

THIS IS NOT A VINYL RECORD: MATERIALITIES OF SOUND AND FORMAT IN FRANCISCO LÓPEZ'S *LA SELVA*

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In 2015, sound artist Francisco López released a vinyl reissue (Sub Rosa, SRV346) of his 1998 album *La Selva (Sound Environments from a Neotropical Rain Forest)*. Despite the subtle care that usually characterises all his outputs, the vinyl version of this work didn't meet the expectations of fans and collectors, mostly due to its unusual form: this edition of *La Selva* consists in fact of a blank LP that doesn't provide any sound at all, while the full-length audio track is stored on a USB flash drive sold together with the album.[1] To explain the decision-making behind this release, López included the following statement as its liner notes:

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The proposal from Sub Rosa to reissue my sound piece *La Selva* (which was previously released on CD by V2_Archief in 1998 and then Kairos in 2009) as a shorter version, vinyl LP release, stumbled upon the somewhat hidden, “Emperor’s New Clothes”, reality of the intrinsic limitations of vinyl. After two years of failed attempts with multiple test pressings from the best plants and cutting engineers in Europe, the inherent constraints of vinyl led to an unavoidable conclusion: this audio piece cannot be released on vinyl. These constraints are not – as many people wrongly assume – a simple matter of range, but a combination of frequency and amplitude, with limits that the grooves cannot take without producing distortion. [...] Despite popular myths, delusions and fads, analog etching is no match for the dynamic range, frequency-amplitude response, detail, subtlety, brightness and presence of digital encoding. That is why this ‘natural’ sound piece has been finally reissued digitally, in its entirety, and with the best possible sound. (López 2015)

It goes without saying that, for a composer so passionate about the sonic qualities of his work, this kind of compromise wouldn't have been acceptable. Yet, a question remains: why did López still release the vinyl reissue, while the artefact that should have reproduced the music stayed silent? As I will argue, far from being a mere mockery of contemporary vinyl-mania, this format configuration raises issues about the relationship between recorded music and records as material artefacts; it is also deeply rooted in López's personal musical aesthetics and his understanding of the essence of reality, sound and listening. Having acknowledged that, the question above – starting from a simple commercial point of view – turns rather into “How can one listen to a record lacking sound?”, allowing for a shift in our perspective on the materiality of musical experience. The vinyl version of *La Selva* seems to work as an ambiguous interface for its musical counterpart, engaging the listener in ways that go against the concept behind the original audio piece. But before we get to the specific issues of materiality emerging from this release, let's delve into López's own approach to sound as a physical and material element.

The Materiality of Sound

Spanish composer, electroacoustic musician and biologist, Francisco López has been around the international experimental music scene since the early 1980s. He is mostly known for having produced a vast number of works that strongly revolve around field recording as the primary (often the only) technique employed to generate musical material. His albums present recordings made all over the globe, in places such as the Amazon rainforest, Argentinian Patagonia, Mount Athos (Greece), the Hverfjall crater (Iceland), the Mmabolela Reserve (South Africa), but also in urban spaces and cities including Madrid, New York, Lima, Panama City and Warsaw. Although this list shows a heterogeneous variety of locations, it is inevitably incomplete. Most of the time López deliberately avoids giving information about where and when a particular soundscape was recorded. He does that because he strongly rejects the idea of recording as a way of documenting reality. As he explained during his Red Bull Music Academy lecture, “I am not interested in representation. I’m not interested in soundscapes that represent reality. I’m not doing recordings because I want to simulate or re-enact or recompose or listen again to this reality” (López 2011).

Instead, López is interested in exploring the sonic textures of reality as a way to access new sensory dimensions. He engages with the sound matter he records without imposing any preconceived form on it and dismissing any extra-musical element, but developing specific skills to deal directly with its sonic substance. According to anthropologist Tim Ingold, “the role of the artist [...] is not to give effect to a preconceived idea, novel or not, but to join with and follow the forces and flows of material that bring the form of the work into being” (Ingold 2010: 97). Similarly, López does not intend to force any specific meaning to his pieces or to trace them back to the context where they supposedly belong; his artistic goal is to “follow the flows” of recorded sound, experiment with its malleability and respond to its peculiarities. To him, sound is basically a material – in the sense of “the stuff that things are made of” (Ingold 2007: 1) – that can be shaped into musical form through various transformational procedures. It can be highly processed and deconstructed, or presented bare as it was captured by the microphone. Either way, the composer’s emphasis is never on its representational dimension. He defends the idea of sound having its own identity for artistic sake, an identity detached from what generated it in the first place: “there’s no such thing as the sound of a frog, if you know what I mean” (López 2011).

La Selva is arguably Francisco López’s most known and celebrated composition. The recordings were originally made at La Selva Biological Station, a reserve of more than 1500 hectares of rainforest located in the region of Sarapiquí (northern Costa Rica), where López – who works also as an entomologist – conducted research between 1995 and 1996. Consisting of a single 71-minute track, the album features many sounds from both biotic (insects, frogs, birds, plants) and non-biotic sources (wind, rain, waterfalls) converging in an extremely dense and layered sound web that captures the sonic environment of the rainforest as a whole. In compositional terms, López organized the recorded material in ways that do not encourage the recognition of individual sound sources or the distinction between foreground and background. The result is “a powerful acousmatic broad-band sound environment” (López 1998), where complex sonic textures constantly alternate in a thrilling musical experience.

Even though the recordings made in the forest weren’t processed at all – López limited himself to their editing – and therefore they present a certain degree of similarity with the “real place”, the liner notes for the original CD release clearly specify that “*La Selva* (the music piece) is not a representation of La Selva (the reserve in Costa Rica)” (ibid.). Once again, López shows no interest in representation, while his focus is on experimenting with the materiality of these astonishing natural sounds. But the very fact that at the heart of the record there’s an interest in

the sonic aesthetics of Nature – which semiotically triggers specific ideological implications – challenges the ability to concentrate on the pure sound matter. What we need is a different conceptual framework to deal exclusively with the materiality of sound. As I said, in López's production sound is shaped into music through different transformational processes: in *La Selva* this is not achieved by altering the materiality of recordings, but simply by *listening* to them. The act of composing – of selecting the recorded material and organizing it in a musical way – can give birth to new sonic dimensions; what's more important though is that it's up to the listener to decide how to explore it. According to López (2001), "composition or performance are not essential for music creation; listening is". The creative act, shared by both the musician and the audience, is thus constantly developing and never complete, because every listener may experience different relations between representation and sound matter – shaping *La Selva* into a unique and personal form.

In regard to López's approach Makis Solomos (2019) talks about a *phenomenological experience of sound*, explicitly referring to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl and pointing out how both the composer and the philosopher seek a comprehension of reality that excludes any *a priori* assumption. They both aim to reach a pure and subjective experience of the matter that constitutes the world. For Husserl, the first step into a phenomenological reconfiguration of experience is *epoché*, a process of "abstaining from all judgments that rely upon the general positing of the world" (Russel 2006: 66). This phenomenological reduction establishes a sense of transcendental consciousness through which we might catch the essence of reality as it appears: by *bracketing our knowledge*, the world is reduced to a phenomenon to be explored with new eyes (or ears). Within the realm of sound, practicing *epoché* means listening without any preconceived conception of the source or context of sonic elements. López refers to this activity as an act of *transcendental listening* (or *profound listening*), "that doesn't negate what is *outside* the sounds but explores and affirms all that is *inside* them" (López 2004: 82-83). Transcendental listening enables one to assume a phenomenological attitude to experience sound in its pure material form, to be with the sound, and to follow its flows.

In order to listen *phenomenologically* to the materiality of sound, one must dismiss any other *non-strictly-sonic* element that revolves around the work of art. Of course – because of the cultural connotations of musical listening – this is not an easy task. To López giving titles to his pieces, having artworks for his albums or even imposing a specific format (such as vinyl) to an audio work means forcing the transcendental experience of sound into a conventional activity. In response to these intrinsic limitations, he developed different strategies to raise listener awareness about the various possibilities of involvement in his work.[2] Much of the information here reported about the philosophy behind *La Selva* derives from the liner notes the composer wrote for its first release. In this case, the principles of *epoché* are instilled by the fact that the booklet is sealed and comes with the indication not to open it. If someone looked inside it, they would find a warning message: "now that you have decided to access this contextual and relational level of information concerning this piece you will enter a new conceptual and perceptual domain [...]. It will lead you to face an unavoidable challenge with an uneasy way back: that of the recovery of the undissipated profound listening experience" (López 1998). López uses the word *dissipative* to describe any "visual and conceptual element 'polluting' the pure sound essence of [his] work" (López in Van Peer 2002: 15). The dissipation of music occurs when transcendental listening is contaminated with non-sonic elements that constrain sound into a specific meaning – despite the "malleability" of its material. These dissipative elements are inherent to the form of recorded artefacts but they can also be used for artistic purposes; that is the case with the vinyl version of *La Selva*, in which there's nothing left but dissipative forces. In the next paragraph I will address the

form of this reissue, analysing how its own (*im*)materiality interacts with the lacking materiality of sound.

The Immateriality of Vinyl

In 1934 German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno wrote a brief essay called *The Form of the Phonographic Record [Die Form der Schallplatte]*. As suggested by the title, it focuses exclusively on the material properties of the recorded artefact, which Adorno describes in vivid detail:

One does not want to accord it any form other than the one it itself exhibits: a black pane made of a composite mass which these days no longer has its honest name any more than automobile fuel is called benzine; fragile like tablets, with a circular label in the middle that still looks most authentic when adorned with the prewar terrier hearkening to his master's voice; at the very center, a little hole that is at times so narrow that one has to redrill it wider so that the record can be laid upon the platter. It is covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing, which here and there forms more plastic figures for reasons that remain obscure to the layman upon listening; structured like a spiral, it ends somewhere in the vicinity of the title label, to which it is sometimes connected by a lead-out groove so that the needle can comfortably finish its trajectory. In terms of its "form", this is all that it will reveal. (Adorno 1990: 56)

Although sound formats evolved so much through the course of time – from shellac to vinyl, from CDs to MP3 – it is striking to realize how the form of records changed so little since the time Adorno wrote these words, almost a century ago. He thought recorded artefacts could be valuable tools to investigate music as a material thing and “the contours of its thingness” (ibid: 58). Indeed, Adorno considered the materiality of the phonograph medium to be an utterly new characteristic of the musical language. Through the gramophone, music overcame the arbitrary system of notation, becoming itself a form of writing: the curves pressed on the record are seen as hieroglyphic inscriptions unintelligible to humans but, at the same time, they are “inseparably committed to the sound that inhabits this and no other acoustic groove” (ibid: 59). The phonograph record is then a sort of *petrified music* – music that has turned into a material object by the merging of its content and form.

Now, let's take a moment to carefully revisit the form of the vinyl reissue of *La Selva*. Two different kinds of formats appear in this edition: one 24-bit/48kHz USB flat memory card (numbered and hand-signed by the author) where the remastered record is stored [3], and one blank, non-audio vinyl LP. The latter presents no grooves at all: on one side there's a digital etching of a detail from the front cover (depicting an intricate tangle of branches and lianas), while the other is completely smooth. The “circular label in the middle” shows laconically only the title of the composition – affirming this way the “petrification” of *La Selva*, with the vinyl artefact as its objective correlative. On the back sleeve, an epigraph reads “phenomenological *epoché* listening is highly encouraged”. But if one places the record on the turntable there's no sound to be heard.[4]

It follows that the form of this record does not encourage true *epoché* – at least, as we have considered it so far. If the process of petrification, as suggested by Adorno, transforms music into “an archaic text of knowledge to come” (ibid: 60), it also undermines the possibility of a pure phenomenological experience. As we said, it is through the materiality of recorded artefacts that the dissipation of music occurs. This is especially true for a piece such as *La Selva*, for which the vinyl format (just as the CD or the cassette) appears somehow defective: it frames the work of art within a material object that conceptually cannot contain it in its purest undissipated form. The LP

affects the endless possibilities of profound listening, imposing a definite shape on a once creative, individualistic and ever-changing musical experience. As a result, music is not only petrified but also *objectified* by the form of the record; or, as López himself puts it, the “materialization of music through machines of perception and memory [i.e., the recording technologies] gave rise [...] to the philosophical/perceptive ‘objectification’ of music” (2010: 97).

However, there’s one fundamental difference between the form of the record described by Adorno and the one given to *La Selva* by López: here the record is unplayable, its purpose of sound reproduction is not fulfilled. This groove-less vinyl record may be considered one of a kind, but it’s actually part of a long history of silent LPs that stretch the very idea of what musical recording is.[5] Examples of this practice are found in Christian Marclay’s *Record Without a Groove* (1987), the 7-inch *Record1* (1991) by Telium Group, Ives Klein’s *Prince of Space/Musik der Leere* (1959) – which was conceived by German artist Charles Wilp – and Marcel Marceau’s “mime record” *Ruhe Im Spiegelbild* (1980). All these albums have covers, titles and tracklists, but – materially speaking – their artefacts do not show any groove embodying the sound of their work. In other words, there is no sign of their recorded/written *musical text*, while they exhibit only their *paratext*. French literary theorist Gérard Genette (1997) came up with this concept to describe anything within a book (or a music record) that is not part of the actual text (or the recorded audio track), but it’s attached to it to define its meaning, ensure its reception, and ultimately present it to the world. Reframing it from the textual to the material domain, the entire recorded artefact can be considered as a paratext, an interface for the petrification/objectivation of a musical work: it transforms sound into an object, narrowing down its essence on behalf of the audience.

According to Genette, paratexts constitute “a zone not only of *transition* but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public [...]” (ibid: 2). Still, López’s whole phenomenological approach is completely opposed to exerting any influence on his audience. The paratextual dimension of *La Selva* works more as an *interference* than an *interface*, blocking with its pervasive action the possibility of pure transcendental listening. There are no curves, no abstract “plastic figures” as a representation of the acoustic event. What’s pressed on the record side is an etching of the same image portrayed on the front cover – in a continuous and redundant play between signified and signifier. Paradoxically, all we need to experience the recorded artefact is just the dissipative representation of the work, not the actual sound. There’s a complete merger between the Genettian paratext and the Adornian writing: all we’re left with is just the album cover, which is inexorably expanding from the sleeve onto the record itself. The vinyl artefact thus becomes a liminal space where the inside and the outside of the work of art overlap – namely what Jacques Derrida would call a *parergon*, something that is “no longer merely around the work” but rather “*gives rise*” to it (1987: 9). Just like a frame surrounding a painting, the parergon “does not stop disturbing the internal order” of the work (ibid) and transforms its very concept and essence. However, in this instance the transformational process turns even more radical: here the work that is given rise to differs materially and conceptually from the original audio piece. It is not *La Selva* anymore.

It’s possible that López orchestrated this whole operation to prove his phenomenological point: the original sound work needed to be sacrificed so that the dissipation of music could reveal itself in all its pervasiveness. In such a way, *La Selva* became a martyr for the fight against the merciless objectification of music. Strikingly, in doing so, the essence of this musical work changed completely. Through the LP it is now impossible to experience the materiality of sound, what we do encounter is a different kind of matter that – although self-explanatory – is only apparently more immediate. The lacking materiality of sound was turned into some sort of “reversed materiality”, an (im)materiality that is completely disembodied from the transcendental sound matter that

comprises the original work; the quasi-immaterial, digitally encoded track was stored on a rewritable USB drive that doesn't stand out as an autonomous format and clearly isn't where the focus of this reissue is. The combination of the two gave rise to a brand-new work, showing how the transcendental experience could be broadened from sound to any kind of material. Paraphrasing its author, La Selva (the reserve in Costa Rica) is not *La Selva* (the music piece), which is neither *La Selva* (the vinyl artefact) – they're all made of different "materials", such as concrete reality, sound and vinyl.

Going back to the opening question, one could still wonder how to deal with the odd characteristics of this release. As López himself explained, he always had a certain concern for contemporary material culture: "I'm not an object-oriented person. I have problems with physical objects. I have psychological problems with material things" (López 2011). Perhaps this concern ultimately shaped the form of the record. Due to how it was conceived, this vinyl reissue forces the listener to experience *epoché* in new and unexpected ways, based on the idea that "when listening is a profound act of will upon sound, music unfolds naturally" (López 2015) – even when music stays permanently silent. In the end, this is the fundamental lesson we should learn from López's philosophy. No matter what we consider to be the essence of the work, if we practice focusing on the pure materiality of recordings, we may find a way to listen to a record lacking sound.

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Endnotes

1. On the Discogs page of the release one comment (among others) states: "this is a snobby and stupid unnecessary reissue". <https://www.discogs.com/release/7418182-Francisco-L%C3%B3pez-La-Selva> [accessed 22 July 2022].
2. Many of his compositions are untitled and most of his discography comprises CDs with transparent packaging and no artwork. Moreover, during live performances López seeks to bracket sonic encounters by keeping the audience (voluntarily) blindfolded and in complete darkness.
3. The full-length audio track can be downloaded for free on the label website at <https://www.subrosa.net/en/catalogue/soundworks/la-selva---sound-environments-from-a-neotropical-rain-forest> [accessed 12 November 2022].
4. Curiously, when this reissue was released a new digital edition of *La Selva* appeared on streaming platforms presenting a shorter version made of two separate tracks, each one lasting approximately 20 minutes (most likely this was the version originally edited for the LP).
5. A list with almost 100 silent releases can be checked at <https://www.discogs.com/lists/Silent-Records/16205> [accessed 8 November 2022].

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