cacophony and salacious ecstasy. "I found this record to perfectly represent the position of the silent majority until I materialized onto the scenic expanse," he said.
>
> Richard Burton said, "Elizabeth loved it."
>
> Governor Reagan's spokesman told a reporter that this was a local matter and does not concern his office.[50]

Ronald Reagan is also, in some ways, the subject of our final example. Ten years to the month after the release of Viner's *Marceao* album, Reagan won the 1980 presidential election, to be subsequently inaugurated president in 1981. Across the Atlantic in London, Dave Robinson, cofounder and director of punk label Stiff Records fired off an early response and released one of the most renowned of silent records: *The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan* (1980) (fig. 4.10). Entirely silent on both sides, with Side A designated "The Wit" and Side B "The Wisdom." The album was released anonymously, with no artist identified or mentioned, and also did not carry the Stiff Records banner, instead appearing as the first release under a new company name, Magic Records, with a strap-line declaring: "If it's a success, it must be Magic!," as well as the catalogue number "ABRA1" etched into the run-out groove. The only other information on the back cover reads,

50 Michael Viner, liner notes for *The Very Best of Marcel Marceao,* Gone-If Records/MGM Records SE-4745, 1970, 12" LP.



Fig. 4.10. The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan. Cover of the 1980 release on Magic Records (Stiff Records). Private collection. Photo: Paul McKay.

"Warning: You May or May Not Hear Something Interesting on this Record."[51]

I interviewed Dave Robinson at some length regarding the development and outcomes of the project, starting with where the idea came from and how it evolved. He replied:

> I had an artist guy, who worked for the record company, Stiff. And he did an album cover for me for a Desmond Dekker record, which is called "Black and Dekker" (1980) [British

51 Cover details on *The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan,* Magic Records (Stiff Records) ABRA1, 1980, 12" LP.

> graphic designer and art director Neville Brody] . And while I was looking through his stuff, he showed me the painting he had done for the cover, and I saw this other canvas of Ronald Reagan.
>
> So, somebody had said, somewhere along the line: "the wit and wisdom of Ronald Reagan, which was supposed to be equal to zero," or something of that nature. And I used to write slogans on the top of my diary, on every page. You know, you'd have a full page per day diary, as we all did in those days, before the internet. So, I wrote "The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan Equals Zero." And then I saw this picture. And I thought, what a good idea. Kind of at the time, Reagan and Thatcher were getting very chummy. And they, kind of, irritated me a bit. So, I thought, hmm, you know, maybe a thousand records with no sound on them.[52]

The record was released just before Christmas 1980, and it was, perhaps not surprisingly, in the States where interest really started to take off:

> At that time, we had an office in America, Stiff Inc, and they were very enthusiastic. So that's how it started. We sold 1000 almost immediately. Bleecker Bob was a guy who took a load of them, and he had a store in the Village. He used to take a lot of Stiff stuff, and used to import records. Kind of punk—the punk era was upon us, so a lot of imports went into America. Nobody released those bands; they were just import records. And so, I think he took 700 or something. And so, I pressed up another thousand. They went very quickly. So, I pressed 5000. Eventually, we sold, I think, a little under about 38,000. I know we had about 1500 left. It kind of caught on.[53]

52 Dave Robinson, telephone interview with the author, September 8, 2022.

53 Ibid.



Fig. 4.11. Side A of *The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan* (1980), clearly showing the imitation tracks cut into the record. Private collection. Photo: Paul McKay.

The enterprise was so successful in fact that Dave Robinson later released a couple of follow-up albums, this time targeting the UK political establishment, with *The Wit and Wisdom of Margaret Thatcher* (1983) and *The Wit and Wisdom of Michael Foot* (1983), the leader of the opposition Labour party at the time. These sequels, however, did not replicate the success of the first, and Robinson concedes that, "I decided on the thing with Maggie Thatcher, that the joke really died with Ronald Reagan. People got that. And I thought of doing a series of them [...]. A few people said you

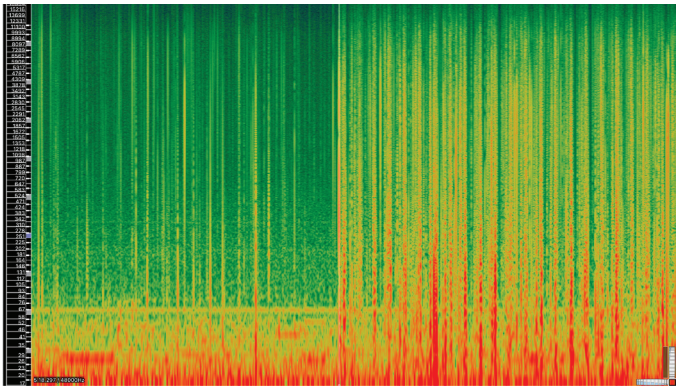


Fig. 4.12. Spectrogram of a one-minute excerpt of the audio output from the 1980 Magic Records (Stiff Records) vinyl release of *The Wit and Wisdom of Ronald Reagan*. Spectrogram by Ricardo Atienza.

should do this—and I didn't. That is a one-off. It was a novelty. A one-off idea."[54]

In terms of the production of the record, one notices a slight anomaly when inspecting the surface of the vinyl, and the fact that it has quite conspicuous grooves on each side (fig. 4.11).

These grooves are also detected, and it can quite clearly be seen that they have some form of acoustic impact, when the output of the record is visualized through a spectrogram. Each track showing a markedly different acoustic contour (fig. 4.12).

I asked Dave Robinson about this, and he said that, "We cut a lacquer, and we wanted to make it look like it had tracks—so the guy just cut it, lifting and lowering the arm every now and again, to make it look like it had tracks."[55]

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54 Ibid. This has, however, not stopped a couple of tribute releases, or revival releases by others, in the mid-2010s. Thus, there is also *The Wit and Wisdom of Donald Trump* (2019), pressed on orange vinyl, and, during the run up to the UK's referendum to leave the European Union, *The Wit and Wisdom of Nigel Farage* (2015), which is only a 7" single release.

55 Dave Robinson, telephone interview with the author, November 14, 2022.

Conclusion: You've Got to Do Something to Get Nothing

Looping back to the event score of *Zen for Record,* we can now begin to ascertain, with reference to the examples discussed here, how powerful and pervasive the concept of a silent record actually is, together with the influence and impact it has had across an expansive range of cultural contexts. It is an idea that easily transfers or migrates between media as well as different approaches and forms of realization. Indeed, and perhaps in the best tradition of event scores and instructional artworks, the concept transcends its mode of physical manifestation and is able to excite and enthuse without and beyond any kind of fabrication or fixity in physical form or object. You do not need a silent record or any form of playback device to listen to a silent record or to access the potency of the idea. This has been evidenced throughout this writing, especially by the extent of mass media commentary devoted to the subject and that, through the shorthand of newsprint, the idea can be grasped and apprehended with immediacy by the casual or disinterested reader. Just as if (imaginatively) they were dropping the needle on a silent vinyl disc or pressing a virtual play button on a mobile device to listen to nothing on wireless headphones.

Another way of illustrating the contagious or promiscuous nature of the concept is in the way that it has been realized by many different individuals and entities (artistic or commercial) at different times, and through varying modalities of situation. Some reference Cage's silent piece, *4'33"*, others do not and have completely contradictory reasons for producing a silent artifact. It could quite easily be argued, though, that each of the examples discussed here can, in a way, be thought of as a realization of the *Zen for Record* event score, however unconscious, automatic, instinctive, or inadvertent that realization may have been in virtually every case. Each example takes upon itself the obligation to "produce" a silent record and then basically follows or carries out the instruction to the letter.

Following completion of a production or manufacturing process, this text has also returned with fair regularity to assertions or positions with respect to the peculiar economics that pertain to

commercial transactions around silent records. From the perspective of news media, the "something for nothing" trope has proved to have perennial appeal. Conversely though, there is perhaps also a wider and more resonant discussion to be had here, especially with reference to escalating noise pollution in urban areas or the mediated 24/7 onslaught of information and audiovisual stimulation that characterizes the online landscape (not to mention the nascent metaverse). With noise, hyperstimulation, and distraction potentially typifying much of contemporary everyday existence (on- or offline), silence and the space afforded to think and converse may indeed be amongst the most valuable commodities that we possess.

So, what price, silence? In the days of analog, mechanical playback of jukeboxes, Mike McCann set the price of silence at a nickel, and there have been many variations of pricing structures discussed herein, often based around the standard cost of an LP record. Moreover, in the analog era, of course, recorded music (although widely distributed) stayed where it was put—confined within jukeboxes or fixed in the grooves or reels of (silent until activated) audio storage media. Sound, and in this case silence, was tied to the peculiarities of place and the physicality of a particular location. These days, of course, with the whole history of recorded sound accessible through mobile devices in pockets or uploaded, stored, and retrieved on demand from the cloud of information within which many of us currently exist, pricing structures can equally vary.

Anny Gould's silent three minutes from 1956 is available for the price of a regular download of a track from a digital music store, or perhaps less with a subscription. When Spotify deleted Vulfpeck's *Sleepify,* it effectively closed the attendant financial loophole. Nonetheless, that particular five minutes of digital silence continues to live a strange and pirated form of afterlife, uploaded by an unconnected third party to YouTube, free and available to be streamed *ad infinitum.* Perhaps, similar to some of the origins and intentions behind *4'33"* (either in Cage's engagement with Zen or his fascination with everyday sounds), the real value and utility

of a silent record is as an encouragement to actively listen to the environment around us—wherever we are, wherever we listen.

If we accept the notion that each example here is a realization of the injunction to "produce" a silent record, this text has also served as an overview of some of the many ways in which the stated aim of auditory nothingness can be achieved, as well as the fact that, almost invariably in every case, something must be done in order to arrive at the ideal of nothing.

Problems arise, of course, as the nothingness of silent audio is just that—an ideal. Therefore, the paradox of the silent record is that every stage of a process of production, manufacture, playback, or broadcast and transmission adds more noise to the system. In the rarified and (relatively) pristine provinces of digital audio, it is indeed possible to create digital silence, where a sequence of samples can contain zero content. Moreover, these days, this can be done with the modicum of means available on virtually every personal computer. On playback of a file of digital silence we are not listening to a recording, for there is certainly no recording there to listen to. Nonetheless, what we are hearing is all of the processual stages after the act of creating or encoding the file took place. This includes the thermal noise and the electronics in the playback device or even (at an infinitesimally low level) the interference due to the electromagnetic radiation inherent to the wider universe.

For those artists and practitioners who worked (and still work) in the domains of analog audio, the challenges and problematics of creating auditory silence (the same conundrum expressed in the text of *Zen for Record*) was of a different modus, and this writing has detailed several approaches in this regard. From the capturing of the sound of an empty space to the utilization of magnetic tape to the conjuring of auditory silence with a lacquer cutting lathe.

This text has been an opportunity to return to the materiality of silent records as physical or digital objects and actually listen to the surprisingly differentiated qualities of silence contained within. As a means toward charting the various production approaches applied, imaging technologies have been used to

verify and as a comparative to the results of listening experience. In so doing, we are allowed a degree of insight into the associated creative process of making or manufacture.

Thus, by turning up the volume on recorded silence, the differentiation integral to reproduced auditory nothingness emerges, and the secrets of its making are there, veiled beneath the crackles of a vinyl surface or the lower limits of the noise floor, waiting to be revealed.

Acknowledgments

Several people have contributed to the research that led to this text. I would therefore like to thank: Adam David, Chris Walch, Marilou Barbanti, Patrice Caillet, Dave Robinson, Edward Michael McCann, Matthieu Saladin, Nick Allen, Paul McKay, Phil Arnold, and Ricardo Atienza.

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This discography is based on the following sources: the Discogs.com lists "Silent Records" by type, and "Completely Silent Records" by mradamdavid, the silent record collections of Patrice Caillet, Adam David, and Matthieu Saladin in Paris, together with additional research by Robin McGinley.

Extended Play, Radical Preservation, and the Politics of Silence

Ken Friedman's *Zen for Record*

Hanna B. Hölling

> [T]here are kinds and grades [of silence]. There is [...] the fertile silence of awareness, pasturing the soul, whence emerge new thoughts; the alive silence of alert perception, the musical silence that accompanies absorbed activity; the silence of listening to another speak; [...] baffled silence; the silence of peaceful accord with other persons or communion with the cosmos."
>
> —Paul Goodman, *Speaking and Language*[1]

Unpacking the Record

One day, a turquoise envelope slipped through the mail slot of my London home, situated a dizzying twelve floors above the bustling city. The abrupt clap of its arrival reverberated against the

1 Paul Goodman, *Speaking and Language: Deference of Poetry* (Random House, 1972). Although Goodman refers to human silence, the application of his meaning is possible in machinic and nonhuman contexts.



Fig. 5.1. Ken Friedman, *Zen for Record*, 1966. Slowscan Vol. 40, record no. 4; VII/150. Private collection. Photograph by the author.

steady hum of the surrounding construction, emphasizing the significance of this unexpected interruption. Gingerly, I tore open the envelope to reveal a petite, exquisitely crafted record jacket. The cover boasted the enigmatic phrase, "zen for record," while the back contained the following description (fig. 5.1):

zen for record
ken friedman
1966

Slowscan Vol. 40, record no. 4 VII/150[2]

2 The "VII" is handwritten.



Fig. 5.2. Ken Friedman, *Zen for Record*, 1966—vinyl disc. Private collection. Photograph by the author.

As I gently lifted the jacket, a black, shiny EP phonograph slid out from within, revealing a seven-inch vinyl disc with beige labels on both sides bearing the words "zen for record" and "Ken Friedman" (fig. 5.2). EP stands for "extended play" that contains several tracks—more than a single and less than a LP record. My heart skipped a beat as I gazed at the disc's pristine surface, gleaming under the soft light. But the question loomed: how could I listen to this treasure? Two days later, I sat before my neighbor's turntable, its gentle hum adding to the hushed anticipation in the room. Carefully selecting a 45 RPM suitable for the format, I placed the needle onto the disc's surface, and the record began to spin, generating a rhythmic soundscape. I strained to filter out the noisy distractions of my bustling borough, determined not to miss a

single note. For 4 minutes and 40 seconds, I listened intently as the needle jumped back, and I flipped the disc over to the other side, where I engaged for another 6 minutes. Although there was no recorded sound on the disc, it held much to listen to. I realized that sound was heard through space and caught myself in a limbo between causal listening and the meditation on listening—a form of reduced listening,[3] where I could relax, quiet my senses, and focus entirely on the sound.

In this sonorous structure, I found myself on the brink of meaning-making, opening myself up to a radical sonic receptivity and the unexpected.[4] Free from expectations, I turned my attention inward and outward, asking questions such as, "Who am I that hears this? [5] and "Where does this vibration go to?" *Zen for Record*'s monotonous operations elicited boredom. I found myself disappearing into the work and the work disappearing into its surroundings.[6] It was not a state of oblivion or unknowing; rather, as my experience deepened, the noise became a sonic event, revealing its own unique characteristics.

Object(s) History

The genesis of *Zen for Record* can be traced back to the autumn of 1966, during Friedman's employment at ESP-Disk Records com-

3 Three modes of listening have been articulated by sound theorist Michel Chion: causal listening, semantic listening, and reduced listening. Michael Chion, "The Three Listening Modes," in *The Sound Studies Reader,* ed. Jonathan Sterne (Routledge, 2012), 48-53.

4 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening,* trans. Charlotte Mandell (Fordham University Press, 2007), 7.

5 Questions inspired by Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019).

6 Boredom has been deliberately applied by Fluxus artists. See Dick Higgins, "Boredom and Danger" (1966), *Something Else Newsletter* (December 1968). This paragraph also draws from Ina Blom, "Boredom and Oblivion," in *The Fluxus Reader,* ed. Ken Friedman (Academy Editions, 1998), 66.

pany in New York.[7] While the company specialized in jazz, Friedman stumbled upon a peculiar manufactured record in a white jacket, which had no sound on it.[8] Uncertain whether it was a mastered record or a failed recording, he accepted it as a ready-made and presented it to George Maciunas, the Fluxus impresario who had recently invited him to join Fluxus activities.[9] However, unlike film, which was already a Fluxus mode of expression due to Maciunas's cinephilia and interest in film culture,[10] phonographic records were not considered a "Fluxus medium." Maciunas was therefore reluctant to include it in his Fluxus program, instead encouraging Friedman to write scores for publication. Although absent from the records in Jon Hendrick's *Fluxus Codex* (1988),[11] the score for the record "Produce a phonograph record with no

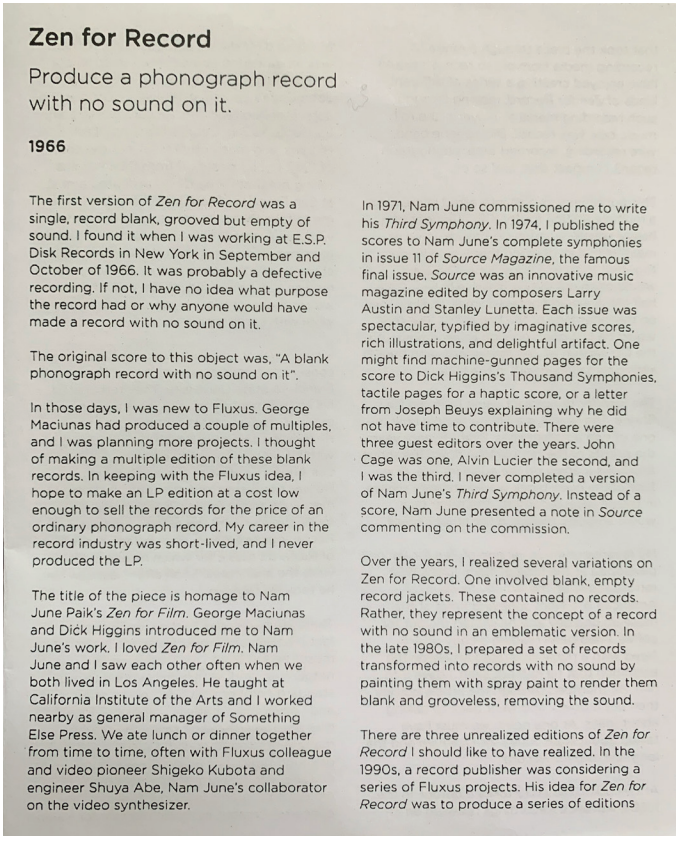
7 ESP is short for Esperanto and Disk, the Esperanto term for a phonograph record. According to Friedman, ESP-Disc was an innovative yet unusual company run by Bernard Stollman, who was an Esperanto enthusiast. The company only produced one record of Esperanto singing, called *Ni Kantu en Esperanto* (*Let's Sing in Esperanto*). However, this singalong record proved to be a commercial failure.

8 This volume, 17.

9 It is important to note that when Friedman met Maciunas, he did not consider himself an artist yet but became an artist shortly after he entered Fluxus. Ken Friedman, *92 Events* (Bettina Pehrsson, Kalmar konstmuseum, 2023), 46. See also "Ken Friedman in conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, January 20, 2023," SNSF Research Project Activating Fluxus, Project archive. Friedman was introduced to Maciunas via Dick Higgins, with whom he corresponded and whom he visited in New York in 1966. It was Maciunas who suggested to Friedman, then age sixteen, to score and notate actions. See Ken Friedman, "Working with Event Scores: A Personal History," *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts* 7, no. 3 (2002): 124–28, and Peter Frank, "Ken Friedman: The Events," in *Fluxus: Concert of Events, Performances and Actions,* vol. 1, unpublished manuscript, 1980.

10 Amongst the examples of filmic realization within Fluxus are the *Fluxfilm Anthology* (1962–70) and a series of 8mm Fluxus films entailed in *Flux Year Box 2* (ca. 1968).

11 Jon Hendricks, ed., *Fluxus Codex* (Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection in association with H.N. Abrams, 1988).



Zen for Record

Produce a phonograph record with no sound on it.

1966

The first version of *Zen for Record* was a single, record blank, grooved but empty of sound. I found it when I was working at E.S.P. Disk Records in New York in September and October of 1966. It was probably a defective recording. If not, I have no idea what purpose the record had or why anyone would have made a record with no sound on it.

The original score to this object was, "A blank phonograph record with no sound on it".

In those days, I was new to Fluxus. George Maciunas had produced a couple of multiples, and I was planning more projects. I thought of making a multiple edition of these blank records. In keeping with the Fluxus idea, I hope to make an LP edition at a cost low enough to sell the records for the price of an ordinary phonograph record. My career in the record industry was short-lived, and I never produced the LP.

The title of the piece is homage to Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*. George Maciunas and Dick Higgins introduced me to Nam June's work. I loved *Zen for Film*. Nam June and I saw each other often when we both lived in Los Angeles. He taught at California Institute of the Arts and I worked nearby as general manager of Something Else Press. We ate lunch or dinner together from time to time, often with Fluxus colleague and video pioneer Shigeko Kubota and engineer Shuya Abe, Nam June's collaborator on the video synthesizer.

In 1971, Nam June commissioned me to write his *Third Symphony*. In 1974, I published the scores to Nam June's complete symphonies in issue 11 of *Source Magazine*, the famous final issue. *Source* was an innovative music magazine edited by composers Larry Austin and Stanley Lunetta. Each issue was spectacular, typified by imaginative scores, rich illustrations, and delightful artifact. One might find machine-gunned pages for the score to Dick Higgins's Thousand Symphonies, tactile pages for a haptic score, or a letter from Joseph Beuys explaining why he did not have time to contribute. There were three guest editors over the years. John Cage was one, Alvin Lucier the second, and I was the third. I never completed a version of Nam June's *Third Symphony*. Instead of a score, Nam June presented a note in *Source* commenting on the commission.

Over the years, I realized several variations on Zen for Record. One involved blank, empty record jackets. These contained no records. Rather, they represent the concept of a record with no sound in an emblematic version. In the late 1980s, I prepared a set of records transformed into records with no sound by painting them with spray paint to render them blank and grooveless, removing the sound.

There are three unrealized editions of *Zen for Record* I should like to have realized. In the 1990s, a record publisher was considering a series of Fluxus projects. His idea for *Zen for Record* was to produce a series of editions

Fig. 5.3. Ken Friedman, "Zen for Record: Produce a phonograph record with no sound on it, 1966," leaflet accompanying the *Zen for Record* 7' edition. Private collection. Photograph by the author.

sound on it" must have emerged around the same time (fig. 5.3).[12] Thus, the concept for *Zen for Record* remained dormant until it was actualized by a Dutch company, Slowscan, in 1982. Fast for-

12 Ken Friedman, "*Zen for Record*: Produce a phonograph record with no sound on it, 1966," leaflet accompanying the *Zen for Record* 7' edition, republished in Friedman, *92 Events*, 71–75.

ward to 2026, Ken Friedman decided to produce *Zen for Record* as an LP, accompanied by a catalog featuring a set of essays, including by this author.

My essay will examine *Zen for Record* in light of Christopher Cox's sonic materialism and place it within a larger context of visual culture of its time. In this artwork, noise will emerge as a potent realm, while silence will provide space for sounds that may otherwise be obscured. Beyond its aural qualities, *Zen for Record* is remarkable for its ability to transition from one form to another, from one medium and technology to the next. Through its multiple identities and many becomings, *Zen for Record* reveals that prolific concepts may supersede structures of intentionality and authorship, transcending the material constraints of their media. In works such as *Zen for Record,* the concept appears to live on through change, transgressing the boundaries of the work's material manifestations in spatiotemporal forms.

Silencing across Media: Versions, Variations and Variants

In his exploration of the concept of an empty record, Friedman utilized various methods to convey it to the viewer, including a blank record jacket with no phonograph and spraying the record's grooves with black paint. Although these examples of *Zen for Record* often existed in more than one realization, they were never officially editioned. What is intriguing about the work's conceptual structure is the set of modifications to *Zen for Record* in a range of recording media that remain unrealized. This includes a player piano roll, wax record, music box, Dictaphone band, wire recording, recorded audiotape, and compact disc, all of which contain a record with no sound.[13] The concept of a record with no sound proliferated in both unique physical manifestations and conceptual transpositions into a variety of media and carriers, after its identification as a found object at the ESP-Disk Records

13 Friedman alludes to a record publisher's idea that aimed to take *Zen for Record* through a range recording media from old to recent, which he approved but never realized. Ibid.

company. The extreme mobility of *Zen for Record*'s underpinning concept appears destined for eternal maneuverability or portability, allowing it to traverse across media, carriers, and means. However, there is a significant difference between a medium that records and plays back sound and one that is intended purely for visual contemplation. The former fills auditory space while the latter fills visual space.

While the sensory experiences of sound, touch, and sight all play a role in the different variants of *Zen for Record* that employ various recording media, the absence of sound resulting from an empty jacket or a "stilled" record with overpainted grooves subdues *Zen for Record*'s aural potential. The sound inheres in the overpainted record but will never become actual. Seen differently, the sound is perpetually conserved under the layer of paint, and restoring it would mean destroying the paint, with an unclear result of which sound might be actualized in this process. The transformation of *Zen for Record* to an empty jacket shifts the focus to the infrastructure and highlights the importance and agency of the framing device, similar to Imi Knoebel's *Der Keilrahmen* (1968–89), which consists of an empty stretcher hung on a wall.[14] Overpainting the content of a record is a different, yet no less radical act, which imposes a new order and violently silences the original content. Silencing is often done for political reasons, and the silenced content might resurface with even greater force as a result of suppression. Joseph Beuys's *Das Schweigen* (*The Silence,* 1973) is an attempt at silencing directed toward another work, as five reels of Ingmar Bergman's *Silence* (1962) were bathed in copper and zinc to produce a sealed film-artifact whose communicative possibilities were deactivated.[15] When art is silenced, its active and activist potential is put on hold, which may have

14 Lara Schilling, "Imi Knoebel, Der Keilrahmen, 1968–89," *Revisions — Zen for Film: Digital Interactive,* Bard Graduate Center, 2015, https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/revisions/rf-023/.

15 Linden Hill, "Joseph Beuys, *Das Schweigen* (1973)," in *Revisions — Zen for Film: Digital Interactive,* Bard Graduate Center, 2015, https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/revisions/rf-017/.

prompted Beuys to criticize Marcel Duchamp in his 1964 performance, *Das Schweigen von Marcel Duchamp wird überbewertet* (*The Silence of Marcel Duchamp Is Overrated*).

At first glance, *Zen for Record* as both a physical and a sounding object may seem indistinguishable. However, the differentiation between the two takes place on a temporal register. The effects of time—use, material decay, and degradation—will accumulate differently on an empty jacket and an overpainted record. The overpainted record, faded and faint, will continue its life as a self-contained object-based form, destined for visual appreciation and requiring care similar to the procedures known from the object-based conservation in which things are kept intact. On the other hand, the aural experience of a record played changes distinctly over time. The wear and tear of the medium and scratches accumulating on its surface bear new sonic patina and soundscapes of use. However, because *Zen for Record* uses specific technology, it also submits to a temporal specificity inextricably bound with its cultural epoch. Technology-based media are always temporally referential. As the distance from their original implementation in an artwork increases, so does the awareness of their historical condition. Social theorist Jacques Attali notes that "every code of music is rooted in the ideologies and technologies of its age, and at the same time produces them. [...] Time traverses music, and music gives meaning to time."[16]

A phonographic record and a turning table, as well as a player piano roll, wax record, music box, Dictaphone band, wire recording, recorded audiotape, and lastly, a compact disc, are media that are inextricably bound with the moment in time when they were commonly used. The physicality of their individual apparatus carries a presence related to the past. A decision to incorporate either a rotating table or piano roll into an artwork removes the viewer from the present and encourages them to enter a past time when those technologies participated in everyday experience (despite the phonograph's recent revival).

16 Jacques Attali, "Noise: The Political Economy of Music," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (Routledge, 2012), 37.

The Sonic Metaphysics

It is important to be attentive to the work's tendency to traverse between different media and formats. When a vinyl record is placed on a turntable and the stylus converts the mechanical energy into electrical energy, which is then amplified and heard as sound, *Zen for Record* becomes an auditory object. The logic of this work relies on the experience of sound, whether it is a recorded sound or the absence of sound. Therefore, any modification that eliminates the sonic component can be considered a deviation from the sonic conception of the work. The presence of the recording itself, with its grooves holding the imprint of the soundtrack, is crucial to the work (as opposed to a blank record with no grooves). Thus, the two variations of *Zen for Record,* one with overpainted grooves and the other with an empty jacket, represent distinct artistic gestures—one concerned with subtraction (empty jacket) and the other with addition (overpainted grooves). Both gestures result in aesthetically compelling objects that are fundamentally different to the work producing sound.

To classify *Zen for Record* as "sound art" and position it within the sonic domain, we need to understand the concept of sound as distinct from music. In his scholarship on the ontology of sound, philosopher Christoph Cox distinguishes between music and sound art ontologically. He argues that sound art draws attention to the auditory unconscious, a virtual and transcendental domain of noise (different from the conventional understanding of noise as something disruptive and relegated to the background).[17] Cox challenges the horizontal distinction between noise and signal and instead proposes a vertical distinction between conscious perception and auditory unconsciousness. The distinction between signal and noise is also a distinction between the virtual and the actual. For Cox, who follows the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Gottfried Leibniz, the virtual dimension of sound is never exhausted by the actual dimension of signal, music, or speech.

17 Christoph Cox, "Sound Art and the Sonic Unconscious," *Organized Sound* 14, no. 1 (2009): 19–26.

The perception of playing back an empty record, for instance, might be unconsciously registered, even if it is not consciously perceived, much like the roar of the ocean (as Cox draws on Leibniz).

In *Zen for Record,* the noise is not merely an unwanted, disposable phenomenon but a manifestation of the continuing and uninterrupted flux of sonic matter. The engineers of the historical phonograph had attempted to eliminate noise as an environmental noise spectrum (which Cox refers to as the phonograph's *trompe l'oreille* effect). By silencing *Zen for Record,* either intentionally by not wanting to experience its sonic aura or unintentionally when encountering it in an imaginary museum, we would be depriving it of its essential quality as a sonoric object emitting and emanating noise.

Unintentional Sound and Intentional Noise

Determining the difference between noise and sound can be a difficult task, as exemplified by *Zen for Record*. However, this challenge also highlights the potential of the interstices between categories and norms. Philosopher Michel Serres noted that as soon as phenomena occur, they leave noise.[18] Every form that pokes through reveals itself by generating noise. Noise is a matter of being. In the case of Friedman's phonograph record, the playback of the work itself creates a noise that is inherent to the technology used—the stylus running in the grooves and feeding signals to the amplifiers. The monotone audible rhythm of *Zen for Record*'s spinning on a turntable can be easily overlooked, but becomes more apparent when a more solid sound, such as a scratch on the record, is produced. While potentially unintended by the artist, the noise generated by the technological apparatus—the record player, rotating vinyl disc, stylus reading the missing recording, and the uncounted random sounds that make up the auditory field—is fully audible and can be considered "intentional." This intentionality of the nonhuman actor determines the sonic character of the

18 Michel Serres quoted in ibid., 20.

work. Unlike in a recording of music or other signals, where the noise of the apparatus is typically "white noise"—background noise that is barely perceptible or perceived as disruptive (something that Friedman's record and Paik's *Zen for Film,* which I will discuss shortly, share)—the intentional noise of *Zen for Record* is neither a background noise nor solely an empirical phenomenon. Instead, following Cox's argumentation, *Zen for Record* elevates noise, the sonic flux of its working apparatus, as a transcendental element. Here, noise is the condition of possibility for sound.

The Virtual and the Actual

While I have been influenced by Cox's convincing insights into the distinction between signal and noise, where the virtual is the dimension of sound and the actual is that of signal or music, the dialectic of the virtual/actual requires further clarification. *Zen for Record* not only embodies the flow of sonic matter, ready to be actualized by a musical or intentional recorded sound intervention. Instead, the relationship between the virtual and the actual is the condition of *Zen for Record*'s genesis, reflected in the relationship between concept and material. The concept, rich with infinite potential for realization, resides in the virtual and the individual manifestations of the work, such as a piano roll, or a CD with no intentionally recorded sound on it, are both virtual and real, on the brink of actualization (even if, unlike the physically manifest phonograph, they have not been actualized yet).[19] The ideas of the virtual and the real stem from Gilles Deleuze's philosophical project, drawing on Henri Bergson, and my adaptation of these theories to artworks that are temporal and iterant.[20] In essence, this distinction allows us to grasp artworks in the state

19 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism,* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Zone Books, 1991), 96–98.

20 I apply the virtual and the actual to the concept of the archive which harbors the virtual and the actual works of art. Hanna B. Hölling, *Paik's Virtual Archive: Time, Change, Materiality in Media Art* (University of California Press, 2017), 156–57.

of the virtual, which can be actualized but do not have to be realized, thus following the rules of difference and creation rather than limitation and resemblance. Deleuze points to another consequence of the division between the virtual and the real: whereas the real resembles the possible that it realizes, the actual does not resemble the embodied virtual.[21]

Applying Richard Wollheim's analytic aesthetics to this model could offer another twist in which ideas (types) are actualized in objects (tokens). In such a discursive constellation, *Zen for Record,* as an atemporal virtual type, would be constituted by tokens of many different pasts–futures, where the type becomes a virtual palimpsest of a work's multiplicity. [22] Taking this distinction further, as in Andre Lepecki's dance that remains unfixed in its original possibilization,[23] *Zen for Record* unlocks its potential in many virtual possibilities, driven by its will to enact. It is an ongoing performance of its conceptual component parts, drawing from and contributing to the tokens of its material manifestations. It would be fair to assume that *Zen for Record*'s phonograph record is one among many, not only a record but also a document of its concept's physical actualization, delayed in relation to what it documents and too early in relation to what is coming its way.

The capacity of *Zen for Record* to record by inscribing into the present a concept otherwise untethered by time resonates with the etymology of the word "phonograph." The phonograph was originally an instrument for recording in Edison's invention (attested in 1877)[24] and derived from the Ancient Greek words *phōnē* and *graphein* meaning "sound" or "voice" and "to write" or "to record" respectively. Edison's phonograph worked by physically "writing" sound waves onto a rotating cylinder using a needle and playing

21 Ibid., 157.

22 Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

23 Andre Lepecki, "The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2010): 31.

24 Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,* trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford University Press, 1999), 21.

back the sound by tracing the needle's path over the grooves.[25] "Phonogram," meaning an inscription of sound, approximates a photogram's ability to inscribe time in the realm of visuality.[26] As a segment of time that extends aurally and durationally, phonogram simultaneously records and instantiates the concept of *Zen for Record* in its materiality, technicity, and time-specific technological milieu. [27]

Exemplification and Exemplativism

Let's take a step back and revisit the *Zen for Record*'s ability to shift between various recording mediums and apparatuses. The idea of a recording with no intentional sound on it, an assumed lack of sound, seems to be exemplified in the actual and potential states of *Zen for Record* conveyed through these media. Thus, the concept of exemplification proves helpful in untangling *Zen for Record*'s complexities.

Exemplification comes from Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin and was applied to works that use degradation and decay by

25 Edison's invention quickly became popular and the term "phonograph" was commonly used to refer to any kind of mechanical sound recording device throughout the early 20th century. *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "phonograph," https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/144262, and *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* s.v. "phonograph," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phonograph.

26 Generated without the use of a camera, a photogram was a photographic image created by placing objects immediately onto the surface of a light-sensitive material. In film theory, photogram refers to an individual frame of film that represent instances of time.

27 In modern phonographic productions, a stylus is used to inscribe sound onto a lacquer disc. From this, a negative master stamper is produced, which is then used to create the final records. Despite this technological process which seems closer to the casting technology that employs a mold, recording can still be understood as a form of transposed inscription.

philosopher Sheri Irvin.[28] According to Irvin, a work "both possesses and highlights a property and metaphorically exemplifies a property when the properties it literally exemplifies bring that property powerfully to mind.[29] Goodman's example is a tailor swatch, where the fabric's essence is exemplified by a reference to its fabric and texture, and other features such as size and shape are incidental and provide no insight into what the fabric is like. In *Zen for Record,* the feature of a silent recording is a reference to the idea of a silent recording and an instantiation of it. Although there are salient features due to the context of use, such as the media and means through which the recording takes place, the size, length, intensity, and volume of the recording do not reveal the quality of the silent recording and could thus be deemed peripheral.

Sustaining the philosophical tone of exemplification but with a practical application to the culturally specific moment is Dick Higgins's "Exemplavist Manifesto" from 1976.[30] In fact, these two share some characteristics. According to Higgins, works of art created in the context of Fluxus emanate experience rather than signify or symbolize something else. Such works cannot be ends in themselves, and through their efficiency and force of suggestion, they always participate in the sharing of experience. Higgins proposed the concept of exemplativist art, in which the audience constructs an image of the set of possibilities intended by the artist by means of a notation and work. Because such art is an example rather than fixity, any realization is arbitrary. Like life, works are impure, an effect of artistic performance, and thus never a fixity.

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28 Sherri Irvin, "The Expressive Import of Degradation and Decay in Contemporary Art," in *Conserving Active Matter,* ed. Soon Kai Poh and Peter Miller (Bard Graduate Center, 2022), 65–79.

29 Ibid., 65.

30 Originally published by Unpublished Editions, New York, 1976, "An Exemplavist Manifesto" was reprinted in Steve Clay and Ken Friedman, eds., *Intermedia, Fluxus and the Something Else Press: Selected Writings by Dick Higgins* (Siglio, 2018), 247–55.

Understanding art as exemplative has several implications for Friedman's phonograph record. The work does not reside in itself but suggests a range of possibilities. The dialectic of the virtual and the actual is significant here: what is important is not an individual realization but the dialectic between any single realization and its alternates. Importantly, for Higgins, all form is a process of notation, a prescription for, or a form of action. This brings us back to an understanding of *Zen for Record* as two-directional, a recording or a document of the past-future (or the past that resides in the present that has been, according to Bergson and Deleuze).

Concretism

Higgins's concept of a work that emanates experience and exists as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end (i.e., it is nothing beyond itself) brings to mind George Maciunas's concretism. In his proto-Fluxus manifesto, "Neo-Dada in Music, Theater, Poetry, Art" (1962), Maciunas explains that concretists advocated for unity of form and content rather than their separation, and the world of concrete reality rather than the artificial abstraction of illusionism. Maciunas postulates an art which would be "an 'automatic machine' within which or by which nature [...] can complete the art-form, effectively and independently of the artist–composer. Thus the primary contribution of a truly concrete artist consists in creating a concept or a method by which form can be created independently of him."[31] At that time and beyond

31 From a draft read by Arthus C. Caspari, in German, at the Fluxus concert *Après John Cage,* Wuppertal, West Germany, June 9, 1962. A version in German was published in Jürgen Becker and Wolf Vostell, *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau réalisme: Eine Dokumentation* (Rowohlt, 1965), 192–95. According to Julia Robinson, Maciunas's concretism relates to functionalism and was mobilized to criticize art as "nonfunctional commodity." Julia E. Robinson, "Maciunas's Models: Thought in Three Dimensions," *George Maciunas Foundation,* May 2008, http://fluxusfoundation.com/fluxus-as-architecture/essays/maciunass-models-thought-in-three-dimensions/.

Maciunas's picture, concretism spilled into many disciplines and fields such as concrete poetry, musique concrète, and others in Europe and the Americas.

Fluxus has generated many artworks that are ends in themselves, rather than representations of something else or means to other ends, and *Zen for Record,* as a child of its time, is an eminent example. Hearing a creaking vinyl record is not symbolic of sound lost, emptiness, or a restraint from representation of something else (although I will return to the notion of emptiness shortly). The record is concretely itself; it is what it is. Independently of the Fluxus context, Deleuze convinces us that works of art sui generis are never representation, narrative, and never signify; they present rather than represent.[32] In *What Is Philosophy* (1994), Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that art becomes independent from its subject and audience and of its model.[33] In Anna Sauvagnargues's *Ethologie der Kunst,* drawing on Deleuze, the work is parsed as a result of real, material production, a result of material powers.[34]

Such concretism, made up of a chance situation and the indeterminacy of a found object collaged into a work of art, reminisce the bricoleur's construction made of everyday objects and materials. The Bricoleur "speaks not only with things but also through things," and selects from a hoard of previously accumulated, often used supplies or ingredients to solve new problems.[35] Bricolaging is tinkering with what is concretely given, or what is found, and employing it from means to goals, rather than from goals to means, as in the engineer's creative thinking. While it would be

32 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation,* trans. Daniel W. Smith (Continuum, 2002).

33 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy,* trans. Graham Burchhell aand Hugh Tomlinson (Verso, 2015), 163–64. See also Christoph Cox, *Sonic Flux: Sound, Art, and Metaphysics* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 37–38.

34 Anne Sauvagnargues, *Ethologie der Kunst: Deleuze, Guattari und Simodon* (August Verlag, 2019).

35 Not incidentally, Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind,* trans. George Weidenfield and Nicholson Ltd. (University of Chicago Press, 1962) opens with a chapter "The Science of the Concrete."



Fig. 5.4. Nam June Paik, *Zen for Film,* 1962–64. Installation view at the exhibition *Revisions: Zen for Film,* curated by the author at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York, September 18, 2015–February 21, 2016. Photograph by Bruce M. White.

inaccurate to claim that Friedman's creative gesture is purely bricolage, the genesis of *Zen for Record* bears several structural characteristics of bricolage, including movement, play, and contingency. It was, after all, a found record reworked into an assemblage of forms and ideas.

Extending the Play: (Beyond the) Homage to Nam June Paik

To fully appreciate *Zen for Record*'s cross-temporal sounding, however, it is important to contextualize it within the broader network of aesthetic and artistic concerns that emerged during its time. The work's exemplification of the impossibility of pure silence connects it to several philosophical and artistic ideas that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s. Notably, Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962–64) is an important reference point (fig. 5.4).

John Cage, an American composer, famously rejected the idea of silence: "There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact,

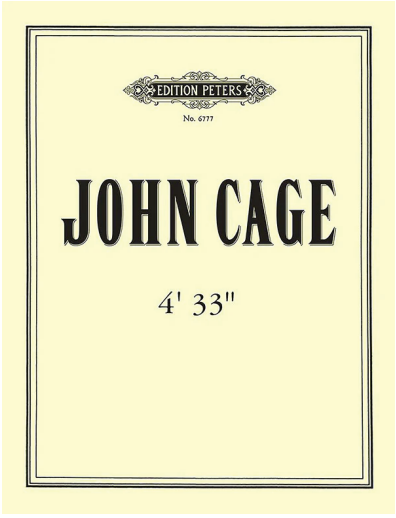


Fig. 5.5. John Cage, *4'33"* (in proportional Notation) (Edition Peters, 1952/1953). Wikimedia.

try as we may to make a silence, we cannot."[36] He believed that we often fail to listen, dismissing noise as a mere distraction. Cage's renowned work, *4'33"* (1952, fig. 5.5), instructs musicians not to play their instruments during three movements, thereby allowing the audience to hear the ambient sounds of their surroundings. This composition challenges the traditional roles of composer and performer and introduces the role of chance, shifting agency to the listener. While the idea of the impossibility of silence in *4'33"* resonates with *Zen for Record,* the latter offers an experience of a recording of silence (probably in a sterile environment) rather than a live event. It is worth noting that the recording of *4'33"* would not be equivalent to the experience of a recording in *Zen for Record,* as the former would inevitably capture environmental

36 John Cage, *Experimental Music,* address to the convention of Music Teachers National Association in Chicago, winter 1957. Reprinted in John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 102.

noises produced by the audience and infrastructure surrounding it. As Cage himself argued, true silence is impossible as we are always surrounded by sound.

Cage's use of stillness brings to mind Paik's *Zen for Film,* a work in which an empty film leader runs an analog film projector to create a visual stillness. Friedman cites it as a source of inspiration.[37] *Zen for Film* was, in a sense, an antifilm that, in a performative gesture—and like Cage's idea of "no sound" music—exposed its own material conditions, accompanied by the rattling mechanics of the projector.[38] The impossibility of silence in both Cage's *4'33"* and Friedman's *Zen for Record* resonates in Paik's blank film, which reflects the impossibility of visual nothingness. Just as it is impossible to experience pure silence, it is also impossible to experience complete visual nothingness. A clear frame proves the impossibility of an empty image, just as an empty record proves the impossibility of a soundless experience.

It is striking that although Paik emphasized his close connection to Cage, Cage himself stressed that it was *Zen for Film* that both united and separated them. According to Cage, *Zen for Film* was Paik's own version of *4'33"*, but Paik's stillness was created through an image, whereas Cage's stillness came from tone.[39] In *Zen for Record,* the stillness comes from tone, but one that is captured through a recording. Alternatively, if the experience of *Zen for Record* involves the event of playing a phonograph on a rotating table, then the noise from its apparatus, much like the noise from Paik's rattling analog film projector, is inextricably linked with and participating in *Zen for Record*'s emergent soundscape.

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37 Friedman in conversation.

38 *Zen for Film* has been thoroughly examined in the book Hanna B. Hölling, *Revisions: Zen for Film* (Bard Graduate Center, 2015), an eponymous exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center Gallery (September 2015–February 2016), https://www.bgc.bard.edu/exhibitions/exhibitions/8/revisions-zen-for-film.

39 John Cage, "Zum Werk von Nam June Paik," in *Nam June Paik: Video Time—Video Space,* ed. Toni Stoss and Thomas Kellein (Cantz, 1991), 22.

Although remote at first glance, the association between *Zen for Record*'s aural stillness with the emptiness in the visual realm can be further explored through its link with Paik's empty film. Namely, Paik's withdrawal from imagery pays tribute to Robert Rauschenberg's *White Painting* (1951), which chronologically preceded Cage's fascination with silence. "Offhand, you might say that all three actions are the same. But they are quite different," stated Cage in reference to Rauschenberg's work, Paik's, and his own. "Nam June Paik's film has no images on it; the room is darkened, the film is projected, and what you see is the dust that has collected on the film. I think that's somewhat similar to the case of the Rauschenberg painting, though the focus is more intense."[40] Cage, Rauschenberg's friend and close collaborator, often admitted that he was inspired by Rauschenberg's eccentricity. In *Silence* (1973), Cage notes that the panels of *White Painting* "were airports of the lights, shadows, and particles," "mirrors of the air" that provide a substrate for observing change and infinite visual possibilities.[41] Although *White Painting* can be seen as naturally "Zen," it also coincides with Rauschenberg's idea of his canvas as a "hypersensitive" picture plane.[42] His belief that "a canvas is never empty" is mirrored in Cage's—and Friedman's by extension— approach to silence, and, subsequently, Paik's seemingly empty projection. "Silence, like music, is non-existent," Cage contends. "There are always sounds."[43] In a similar vein, listening to *Zen for Record* offers an infinite potential for observing fluctuations of the sonic—or the sonic unconscious—and a plane of sound against which other sonic events are measured (as evidenced by my listening to the record in my central London apartment affected by environmental noise). It could be said that Rauschenberg's pictorial,

40 John Cage quoted in Wulf Herzogenrath, Nam June Paik Fluxus/Video (Silke Schreiber, 1983), 150.

41 John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," in *Silence,* 102.

42 Calvin Tomkins, *The Bride and the Bachelors: Five Masters of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 203.

43 Cage, *Silence,* 152.

Cage's musical, Paik's filmic, and Friedman's sonic silence neither renounce conventional modes of communication nor subscribe to "coquettish, even cheerful nihilism," as the critic Susan Sontag has put it.[44] Rather, through artistic means and each in their own intrinsic way, they sharpen the perceptual attention of the spectator/listener.

Despite their similarities, the three artworks—*4'33"*, *White Painting,* and *Zen for Film*—all demonstrate fundamental differences concerning vision (Rauschenberg), sound (Cage), and time (Paik). Where to place *Zen for Record*? *Zen for Record* shares a temporal concern with Paik's empty film, and both explore the relationship between boredom and time. As spectators/listeners, we are exposed to an experience of time that requires endurance. While time is inherent in Paik's film due to the movement of the film strip through the projector, *Zen for Record*'s time is inscribed into the duration of each side of the record.[45] Change, that is, the transformation from the visual/sonic transparency to opaqueness, is an index of time passing, which stages the beauty of decay against the deadly effects of time. Here, the "becoming-opaque," whether in the film or, metaphorically, on the record, endows what is being seen and experienced with another quality—a remarkable aesthetic–sonic encounter that takes place in duration.

Another parallel between these works is the presence of a notation, instruction, or score. While Cage's *4'33"* exists in at least three notations, Rauschenberg's paintings exist in at least two instructions for fabricators. While *Zen for Record* has one event score, there is no evidence that Paik notated his verbal instruc-

44 Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Solitude," in *Studies of Radical Will* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

45 There is yet another technological parallel between *Zen for Record* and film: in the making of a phonographic record, the master copy of the record is converted into its "negative" imprint to be used as a "stamp" pressed into steam-softened vinyl. In analog film, the filmic master is kept to produce photo mechanic reproductions—an aspect missing in *Zen for Film*'s leader that circumvented the usual process of development.

tions (which is not to say that verbal scores or instructions do not count). *Zen for Record*'s score simply reads, "A phonograph record with no sound on it. 1966."[46] This Fluxus event score is, on the one hand, a condition of possibility for the physical object—the phonographic record—to occur, whether or not it actually preceded or followed from the found record.[47] On the other hand, according to the Fluxus event score doctrine, the work can also materialize in the reader's imagination, thus rendering it decisively distinct from all previously mentioned scripts.

Zen

Zen, bound up with ascetic withdrawal from the richness of visual representation, is another thread running through *White Paintings, 4'33", Zen for Film,* and *Zen for Record*. While Rauschenberg was reluctant to confirm his attachment to Zen, Cage noted, "I spent years studying and trying to understand Zen. You, you have done nothing of the sort, you are just naturally Zen."[48] In the 1960s, Zen aesthetic, which disdains abundance in favor of sim-

46 Ken Friedman, *Fluxus: Concert of Events, Performances and Actions,* vol. 1, unpublished manuscript, 1980.

47 I describe scores "a posteriori" when they are based on experience and observation of the realization of the work before it becomes scripted. "A priori" scores are written before the work realization. For these notions, as well as the specification of a score as "primary" or "secondary," see Hanna B. Hölling, "Unpacking the Score: Notes on the Material Legacy of Intermediality," *On Curating* 51: Fluxus Special Issue (2021), https://www.on-curating.org/issue-51-reader/unpacking-the-score-notes-on-the-material-legacy-of-intermediality.html.

48 Quotation of John Cage by Robert Rauschenberg in French: "Non. John me disait: 'J'ai passé des années à comprendre et à étudier le zen. Toi, tu n'as rien fait, tu es juste naturellement zen.' Ce qui l'irritait un peu." Bérénice Bailly, "'J'aime le mouvement de la main,'" *Le Monde,* August 9, 2005, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2005/08/09/robert-rauschenberg-j-aime-le-mouvement-de-la-main_678772_3246.html.

plicity, became increasingly attractive to Westerners. Nothingness is a fertile source inherent in all that exists, according to Daoist and Buddhist mindset. And the Heart Sutra, a popular Buddhist scripture, proclaims: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." To engage with an empty painting, a silent record or a film devoid of visual representation is to ask the viewer/listener to empty their mind and to allow things to be perceived as they manifest themselves in the fullness of being, achieving Zen's desire to achieve a unification with the world. What effects from such experience is a form of sensitization of the viewers. Sound is everywhere; it's only listening which stops now and then, to paraphrase Cage.[49]

Western culture was influenced by Zen in the 1950s through books on haiku, Zen painting, calligraphy, martial arts, and exhibitions conversant with Zen thought.[50] However, Zen that inspired Western artists, particularly Cage (and, through Cage, Fluxus[51]), reached the artistic circles through the Japanese scholar and writer Daisetz T. Suzuki. Suzuki, preoccupied with Zen and Shin Buddhism, withdrew from pictorial content and proclaimed seeing of Nothing as being the real, eternal seeing.[52] While Paik disavowed Zen as a source of inspiration,[53] Friedman believed that Zen was

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49 "Art is everywhere; it's only seeing which stops now and then." Constance Lewallen, "Cage and the Structure of Chance," in *Writings through John Cage's Music and Poetry, + Art,* ed. David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 227.

50 Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in Art between East and West* (Waanders Uitgevers, 1996), 54.

51 David T. Doris, "Zen Vaudeville: A Medi(t)ation in the Margins of Fluxus," in *The Fluxus Reader,* ed. Ken Friedman (Academy Editions, 1998), 94–95.

52 Nina Zschocke, *Der irritierte Blick: Kunstrezeption und Aufmerksamkeit* (Wilhelm Fink, 2006), 313.

53 Nam June Paik, "Afterlude to the EXPOSITION of EXPERIMENTAL TELEVISION 1963, March, Galerie Parnass," in *FLUXUS cc fiVe ThReE* (Fluxus newspaper #4), June 1964; In relation to *Zen for TV,* 1963, Paik notes, "The title is an artistic coincidence, you know. It is a beautiful title." Nam June Paik and Justin Hoffman, "Interview in a Station Restaurant: Nam June Paik in Conversation with Justin Hoffman, Wiesbaden, May 22, 1989," in *Nam June Paik: Exposition of*



Fig. 5.6. Ben Vautier, *Disque de Musique Total : Je ne signe plus,* Centre d'Art Total Nice, 1963. Photograph from *Discogs*.

significant, even though it was unachievable in his art due to the detachment it required.[54] Instead, Friedman often used the notion of Zen humorously. *Zen Vaudeville* (The Sound of One Shoe Tapping, 1966), which unites Zen, humor, and vaudeville is an apt example of works which Friedman deems "jokes about Zen."[55] However, one must be mindful of too spontaneous judgments of

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Music, Electronic Television, Revisited, ed. Susanne Neuburger (Walther König, 2009), 84; Ken Friedman, conversation with the author.

54 Friedman acknowledged that he did not practice Zen, but rather had extensive knowledge of the cultural and intellectual histories of China and Japan, which he believed were significant. Ken Friedman, email correspondence with the author, April 27, 2023.

55 Ken Friedman, conversation with the author.

Zen for Record as entirely devoid of the Zen element. In the simplicity of its composition and means, the somewhat superficial treatment of technique, and the understanding of its inner nature (according to the Zen credo that "an artwork is already a work of natural art before the arrival of the artist on the scene"), *Zen for Record* manifests commonalities with Zen compositions. Even if in some sense it might be seen as "a joke about Zen," beneath it, as the artist asserts, "the work conceals important truths."[56]

Antecedents, Contemporaries, Followers

At least two other Fluxus works invoke the concept of *Zen for Record,* either by carrying it forward or questioning its character. Ben *Vautier's Disque de Musique Total. Je ne signe plus,* published by Centre d'Art Total in Nice in 1963 (fig. 5.6), seems to be one of *Zen for Record*'s antecedents. As an homage to Cage, Vautier's empty record, whose contents remain unexplored in my research, is contained in a jacket that displays a set of instructions for the reception of total music. The artist provides the instruction to "place the record on an empty table until it becomes interesting (at least for four minutes) [...] Ben Vautier 1963," and adds, "Any 7" could be used for the performance." A 1984 modification of this idea on a record jacket is titled "12 Propositions for a Record to be Considered as Music." The instructions direct the reader to look at the record for one hour, to play it 420 times, or "try to eat the record."

In a different manner, Milan Knížák's *Destroyed Music,* 1965–79 (fig. 5.7), a project in which the artist intentionally destroyed records by scratching them, punching holes in them, or even melting or breaking them, seems to overlap with Friedman's concept, but in a more dramatic, if not violent, way. Playing back such a record implied destroying the needle and potentially also the turntable. Knížák's amendment to his destructive techniques was to place sticky tape on the top of the records, paint over them (recalling *Zen for Record*'s early manifestation in which the grooves were overpainted), burn and smash them, and subsequently col-

56 Ibid.



Fig. 5.7. Milan Knížák, *Destroyed Music,* 1965–79. Photograph from *Monoskop*.

lage the broken parts together. The music produced as a result of such manipulation was disturbing, if not nerve-wracking. Knížák saw his records as notations, as any transcription of the music they played would fail.

This creation of chance music by applying chance operations recalls Christian Marclay's *Record without a Cover,* in which he

sought to create "a record that could change with time."[57] Released in 1985 by Recycled Records in a limited number of copies (originally fifty), the record features Marclay's own composition. Sold without covers, the scratches and dirt that accumulated on the vinyl would fuse with the original recording and produce new sounds. Reminiscent of the chance operations that occur on *Zen for Record,* but undergoing a stronger material transfiguration, Marclay's record becomes subject to the indeterminate events of the circulation process, in which the production of sounds is thrown into flux.

Radical Preservation

In their book *What Is Philosophy,* Deleuze and Guatarri argue that, "Art preserves, and is the only thing in the world that is preserved. It preserves and is preserved in itself although it lasts no longer than its support and materials—stone, canvas, chemical color, and so on."[58] Their statement highlights the importance of considering the materiality of a work when thinking about its preservation.

To keep the physicality of *Zen for Record* intact would require the basic material preservation of its constituent parts: a vinyl record, an edition of 150 EPs, and a turntable capable of playing back this format. While a turntable might vary in kind, the material preservation usually opts for time-specific technology. Moreover, the material of the record—the vinyl, rather than polystyrene—would be significant in preserving the work's material structure. "Changing media move different kinds of boundaries," notes Friedman telling the story of giving away of his LP collection in the early 1980s, which he replaced with a large library of cassette tapes and then a collection CDs, now replaced by online stream-

57 Cabelle Ahn, "Christian Marclay: Record without a Cover, 1985," *Revisions: Digital Interactive,* Bard Graduate Center, 2015, https://exhibitions.bgc.bard.edu/revisions/rf-025/.

58 Deleuze and Guatarri, *What Is Philosophy,* 163–64.

ing. He adds: "Most of the media I listen to now didn't exist when I found and scored *Zen for Record*."[59]

Including *Zen for Record* in an institutional collection with a focus on material preservation would likely involve providing a stable climate and protective glazing. However, this could also have the unintended consequence of silencing the record and turning it into a relic. While conservation efforts can be perceived as both caring and oppressive,[60] as relics often have a certain charm due to their remote history, yet this same remoteness can also strip them of relevance in the present.[61]

Perhaps the preservation of *Zen for Record* should involve considering the context in which it was created in the 1960s, with its specific technophile culture. While playing back an empty record can provide a unique aural experience that some may perceive as timeless, *Zen for Record* is inherently tied to a time-specificity that cannot be fully recaptured through material preservation. Similar to a species that is closely linked to its natural environment,[62] *Zen for Record* requires a recollection of the zeitgeist and spirit of Fluxus, including the vibratory presence of sound. As Brandon LaBelle notes in *Background Noise,* sound played a crucial role in the construction of Fluxus scores, events, and objects.[63] The cross-temporal resonance of Fluxus and the bits of actuality that

59 Ken Friedman, email correspondence with the author.

60 Conservation as oppressive, emancipatory, and caring has been addressed in Karolina Wilczyńska, "Conserving a Performance about Conservation: Care and Preservation in Mierele Laderman Ukele's Maintenance Art," in *Performance: The Ethics and the Politics of Conservation and Care,* Vol. 1, ed. Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin (Routledge, 2023).

61 David Lowenthal, "Material Preservation and Its Alternatives," *Perspecta* 25 (1989): 67–77.

62 Alva Noë, "Death and Entanglement: Some Thoughts about Life, Love, and the Aims of Art Conservation," in *Conserving Active Matter,* ed. Peter N. Miller and Soon Kai Poh (Bard Graduate Center, 2022), 120–21.

63 Brandon LaBelle, *Background Noise: Perspective on Sound Art* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 62.

keep it relevant today cannot replace the reality of Fluxus in its historical moment.

And there is, and must be, more, and it resonates on a personal level. Friedman notes, "For me, as an artist, there is also a range of personal, emotional issues. I miss the people who are now gone—people with whom I spoke and the people I often saw. My connection to them was part of the context of the work for me."[64] In Kurt Vonnegut's semi-autobiographical novel, *Slaughterhouse-Five,* the protagonist finds himself trapped in a moment, much like the three ladybugs preserved in amber. Similarly, we often hold on to memories and the afterthoughts they bring. However, while the ladybugs remain frozen in time, we are unable to fully relive the moment and can only reflect upon it from a distance. We are, in fact, never in time.[65]

Therefore, while the phonograph captures silence in its culturally specific time, recording something means attempting to make it last—here, to preserve silence from oblivion. This preservation of silence generates noise that paradoxically sublates silence. Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation) comes to mind: Because the preservation of silence generates noise, it occurs as both preservation and deletion.

On various scales of its preservation and of how it preserves, *Zen for Record* goes beyond the sum of its individual parts. Guaranteed by the score on the one hand and the vagrant character of its concept on the other, its perseverance prompts us to reframe preservation and what it means to preserve. By releasing the concept in different media, such as a piano roll, a Dictaphone, or a CD-ROM, it suggests that what is being captured is more important than the material survival of its carriers. If we accept this, we can conclude that preservation is not external to the work but indeed, it is the Work itself (capitalized to signify a larger structure). The Work sustains itself on a meta level, adapting to changing environments and technological support. In this process of self-pres-

64 Ken Friedman, email correspondence with the author.

65 Ibid. I am deeply indebted to the artist for providing me with inspiration for writing these paragraphs.

ervation through variants, forms, and formats, the Work offers a glimpse of radical preservation that is free from the obsolescence of its individual carriers and the physical demise of its means. Such radical preservation cuts across spatial and temporal strata, unconcerned with the physical upkeep of authentic materials.

So, to address the question of what, how, and when *Zen for Record* is, we might need to listen to its extended play. We may locate the Work not in a fixed medium or singular manifestation, but in its resilient capacity for change. Its essence lies precisely in this variability—a condition that exceeds specific formats, intentions, or historical moments, and that moves across generational and cultural boundaries. In this sense, the Work does not begin with *Zen for Record*; rather, *Zen for Record* is one articulation of a Work that, in a way, has always already been.

Prolific artworks can transcend the material constraints of their media and persist through transformations that exceed the spatial and temporal boundaries of their form, as well as the idioms of singular authorship or intention. Craig Dworkin has suggested that *Zen for Film* and *Zen for Record* might be seen as editions of the same work.[66] However, as I have shown, these two works—together with Rauschenberg's *White Painting* and Cage's *4'33"*—exemplify a broader continuity of form and substance. This continuity is more powerful than the preservation of a singular work because it is not bound by the political economy of objects, collections, and institutions. As Cage once noted, "Until I die there will be sounds. And they will continue following my death. One need not fear about the future of music."[67] Friedman subverted this sentiment, remarking that "Ultimately, I've got to tell you, five billion years from now, there will only be silence."[68]

In the time that remains, what matters is that we listen.

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66 This volume, 37.

67 Cage, *Silence*, 8.

68 Ken Friedman, conversation with the author.

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This essay has largely evolved through my conversations with Ken Friedman, for which I extend my sincere appreciation. He not only introduced me to *Zen for Record* but also encouraged deep contemplation on the subject. I am grateful to my collaborators within the project Activating Fluxus, Josephine Ellis and Aga Wielocha, for their constructive comments on various sections of this chapter. I am indebted to the Swiss National Foundation for their generous support of our collaborative research, and my deep thanks to the Institute of Materiality in Art and Culture and the Research Division of the Bern Academy of the Arts for their unwavering institutional support.



Fig. 6.1. Ken Friedman, *Zen for Record*, 1966 (2026). Photo © 2026 by Anja Karolina Furrer.


Record
SIDE A
33 ⅓ RPM
edman

EPILOGUE

From the Ise Shrine to *Zen for Record*

Ken Friedman

In a recent essay in the Swedish journal *Kvartal,* Ola Wong discussed the Ise Shrine (fig. 6.2) in relation to the process of destruction and creation embedded in life activity.

He wrote:

> There is an Asian view of process knowledge reflected in architecture. It is best symbolized by the Ise Jingu Temple in Japan. Ise is the most important shrine in the Shinto religion. It has stood on the same site since the year 690. Every twenty years, it is rebuilt from scratch, from wood and hay. Twenty years is about the length of time as a human generation. Each cycle means that a new generation of craftsmen learns the knowledge from contemporary masters. In this way, the Japanese give the temple eternal life.[1]

What kind of process knowledge does silence embody? Does John Cage build on the silence of Marcel Duchamp? Is there an implicit

1 Ola Wong, "Är allt juristernes fel?," *Kvartal,* July 12, 2026, https://kvartal.se/olawong/artiklar/ar-allt-juristernas-fel/cG9zdDoxMz-I2NzU. My translation.



Fig. 6.2. The rebuilding site of the Gekū, one of the two main shrines in Ise, marked with a sign announcing the 63rd rebuilding, 2026. To the left the current shrine, which may not be photographed from inside the sacred perimeter. Photo by Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei.

silence in Erik Satie, or is it merely music? When we take the sound away from music, what remains?

A decade ago, I imagined a future with no music by proposing the Extended Music Academy (fig. 6.3). In this academy, the curriculum would be limited to the sounds that instruments make when sawed into sections, hammered, or otherwise destroyed. The academy would appoint music professors to teach the destruction of instruments they once played.

The Extended Music Academy is a joke with something quiet hidden inside. The Zen master Mumon (1183–1260) said:

> Talking too much spoils your virtue;
> Silence is truly unequaled.
> Let the mountains become the sea;
> I'll give you no comment.[2]

2 Katsui Sekida, trans., "Case 27. Nansen's 'Not Mind, Not Buddha, Not Things'," in *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and the Blue Cliff Records.* ed. A.V. Grimstone (Shambhala, 2014), 92.

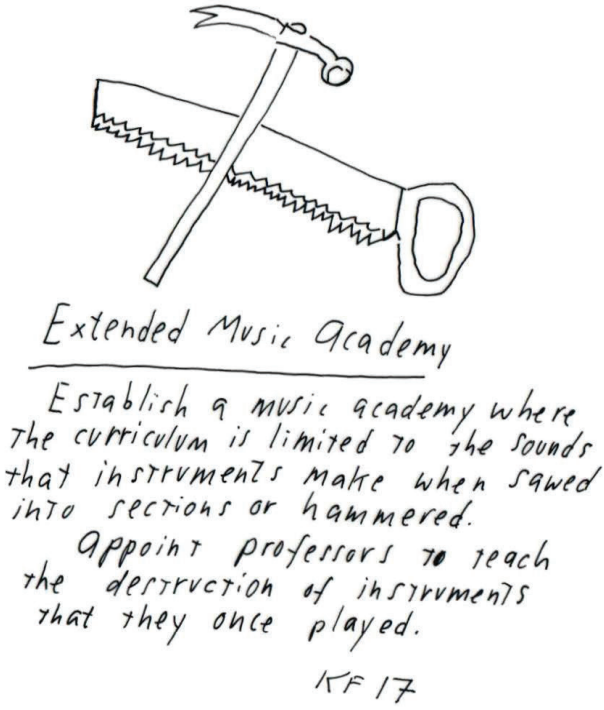


Fig. 6.3. Ken Friedman, *Extended Music Academy,* 2017.

But every book is a comment with sound and silence chasing each other across the pages. *Zen for Film* opened the conversation. *Zen for Record* continues it. The different versions of *Zen for Record* emerged every twenty years or so, a bit like the Ise Shrine. Nevertheless, there is no way to know how the process of silent music moves across generations. The imaginary professors at the Expanded Music Academy teach nothing to their imaginary students.

Sometimes, I wonder about the person I was when I found that first soundless LP in 1966. Six decades later, the archeology of time creates the layers of the self that I became. Much like the Ise Shrine, time perpetually tears us down to replace us with new versions. At the end of the process, only silence remains.


KF 1966-1987 2/0

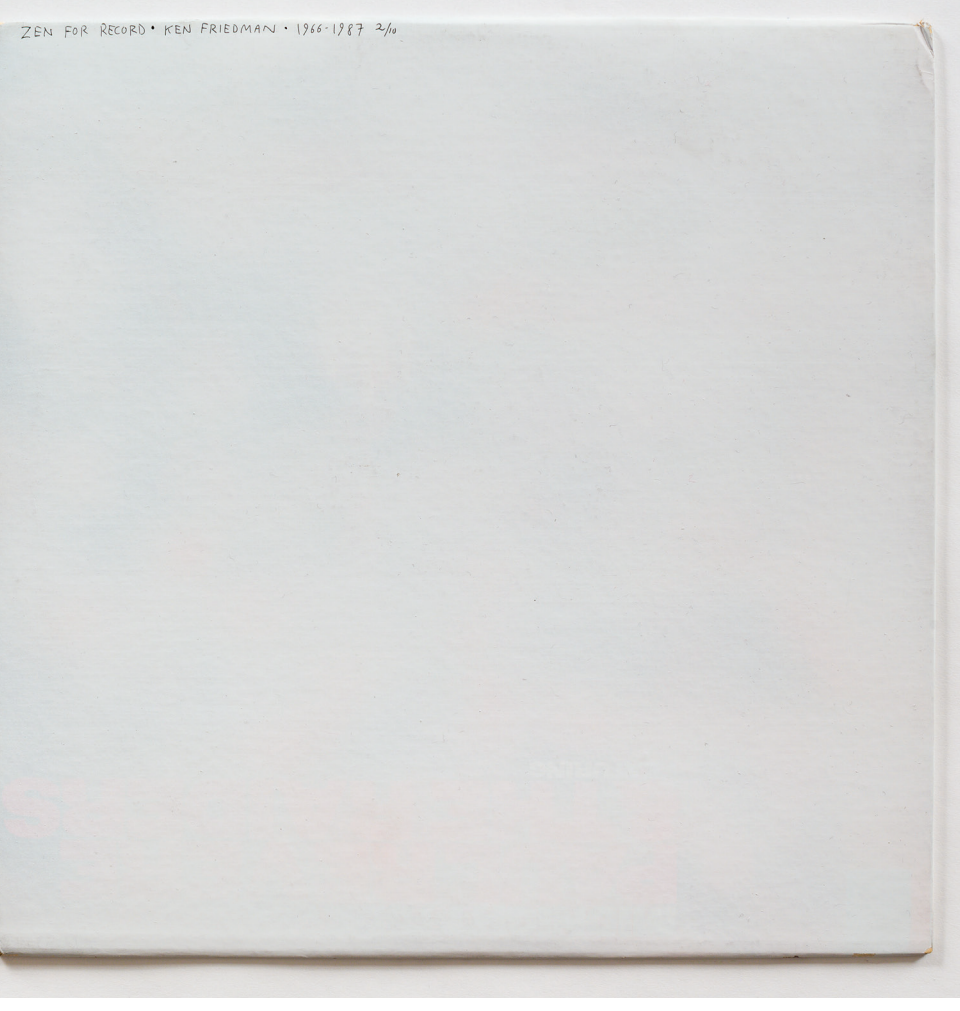


Fig. 6.4. Ken Friedman, *Zen for Record,* 1987. Emily Harvey Collection, Emily Harvey Foundation, New York. Photo © 2026 by Christian Xatrec.

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