

Broken Music | 4Columns

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Broken Music *Geeta Dayal*

Record achievement: a holy grail of sound art gets recreated.



Broken Music, edited by Ursula Block and Michael Glasmeier, Primary Information, 278 pages, \$34

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It's almost hard to recall the days before the internet achieved total dominance, when elaborate paper compendiums like *Broken Music* functioned as secret keys to hidden universes. Like the zine directory *Factsheet Five*, or the recently departed *Village Voice*, print

publications compiled what was cool, what to read, what to hear, and what to see; they were gateways to tantalizing realms one hadn't yet experienced.

The book *Broken Music*, published in 1989, is one of the holy grails of sound art. Original copies of the sumptuous, nearly 280-page tome now fetch several hundred dollars. Edited by Ursula Block and Michael Glasmeier, it was initially created as a catalog to accompany an exhibition they both organized at daadgalerie in Berlin. Think of *Broken Music* as a kaleidoscopic atlas to experimental sound and artists' records, long before the advent of the World Wide Web. I encountered a first edition of *Broken Music* some years ago in the collection of a friend, wishing madly that I had my own copy as I gingerly turned the fragile pages.



John Cage, 33 1/3, 1969. Installation for *Broken Music*, daadgalerie, Berlin, 1988/1989.

John Cage, 33 1/3, 1969. Installation for the *Broken Music* exhibition at daadgalerie, Berlin, 1988/1989. Image from the pages of *Broken Music*, courtesy Primary Information.

The estimable Brooklyn publisher Primary Information recently issued a meticulous recreation of the rare book. All of the original details have been faithfully replicated, right down to the attached vinyl flexidisc of one of Czech artist-musician Milan Knížák's startling sound collages, performed by the Arditti String Quartet. The first half of the book includes reprinted essays by luminaries such as Theodor Adorno, László Moholy-Nagy, and Jean Dubuffet, and the text is simultaneously presented in German, French, and English translations. The second half is a lengthy annotated index of hundreds of records and works by artists and musicians. Some, but not all, of these entries are adorned with helpful explanatory text and numerous lush images (including John Cage's geometric graphic score for *Imaginary Landscape No. 5*; Joseph

Beuys's eerie sculptures of gramophones festooned with bones and blood sausage; and an expansive floor installation by Christian Marclay, *One Thousand Records*, at gelbe Musik in 1988.)

The book takes its name—and inspiration—from a series of chaotic, transformational works by Knížák. “In 1965 I started to destroy records: scratch them, punch holes in them, break them,” he writes in the book. “By playing them over and over again (which destroyed the needle and often the record player too) an entirely new music was created—unexpected, nerve-racking and aggressive. Compositions lasting one second or almost infinitely long (as when the needle got stuck in a deep groove and played the same phrase over and over again). I developed the system further. I began sticking tapes on top of records, painting over them, burning them, cutting them up and gluing parts of different records back together, etc to achieve the widest possible variety of sounds.”



Milan Knížák, *Destroyed Music*, 1963-1979



Milan Knížák, *Untitled*, 1963-1987

Milan Knížák, *Destroyed Music*, 1963–79, and *Untitled*, 1963–87. Image from the pages of *Broken Music*, courtesy Primary Information.

Knížák's pieces are some of the most dynamic and exciting documented in the book, which largely details works made with records, not tape. As Block writes in her opening essay, “*Broken Music* shows works of visual artists created with and for the medium of the record: records, record-covers, record-objects, record-installations. In contrast to the composer or musician who perceives the record first and foremost as a vehicle transporting his musical ideas, the visual artist is especially interested in the optical as well as the acoustical presence . . . *Broken Music* stands for a break with conventional ideas, as a breakthrough into something new.”

Altgor

Altgor

→ Sound Poetry

Altman, Patrick

→ Sound Poetry



Anderson, Laurie

Title: "It's Not The Bullet That Kills You - It's The Hole." "Break It." g 17cm, 45 RPM, 1977, Holly Solomon Gallery, New York

Cover: only in white protective cover

Amerikanische Künstler in Berlin

Supplement: Arnold Dreyblatt And The Orchestra Of Excited Strings

Per.: Arnold Dreyblatt, Wolfgang Glum, Jan Schade, Dirk Lebahn, Wolfgang Metler

Exhibition-catalogue as record-box, white with title sticker, contains loose sheets, 46 pages and a LP-record (g 30cm, 33 RPM), 1986, Amerika Haus Berlin / Initiative Berlin - USA e.V. The record is a production of the Künstlerhaus-Bethanien, Berlin.



Anderson, Laurie

Title: O Superman. (For Massenet). Weak The Dog

Per.: Laurie Anderson (voc, vocoder, v, wooden blocks), Roma Baran (farsa, casio, vocoder, tenor whistle), Perry Hopeman (t, sax, walkie-talkies, soprano whistle), D. Sharpe (dr), Brandy (dogs)

g 17cm, 33 RPM, 1981, One Ten Records, New York

Cover: two-color print, design: Laurie Anderson

Amirkhanian, Charles

→ Giorno Poetry Systems

→ Revue OJ

→ Sound Poetry

Anderson, Beth

→ Giorno Poetry Systems

→ Sound Poetry

Anderson is a composer, but more visibly she is a "performance artist", which gives the first clue to her popularity. Performance art is the fashionable discipline these days, having succeeded painting, theater, dance and video, all of which enjoyed their place in the trend-setting sun over the past two decades. But there is more to her success than that; there are other performance artists, after all. Anderson owes her special recognition to her mixture of music and performance, and specifically to the way she embraced new-wave rock without becoming its slave. In all her guises she is a performer who seizes the attention and holds it. She has a delicious sense of humor, which is not all that common in either punk or the avantgarde. And she is a woman.

Her early pieces were short and clever, owing something to happenings and the post-Cagean avant-garde theater of composers like Ashley. She would play the violin, for instance, but in an unusual situation - like standing in a block of ice - that called fresh attention to this most familiar of actions. She wrote poetry, made conceptual installations in galleries, and recorded short songs and quirky instrumental pieces, all in preparations for her larger projects.

The most ambitious of these projects to date is called United States I/IV, an attempt to embrace and understand her native country, the inspiration for which came during her ever more frequent European performances.

All her work, including United States, is best described as solo opera - although in her larger-scale recent productions she has had accompanying musicians as well as assistants to help with the sound, lighting, tape recorders and slide and film projectors. Still, it is Anderson alone who is in the spotlight. The effect is like a highly attenuated art-rock concert, a stylized lecture or perhaps a poetry reading writ very large indeed, with every aspect of the poetic concept amplified and counterpointed by aural and visual imagery. The subject is herself on one level, but more generally, in the tradition of all autobiographical artists, her observations on whatever it is that is the subject of a given piece.

Excerpt from John Rockwell: All American Music: New York 1983



Laurie Anderson playing her Vinylograph (Turntable) mounted on a violin; needle in bow; '45 has 1 note on each hand - needle scrapes. (1976)

<p>WALK THE DOG</p> <p>I saw a lot of trees today. And they were all made of wood. Well, they were wooden trees - and they were made entirely of wood. Well, I came home today, and you were all on fire. Your shirt was on fire. And your hair was on fire. And flames were licking all around your feet. And I did not know what to do. And then, a thousand violins began to play. And I really did not know what to do then. So I just decided to go out. And walk the dog.</p> <p>I went to the movies, and I saw a dog thirty feet high. And this dog was made entirely of light. And he filled up the whole screen. And his eyes were long hallways. He had those long, echoing, hallway eyes.</p>	<p>I turned on the radio and I heard a song by Dolly Parton. And she was singing: Oh! I feel so bad. I feel so sad. I left my Mom and I left my Dad. And I just want to go home now. I just want to go back to my Tennessee mountain home now. Well, you know she's not gonna go back home. And I know she's not gonna go back home. And she knows she's never gonna go back there. And I just want to know who's gonna go and walk her dog. (Her dog.) Well, I feel so bad. I feel so sad. But not as bad as the night I wrote this song.</p> <p>Close your eyes. OK. Now imagine you're at the most wonderful party. OK. Delicious food. Uh-huh. Interesting people. Uh-mm. Terrific music. Mm-mmh. NOW OPEN THEM!</p>
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Laurie Anderson featured in the pages of *Broken Music*. Image courtesy Primary Information.

Looking back now, nearly thirty years after the exhibition and book were first created, it's easier to see some of the holes in the history *Broken Music* is presenting. There are numerous works by well-known male artists (Hugo Ball, Marcel Duchamp, Buckminster Fuller, Hans Haacke, Martin Kippenberger, Kurt Schwitters, and Richard Serra, among others), but relatively few women (Yoko Ono, Annea Lockwood, and Meredith Monk are listed, for example, but the information provided about them is slim). This is curious, because the book opens with a striking image of a woman: the musician Hermine in a chic strapless gown, putting vinyl records into a dishwasher. (The off-kilter domestic scene was the cover for her 1982 album *The World on My Plates*.)



Robert Rauschenberg

Record art by Robert Rauschenberg. Image from the pages of *Broken Music*, courtesy Primary Information.

Also, while cover art by several prominent visual artists—including Andy Warhol, Richard Hamilton, Gerhard Richter, and Robert Rauschenberg—is documented, the records depicted are mostly centered around rock music, overlooking the iconic covers created for jazz albums by

noteworthy artists. Warhol didn't just do art for rock bands like the Rolling Stones and the Velvet Underground; he also created memorable covers for Thelonious Monk, Count Basie, and many others.

There are also few works by people of color. Hip-hop was at one of its creative peaks in the late 1980s when the book was published—an entire genre that was built on hacking, modifying, and sampling records—but hip-hop, along with DJ culture, disco, and other forms of dance music, is largely absent from *Broken Music's* story.



Image from the pages of *Broken Music*, courtesy Primary Information.

The book and exhibition were created in Europe, and its Eurocentric approach is perhaps understandable. In developing countries at that time, turntables were far less common, and presumably art created using the medium of LPs was less common too. In India, for instance,

vinyl records certainly existed, but cassette tapes were far more prevalent; they were cheaper, more portable, and easily dubbed. As vinyl records have come back into vogue, it's worth remembering that vast swathes of the world's population didn't use records, or turntables.

Broken Music was a tremendous work of scholarship for its era, and Primary Information has done a wondrous job in resuscitating this important historical document, which is still one of the key relics of sound art and culture. The time has come for a revised and updated version—one that plugs the gaps in its fascinating history.

Geeta Dayal is an arts critic and journalist, specializing in writing on twentieth-century music, culture, and technology. She has written extensively for *frieze* and many other publications, including *The Guardian*, *Wired*, *The Wire*, *Bookforum*, *Slate*, *the Boston Globe*, and *Rolling Stone*. She is the author of *Another Green World*, a book on Brian Eno (Bloomsbury, 2009), and is currently at work on a new book on music.