



Dräger

From Thomas Edison to Christian Marclay, two modes of hearing images and visualizing sound.

Photographs & Phonographs

Sara Knelman

Of our five senses, we've only worked out how to record two: sight and sound. In the span of half a century, a pair of inventions generated the first durable, reproducible impressions of visible and audible perceptions. The reverberations of their original names—*photograph*, *phonograph*—remind us of their parallel ambitions: to write with light, to write with sound. As physical objects, they've each taken efficient and elegant forms, most often as flattened surfaces embedded with traces of things outside of themselves. Yet their fundamental operations are by definition inaccessible to the other. Sound is invisible, still images silent. They are, to use musical metaphors, harmonious and discordant at the same time. The friction in this—their obvious resonances and blunt boundaries—has sparked a fascination in photography with making the objects and operations of recorded sound visible. What might be revealed in picturing the mechanisms of another sense?

Having come first, photography was there to chronicle the invention of the phonograph. In 1878, a year after shouting the first recorded words, “Mary had a little lamb,” down a mouthpiece, Thomas Edison made a trip to Washington, D.C., to present his phonograph—a cylinder covered with tinfoil that registered the vibrations from sound—at the National Academy of Sciences. The next day, Edison stopped off at Mathew Brady’s studio to pose for the first mechanical renderings of the newest

François Kollar, *Advertising study for “Magic Phono,” a photomontage portrait of Marie Bell, 1930*
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RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, New York

Thomas Edison with
his tinfoil phonograph,
Mathew Brady Studio,
Washington, D.C.,
April 18, 1878
Courtesy Library of
Congress Prints and
Photographs Division

**Records become commodities
twice over, both as objects
for collecting and as subjects
for images commissioned to
stir our desire for them.**



mechanical recording machine. One of the resulting pictures shows Edison looking boyish (he was only thirty-one!), but serious (long exposure times made a smile difficult to hold), two fingers poised gingerly on the crank of his “speaking phonograph.” Less out of place than out of time, his invention sits on a table beside him, appearing self-consciously cutting edge amidst the ornate patterns of Brady’s staid studio scenery and Edison’s checked suit. Part comical prop, part futuristic beacon, it is remarkably at ease on the smooth surface of the image, and predicts something of photography’s increasing interest in the machinery of the modern world.

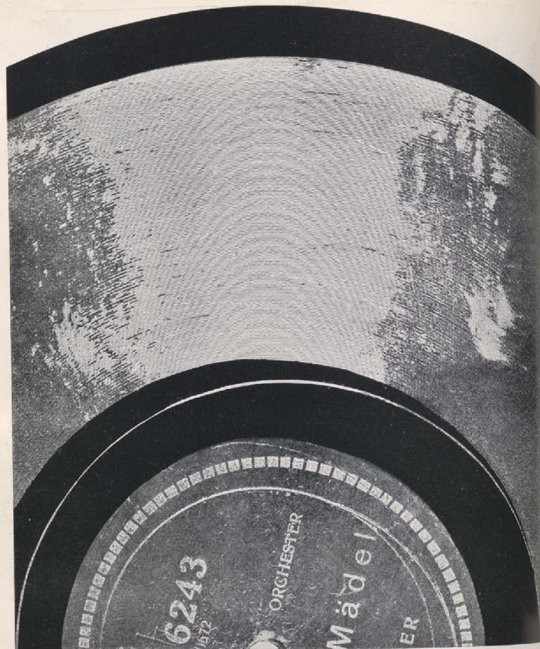
With the invention of the phonograph record in 1889 (more commonly called the gramophone record in Europe), tinfoil impressions became embedded grooves, and by the 1920s, flat discs had entirely usurped the cylinder format. Round, reflective, mechanically impressed, potentially kinetic: they made perfect objects for modern photography. László Moholy-Nagy and other avant-garde figures in the 1920s and 1930s took records, like photographs, as tools and symbols for the creative aptitudes of technologically driven media. Moholy-Nagy urged artists to use them to produce rather than reproduce, to make new sounds and images rather than faithful renderings of the familiar. Acting on this imperative, he made the record strange by looking at it the way only a camera could: uncomfortably close, tightly cropped, dramatically lit. In his 1925 book, *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (Painting, photography, film), the record’s circularity and dynamism are echoed by the luminous orbs of street lamps and headlight trails on the page opposite. Deprived of depth and scale, we are left with equivocal etchings of modern and mechanized surfaces—of the world, of the record, and of the photograph.

The 1920s and 1930s also saw the increasing popularity of radio and offset lithography, when music and records were as central to mass culture as picture magazines and avant-garde journals. In his 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin famously addressed the complexity and potential of art’s new capacity to reach us in every corner, observing that “technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself.” Benjamin continues:

Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record. The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.

But what does it take for a record to resound in the drawing room, for an image to reach an art lover’s wall? As art, document, and advertisement, photography might be the original, the copy, or the purveyor of copies in this exchange. And records certainly become commodities twice over, both as objects for collecting and as subjects for images commissioned to stir our desire for them.

Yet the line between art and commerce was not so clear for the persistent and experimental photographers who took up paid work for the recording industry. Are François Kollar’s commissions, such as *Advertising study for “Magic Phono,” a photomontage portrait of Marie Bell* (1930), any less arresting for their commercial motivations? Is Florence Henri’s visual excitement not just as palpable in her mirrored records for Columbia as it is in her self-portraits? Even an anonymous press image from 1948, showing (seemingly) the inside of a jukebox—or a “coin-operated phonograph,” as it was sometimes called—has been subtly and lovingly retouched to emphasize the edges



Grammofonplatte

Foto: MOHOLY-NAGY
bei von Lébbeck

Gesteigerte Realität des Alltäglichen. Ein fertiges Plakat.

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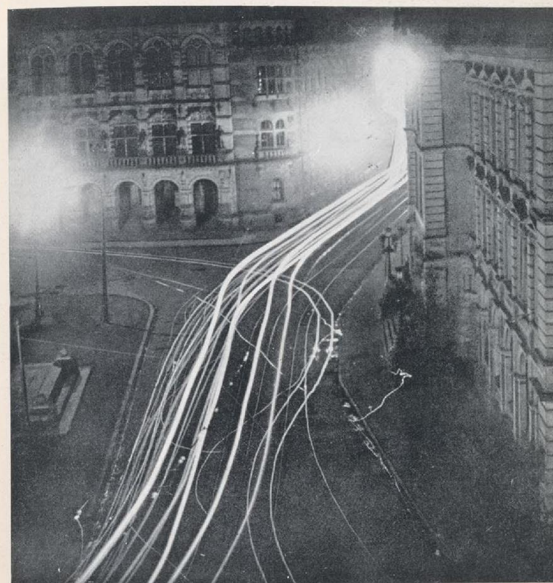
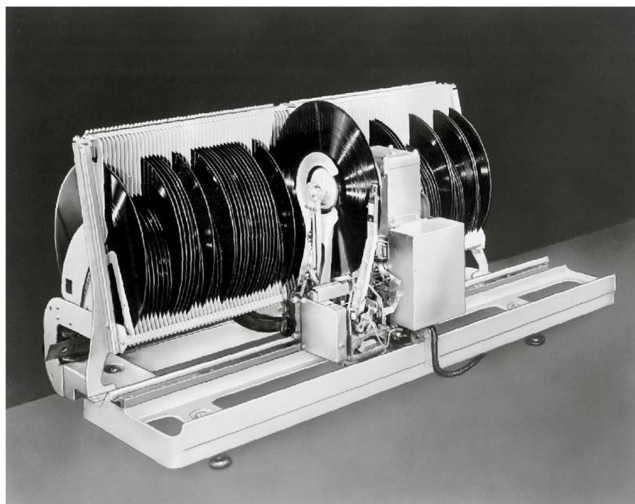


Foto: GRÜNEWALD
BREMEN

Nachtaufnahme

Die Lichtspuren der vorbeifahrenden
Autos und Straßenbahnen.

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Clockwise from top:
Spread from László
Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei*,
Photographie, *Film*
(Painting, photography,
film) (Munich: Albert
Langen Verlag, 1925);
Florence Henri, *Columbia*,
1931; photographer
unknown, *Interior*
mechanism of a jukebox,
1948

© Artists Rights Society,
New York/VG
Bild-Kunst, Bonn, and
courtesy the Museum of
Modern Art/Art Resource,
NY; © Gallery Martini &
Ronchetti, Genoa; Courtesy
the author





and curves of all its moving parts. Labeled only “phonographs,” it offers a rare glimpse of technological lucidity amidst the drive to obscure the increasingly complex inner workings of things. The spirit of such images reflects photographers who had begun to revel in, rather than fear, the significance of the medium’s mechanization, who sought to explore its limits and work out ways to exceed them, and who understood, as Benjamin did, the contradictory and overlapping functions photography might hold.

Sight and sound were, of course, united in the formation of a third medium: film. (In 1960, Smell-O-Vision briefly added a third sensory dimension to the cinematic experience, a novelty that seems to be enjoying a resurgence as cinemas struggle to draw audiences.) But there’s a different fascination, if a certain loneliness, in sensory isolation. On its own, still photography could deliberately bump up against realms it couldn’t quite enter, like movement and sound. The machines for playing records often served as photographic subjects for some of these experiments. Marcel Duchamp, for one, delighted in the optical possibilities of the record player’s repetitive, spinning motion. Rather than recording on the surfaces of records, he literally resurfaced them to make his *Rotoreliefs* (1935), covering the discs with joyous, psychedelic swirls of color; when “played,” his records recast the turntable as a machine for visual, rather than audible, pleasure. More recent work dwells on the effects of

this kind of visualization, now often lost, that was once embedded in the experience of listening. Motes of dust glint in the sunlight in Moyra Davey’s *Shure* (2003), for example, and we can just about feel the rhythmic movement of the arm as the disc spins beneath it. In Chad Gerth’s series *Phono* (1999), sound and movement come together in long exposures of moving records. Named for the song we might know but can’t hear—the Beatles’ “A Day in the Life” or Sonic Youth’s “Teen Age Riot”—they allow each melody to play out before the camera, drawing attention not to what we can see, but to the way information amasses over time, and to the collusion of memory in looking and listening.

As records became a mainstay in popular culture, the image was no longer of the record but on it. A cover, yes, but for many an integral part of the whole object, as important as the music it played. Anne Collier and Jason Evans look back to record covers not as art objects in themselves, but as images central to the formation of identity—individually and culturally. For her recent series *Women Crying* (2016), Collier surveyed vintage record covers for pictures of tearful women. Cropped and enlarged to isolate the drama of falling teardrops, they edge on sentimental nostalgia, which seems partly the point, and they wonder, with great vulnerability, about gender, emotions, and the cathartic power of music. Evans’s *Self-Portrait as Sound System* (2015) is its counterpart, an exploration of the projection of manliness in



music culture that impressed itself on Evans as a boy. The piece shows two grids on each side of a monolith. One side, looking like a row of outsized, vintage stereo speakers, displays photograms of sixteen records, made with the flash of a digital camera; the other side shows images of their covers. Among the selections: the Smiths' "This Charming Man," David Bowie's *Hunky Dory*, Kraftwerk's *The Man-Machine*. We might take it as an invitation to substitute our own playlists.

Evans's photograms, the exact size and shape of records, appear as visual ghosts of objects now missing or disembodied. In 1967, the musician, comedian, writer, artist, and photographer (how often do you get *that* combination?) Mason Williams played up this confusion of image and object that photography can summon. Taking a no less iconic but obviously more cumbersome object, Williams set about creating full-scale, photographic replicas of a Greyhound bus. To do it, he enlarged a photograph (made originally by Max Yavno), silkscreened it onto billboard stock in sixteen sections, reassembled each copy "quietly on television soundstages on Saturday mornings," and finally folded up and repackaged the entirety in a box, perhaps not coincidentally about the size and shape of a compact record player. Voilà, an "actual-size" bus, weighing about ten pounds, that can either cover a wall over ten by thirty-six feet or, boxed, sit easily on a small shelf. You may well be wondering what this

Opposite:
Christian Marclay,
Broken Record in 5 pieces,
1990
Courtesy the artist,
Paula Cooper Gallery,
and White Cube

This page:
Anne Collier, *Album*
(*For Whom The Bell Tolls*),
2016
© the artist and courtesy
Anton Kern Gallery,
New York

**On its own, still photography
could deliberately bump up against
realms it couldn't quite enter,
like movement and sound.**

STEREO

THE MASON WILLIAMS PHONOGRAPH RECORD



W
WARNER BROS. RECORDS
1729

**The Mason Williams
Phonograph Record
(Warner Bros. Records,
1968)**

Photograph by Jerry White
© Rhino Entertainment
Company, a Warner Music
Group Company, and
courtesy Mason Williams



Moyra Davey, Shure, 2003
Courtesy Murray Guy,
New York

has to do with records: less than a year later the image reappeared, warped and obviously reduced, as the backdrop on the cover of *The Mason Williams Phonograph Record* (1968). With characteristic cleverness, he'd tried to mold the life-size photograph around the shape of a record package, and only partly succeeded. The album includes his best-known song, "Classical Gas," as well as the less-heard "Sunflower," a sound track for a failed film of the world's biggest sunflower, drawn by skywriting.

We still need actual tires and motors, but records have been displaced—first compressed, like a bus in a box, as tapes and CDs, and ultimately dissolved into digital files. The anxious last moments for visualizing music as a physical thing had parallel effects for photography's material forms, and the medium's death was similarly lamented and theorized. Over the course of these shifts, the strangeness and excitement of vinyl discs, their sheen and novelty, have, for most, worn off. The camera, for its part, recorded their demise just as compellingly as it recorded their invention. The obvious trope of the broken record can be seen as early as 1984 in Helen Levitt's *Record*, in which a disc rolls along an empty street like a tumbleweed, chunks missing as if it were eaten by a dog, foregrounding a shop window with smartly dressed mannequins. A little later, Christian Marclay's *Broken Record in 5 pieces* (1990) takes up the fragments to make of it an iconic puzzle. Both seem not to know quite what they are worth now, these pieces of plastic, what their value or function might be, except perhaps as images.

By the late 1990s, when Zoe Leonard began her project *Analogue* (1998–2009), records and record stores had all but disappeared, and the wave of retro interest hadn't fully taken hold. This was a strange moment when you might have looked around and seen a cassette player and CDs, and also made your first digital download from the new music-sharing website Napster, launched in 1999. Still, it's surprising to see that there are virtually no images of records or record shops in Leonard's meticulous document of disappearing technologies and the places that would resell and repair them—from the local mom-and-pop shops on New York's Lower East Side to more distant street markets in Africa, Central America, or the Middle East. This is partly because the presentation of the work—grids of 11-by-11-inch color enlargements—so clearly references the shape and size of the record cover. Slowly, though, discarded records have been amassed, reorganized, and even rebranded in "new" used record shops. Darin Mickey's *Death Takes a Holiday* (2016) peruses these vinyl relics in precarious piles, overflowing boxes, and thin-spined rows. As images, they evoke the attraction of picking up and turning over, the compulsion of looking through, the smell and taste of aging materials—and the promise of sound you can watch. Covered in thick dust, thumbed through by anonymous characters, they are neither quite alive nor dead, just lounging around betwixt and between.

If records are on holiday, what might this mean for photography? Is it just a gawking tourist? A fellow cruise goer without anything urgent to report? Or perhaps the resonances among photographs and phonographs have shifted again, into something more distanced, as their technological operations have grown apart? It may appear now as a metaphor for the disappearance of, even a fetish for, physical analog media. Yet the record has been a perfectly imperfect stand-in for photography all along. As revolutionary invention, industrially designed object, or vessel for mass culture, it's served as the stunt double for feats the photograph can't undertake, a metonym for the medium in moments of self-reflection, even a sound track of definitive silence for still images. The visualization of recorded sound—pictures of records—may just be as close as we can get to photographs of photography.



Darin Mickey,
Avalon, R&B Records,
Upper Darby, PA, 2014
Courtesy the artist

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Aperture | Fall 2016



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