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PHILIP JECK
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Waxwork: Philip Jeck on his landmark turntable piece *Vinyl*



Image via: Andrew Bowman

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Anyone with an interest in the historical moment where vinyl tilted from mainstream format to collector's concern should spend time with Philip Jeck's 1993 audiovisual piece *Vinyl Requiem*.

Produced in association with visual artist Lol Sargent, *Vinyl Requiem* was a one-off performance of remarkable force and scale. 180 record players, arranged in stacks as high as a house, were cued and synced by three operators, creating a wall of surging, ever-changing sound. Jeck, meanwhile, stood front and centre, barracked in by a ring of ancient turntables. Sargent added visual detail, using nine slide projectors and two movie projectors to up the spectacle. It was, by all accounts, a remarkable send-off – an blazing Viking burial for a format on the out; head **here** (<http://vimeo.com/17439345>) to watch extracts from the original.

Originally trained as a visual artist, Jeck has turned his interest in the artistic possibilities of the turntable into his bread and butter. 1995's *Loopholes* used layered loops to build churning, haunted soundscapes with an industrial flavour. 1999's *Surf*, meanwhile, was a keening and elegiac set, and landed in our **100 favourite albums of the 1980s list** (<http://www.factmag.com/2013/06/24/the-100-best-albums-of-the-1980s-100-81/>). Subsequent releases, invariably on Touch, have continued to explore the revelatory potential of knackered record players and wounded vinyl, with 2002's *Stoke* remaining the high watermark. His latest project, though, is a 20th anniversary revival of *Vinyl Requiem* at **Portugal's Semibreve Festival** (<http://www.factmag.com/2013/09/10/philip->

jecks-vinyl-requiem-raime-sculpture-and-helm-added-to-portugals-semibreve-festival/), which will see Jeck performing alongside a pre-recorded version of himself c. 1993. FACT spoke to the artist, now based in Liverpool, to talk about past projects and the future of vinyl.

"I'VE LOST A LOT OF RECORD PLAYERS. TWO-THIRDS OF THEM SORT OF ROTTED TO DEATH."

What motivated you and Lol Sargent to revive the *Vinyl Requiem* for the Semibreve performance?

We'd sort of lost contact for quite a while, and we met up again last year after a few years of not seeing each other. I was working with Gavin Bryars, and I got him a ticket to come and see the **show at The Barbican** (<http://www.barbican.org.uk/music/event-detail.asp?ID=12612>), and we sort of met up while I was down in London. It hadn't really dawned on me, but Lol said, "You know, it's 20 years since we first did *Vinyl Requiem*," and it was just a general conversation: "Let's not to do the *whole* thing again..." In fact, it would be almost impossible, because I've lost a lot of record players in the time. I stored them in a shed which, unbeknownst to me, had a really bad leak, so two-thirds of them sort of rotted to death. Lol, in a way, had now got the software and stuff to be able to do it.

It was filmed on Betamax – and in a way, thank God it was Betamax and not VHS, because Betamax was better quality. He was already editing some stuff himself, and he put some on Vimeo and I had a look at that. I had

a VHS copy of some of it, which I'd occasionally look at and go, "Oh my god, it's like looking through a fog" – and this was really crystal clear. So we thought, "Oh, maybe we could just do it as a film. If you [Lol] edit it, we'll do it as a film." Also, the sound was maybe not so brilliant on that, but when we did it originally I got a friend of mine who works in a studio to come and record it and do a full run-through without any audience, so there is a really good digital recording of the sound. I said I could lend Lol that so he could put the sound on, instead of the stuff that's recorded from the camera.

Then we were talking about it more and I thought, "Well, I don't need to be there, do I, when you go and show the film?" And I don't know who mentioned it first, but someone said "You've got two solos in the show, and maybe we could drop those out and we could do new solos." And I thought, "Ah, no, I know what I can do – I can actually duet with myself from that time." So I've sort of played around at home with playing those bits, and maybe working out something I could do relating where I am now with where I was then. Maybe also to add one or two sounds through the rest of the performance. And it was great, and I got very excited about it again. Rather than just showing this archive clip of it, let's make it like it's got something new about it again.

It seems like an interesting elaboration of your practise, moving on from all these works that sift through and reanimate found musical artefacts, and moving on to plundering your own output and restaging that.

Yeah, although we're keeping very true to a lot of the original and its order. Some bits have not been filmed so well, so in a way that's some natural editing we're going to do – we're shifting it down to well under an hour compared to its original 70-odd minutes. 78 was mentioned, but I think it came in just slightly under that – so more like a 45. It may be, like one of my record players, about a 53 [laughs].

In my artwork, the CDs I make in a way are reworkings of recordings I've done of my own concerts, and I've learned early on that making a CD is very different to doing something live. Seeing me play live is a totally different experience to listening to me at home, so in a way I rework my own...one track on one of the CDs might incorporate bits from five or six different concerts. I make it from sitting down and listening at home. It's not a live experience in the sense of coming to see me at a theatre is.

Having spent two decades or thereabouts refining and developing your technique, how do you feel about the original *Vinyl Requiem* when you listen back?

I had a look through a few days ago, because I was working out what other sounds I might use around it. It's good having all that gap, because it is me – but it's almost not. It's so far away. I can look at it fairly coldly. There are moments in it I know I'd do so differently now, but you change. I'm still actually pretty proud of it. There are some parts of it where I go, "I don't know how I did that, I don't know how that happened, because I don't know where I'd be able to come up with that." And I probably wouldn't, because it would be

something different.

Because [*Vinyl Requiem*] was in conjunction with three other operators, I didn't operate anything on the main body of the record players. I just did these two solos. Obviously I arranged it all and instructed the players how to do everything, but of course the way they did stuff also made it. They did things, and did things in a way i wouldn't have done, and once I relaxed into that, I then just listened to them. If I didn't like it, that was said, but sometimes the timing and stuff went very different, and I thought, "Oh, actually, that's good, let's keep to that."

There were some nightmares in it, because I thought everyone was going to be able to do it by ear – which, looking back on, it was really stupid, because everybody was operating their own record players with the sound coming out of the speakers. It was right by their ear, so how the hell were they going to hear anybody else unless they weren't playing anything at all? And so in the end, I really had to write a score, and it was done with the best stopwatches we could afford to buy, which I never envisaged at all beforehand. And that we struggled for several days over working out how that was going to work – tearing my hair out, I think. But, actually, necessity and all that is the mother of invention. When you've got a date, you've got to do it. You find a way.

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You touched there on the potential problems with the speakers...watching video of the original performance, the sheer scale of the enterprise is so remarkable. Visually, it reminded me of soundsystem culture...

Yeah, it's true, it's true. I used to go off and along to Notting Hill Carnival, and when I lived in London, my friends over in Brixton, we'd go to parties. There were just these speakers, usually homemade housings just piled on top of each other. That would be exactly it, a very similar feel about it. But obviously each one of their speakers was pumping out way more volume than the little record players could.

It's curious how these moments of correspondence between so-called "art music" and street music crop up. Hip-hop's the obvious example you've talked about before, and soundsystem culture nudges onto what you were doing.

Yeah. I started out, really, in the late 1970s, just starting to get glimmers of what people were doing in the States. I was lucky enough to go to NY in '79, me and my partner. We stayed with friends there, and they took us out to clubs and stuff, and I started seeing these people that I was just reading about, first getting glimmerings of, and it blew me away. I thought, "I can do that", or, "I can try to do that", and those were my first steps into it. I think the most all-encompassing art form is music – it's the one that can instantly affect you. I played a little bit of guitar and keyboard when I was a teenager, but what i could do with it just never was exciting to me. And whether through lack of imagination or

ability...I had a bit of talent, I could draw and paint, I was at art college. I think a lot of that sensibility is in what I do, it's the way I construct things in the way I might construct an installation or a painting. So it's definitely got its origins in that, but also in the roots of popular music kicked off by people in the late '70s in the disco. I still have a collection of stuff from that time which I occasionally get out on a late night when friends say, "What records did you use to play when you were Djing?". So I get them out. And some I go, "Oh, actually that sounds dated", and every now and then you pull one out and go "Wow, that's *so* good – it still sounds amazing". Not all of them, some have lost their magic to me.

*"I DON'T USE FLASH TURNTABLES. I
DON'T USE TECHNICS."*

Looking at what's different between now and your work then – in the 1980s, art using turntables was directly engaging with the vernacular. It was the dominant mode in which people bought and listened to music. Whereas now, working with vinyl is a more niche and arcane concern. Has the meaning of your work changed as the technology has changed?

Yeah, and sometimes, if anybody hears me on the radio, maybe they don't even know that's what I'm using. I could do something similar if I used a computer to put things together. I think of it differently because of the way I shape it, and because of the vagaries of the equipment that I use. I don't use flash turntables. I don't use Technics. I use really old ones, that actually might not be 45 in speed. It fluctuates. They've got four speeds,

but they're not like Technics when you can slide plus or minus speed or line stuff up when you're playing. When you're DJing, you can completely match one record to another with the beat, BPMs and whatever. I can't really do that with the record players that I use, so they bring their own colour. Also, they're not hi-fi, although I'll record them in a hi-fi way, which might seem strange. I've never tired of using them. Every time I think, "maybe I'll try something else", something new always appears that I don't think I've done before – although I don't think I have any great epiphanies and jumps. I think if I listen to myself or pick stuff out from the early days up until now or in-between, it's more of an evolution. Every now and again, something reappears that maybe I used a long time ago, but I've used it in another way. The difference between then and now, – going over the same ground, but finding there's always another sound, another feel that will appear out of these things.

There's been a lot of chatter in the last few years, and this last year in particular, about the notion of a vinyl revival. Sales are consistently up, and are now at a ten year high [link]. I wondered what feelings you had about that.

It's funny, because CD sales have gone down. Me and a couple of friends were talking about where we get our music from, because people download, or stream or whatever. I can imagine that's not far off from where vinyl is – how long that'll last, I don't know. What's nice about vinyl is that you have this big sleeve, the artwork can be on a bigger scale, they are nice artefacts. I still have quite a large vinyl collection. Well, I have two collections: I

have a collection of my stuff in boxes that I work with, and downstairs I have my vinyl that I really look after. Also, I have loads of CDs as well that I really look after. In a way, now is quite a good time to be buying CDs, because you can pick up stuff so cheap. It feels like they are almost on their way out, which at the time that we were doing *Vinyl Requiem*, was the thing that really spurred us on – going to the shop and realising that the CD area was bigger than the vinyl area. We thought, “It’s changed. This is really changing.” And now the virtual area is taking over the physical sales area. Blu-Ray might be the shortest ever lived format. They’re better than DVDs, but they’re also four times as expensive, and they’re not four times better.

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