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REVIEWS

David Grubbs. "*Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording."* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014.

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David Grubbs is an Associate Professor at Brooklyn College Conservatory of Music. Such trappings of tenure and domestication should not, however, fool you. From his first flights as part of the punk band Squirrel Bait in his teen years to his founding membership with the Chicago experimental music group Gastr del Sol to his ongoing collaborations with Tony Conrad, Pauline Oliveros, the Red Krayola, and many more, Grubbs is as much a musician as an academic. He is also as much a ravenous, easily-distracted, tickled-by-the-obscure listener of the present as an exceedingly thoughtful and eminently readable historian of sounds past.

These many identities are mobilized in Grubbs' delightful new book, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording*. The book begins and ends with discussions of his own listening experiences, in the past as a graduate student in Chicago slinking around the free jazz and improvised music scene and presently, attempting to navigate the infinitude of listening possibilities on DRAM with some semblance of discipline. In a way, this gives the book a narrative arc.[1] But the very premise of *Records Ruin the Landscape* is a folding — a knotting even — of temporality. Rather than an autobiography of listening or a cultural history of 1960s musicians' attitudes about recording, Grubbs instead wrote a book responding to the question of

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"what it means for contemporary listeners to construct narratives of experimental music in the 1960s through the lens of recordings."[2]

This question becomes all the more interesting with the knowledge that many of the avant-garde musicians of the 1960s, John Cage being both the best known and most provocative, were deeply ambivalent about records. Since their prognostications that records heralded the end of music, recordings of these very musicians have proliferated, especially since the 1990s. An avalanche of rereleases and new releases have made their work more available that it ever was when these musicians were most active. Further, Grubbs rightly highlights throughout the book how listening practices and values have shifted and changed over the last half century. In this way, Grubbs asks the question that keeps the (or at least this) historian up at night — what if our current perceptual systems and practices prohibit us from accessing the past? Written records and visual culture, while of course problematic, at least offer a more straightforward materiality. Sound is by its nature fleeting and often embraced by avant-garde musicians precisely because of this fleetingness. This has led many to reject the material forms of sound recording once they became viable. If we cannot experience Cage or Bailey or AMM as their work was experienced in the 1960s, can we ever aspire to Leopold von Ranke's dictum to see the past "wie es eigentlich gewesen," to document history as it really was?[3]

The history presented here moves at a trot. Those unfamiliar with the individuals and pieces and places of the period will have many names to learn. Grubbs' discussions of recordings are, helpfully, wonderfully rich and vivid, and he includes a selected discography at the end. The book also includes plenty of charming anecdotal chestnuts. The decades that went into researching and writing *Records Ruin the Landscape*, first as a dissertation and now as a book are evident. It is both thoughtful and nimble, often jumping, even leaping to its next analytical point.

Each of the five chapters of *Records Ruin the Landscape* is a case study of sorts. Grubbs opens with an examination of the "avant-garde hillbilly" composer and musician Henry Flynt. Other than a single cassette released in West Germany in 1986, none of Flynt's work used to exist in recorded form. Since the early 2000s, recording companies and web-based distributors like UbuWeb have made hundreds of hours of Flynt's music available to those who had only previously known of him by obscure footnote.[4] Flynt himself, in an 2004 interview, expressed surprise not only in the interest in his work but that those interested in it were also interested in blues, jazz, rock, pop, and country music. The listening landscape had changed.

The 1960s is the focus of Grubbs' second chapter. He explores the efforts of various artists to respond and move beyond Cage in this period. He ends with a close discussion of Luc Ferrari's Presque rien No. 1 'Le Leve du jour au bord de la mer (1970). Ferrari edited a day of recorded environmental sounds at a Yugoslavian beach into a 21-minute piece. Mobilizing a broader definition of music that included ambient sounds, *Presque rien…* affirmed that potential music was everywhere. One just had to listen *and* record. Recording was critical to this revolutionary project.

The third chapter, "John Cage, Recording Artist," forms the core of the book. Here, Grubbs contextualizes Cage's original recordings. Refreshingly, Grubbs is comfortable letting Cagean contradictions lie.[5] While he refuses to untangle the likely deliberately knotty declarations of Cage, Grubbs does loosen things a bit. He artfully frames Cage's records as, not acts of hypocrisy but manifestations of the composer's conceptions of chance and indeterminacy. He further underscores this analysis with critical theory. Grubbs claims that, in the end, Cage's innovations advanced an aesthetics of recording that included a number of innovative recording techniques, from superimposition of multiple takes to treating the studio itself as a "musical meta-instrument." These techniques directly informed the evolving aesthetics of sound recording. Grubbs explains that such innovations likely went unnoticed because Cage's records were seen as documentation of techniques related to specific compositions, and "because people have tended to take Cage… at his word."[6]

Record scratch. Grubbs asks why *do* we take Cage at his word. And here again we see the fruitfulness of toggling between the role of historian and that of cultural critic. Rather than getting bogged down in parsing the context of the contradictions of Cage, Grubbs instead moves on to explore how the next generation of avant-garde musicians reconciled their work with the clearly-here-to-stay recording industry.

In Chapter Four, Grubbs offers a similar analysis of the free improvisation guitarist Derek Bailey and the group AMM. Again, these artists' understanding of free improvisation was, in the 1960s, at odds with the type of listening — or consumption, rather — facilitated by the mainstream recording industry controlling the number of releases, the format of LPs, jacket space, cost to consumers, and the context in which the records are played. Bailey railed: "The point of a record is that you can play it again…. It'll all eventually become mood music, right?"[7] But, Grubbs explains, the protests of free improvisation musicians break down in the present. The near infinitude of recordings of performances and sessions instead underscores the specificity of each, the unknown outcome of every show.

Cage once quipped that removing the records from Texas would result in the people learning to sing. In his final chapter Grubbs juxtaposes this proposition against an email from a woman in rural Texas to UbuWeb's founder and WFMU DJ Kenneth Goldsmith. She thanked him for providing music that would otherwise be completely inaccessible to her. The chapter is a comparison of the sound archives of DRAM and UbuWeb but it is also a sophisticated exploration of the definition of archives generally; how they are being redefined by their media platforms and user practices. The highly accessible web-based materials of DRAM (searchable by, say, "snake charmer's horn") and UbuWeb are not the traditional archives of old, maintained, as Foucault and Derrida warned us, by powerful institutions determined to control narratives. Instead one of the goals of DRAM and UbuWeb is to upset such power structures. This is achieved through different models — DRAM requires a subscription and UbuWeb's contents are usually donated by artists themselves. Neither perfectly eliminates archival gate-keeping but they get close. UbuWeb describes itself as the Robin Hood of the avant-garde.

UbuWeb additionally notes that the web is the ideal place to "restage these works." Grubbs seems to think so as well. And by devoting a chapter to examining web-based sound archives in a book on Cage's ambivalence about sound recording, he implies that sites like DRAM and UbuWeb reconcile Cage's critiques. This turns, I think, on the use of "restaging" rather than "re-playing" or "re-performing." "Re-staging" suggests something new might very well happen, indeed that it should. Listening deliberately, conscious that one is bringing new experiences — new since the recording was originally made — also brings a form of specificity and unknown outcome.

Geography and temporality are both transcended by streaming and downloadable music archives but likely not without ripple effects on both the present and understandings of the past. One of the great strengths of *Records Ruin the Landscape* is Grubbs' constant return to the ever-shifting forms of listening. Listening practices are framed by access. Live performances, limited LP releases, changing formats, streaming music, downloadable music — each facilitates different forms of initial listening, repeated listening, background listening, and so on. Grubbs remains, however, agnostic about which form of listening is most appropriate.[8]

In this way, Grubbs offers readers an absolution of sorts. You listeners do you. Everybody gets a trophy for trying. Certainly permission is granted to the increasing number of listeners that will have only gotten to know Cage after his death and live performances of his compositions dwindle. Then again, this agnosticism means that Grubbs doesn't really answer his initial question of what it means for our current understanding of the period that the records that were so peripheral to the prickly avant-garde musicians of the 1960s are now so central to our approach. The landscape certainly has changed, he shows us. But it's not ruined.

Though Grubbs won't tell us how to listen, I would have liked him to offer some insight into how the thinking of his historical actors might be applied to the present. What would Ferrari or Bailey think of the current listening landscape? In relation to a separate point, Grubbs makes a passing mention of Jacques Attali's image of the collector-listener's horrifying realization that the playtime of his remaining music stockpile exceeded the possible listening hours of the rest of his life.[9] This reminded me of a young friend's description of the current practice of Harvard students watching lectures at double-speed in order to more efficiently absorb the information. A classmate of hers had begun to apply the practice to watching television shows online to make, I suppose, his experience more efficient. Imagine doing this with, say, Cage's *The 25-Year Retrospective Concert*. Would you listen more intently? More efficiently? Would Cage be horrified or delighted or both? Oh right, we shouldn't be taking him at his word anyway. Grubbs' willingness to maneuver around the dictums of his historical actors gives him the freedom to address in his book the questions that keep at least me up at night: what if our historical actors reject our interest in them and the documentation of their work? Do we have an ethical obligation to obey their wishes even when new technology renders said wishes paradoxical? As both historians and cultural critics, what of our ethical obligation to listen as openly and ecumenically as possible? Is this

not the great revolutionary act of both the past and the present — certainly the one pushed by the avant garde — to hear the unheard?

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[1] About DRAM: https://www.dramonline.org/page/about, accessed 8/17/2015.

[2] David Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Duke University Press, 2014), 3.

[3] Historian Peter Novick (*That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge University Press, 1988) has highlighted how American historians (not necessarily historians of America) have mis-translated Ranke's "eigentlich" as "actually" rather than a looser "essentially." The consequence of this for the profession has been an ongoing tension over whether an objective understanding of the past is even possible or desirable.

[4] In addition to records, UbuWeb maintains a vast collection of recording ephemera, practice sessions, and sonic detritus. About UbuWeb: http://www.ubuweb.com/resources/index.html, accessed 1/20/2015.

[5] In an April 3, 2014 interview with Marc Masters of Pitchfork, Grubbs noted: "Part of the pleasure in writing the book was to go deeper into his contradiction and appreciate it, rather than to call him out — "John Cage is contradictory!" That would not have been telling him anything he didn't know."

[6] Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape*, 104.

[7] Ben Watson, *Derek Bailey and the Story of Free Improvisation* (London: Verso Books, 2004), 416. Quoted in Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape*, 107.

[8] Grubbs elaborated in an April 7, 2014 interview with Sasha Frere-Jones of The New Yorker: "Who would have known that a greater volume of recordings would arguably better represent improvised music? When recordings of free improvised music were fewer and further between, listeners were more apt to come back to these again and again — and to bestow upon them the status of works. But the next question would have to be this: If people are less inclined to repeat listens of recordings of improvised music, does that mean that they are listening more intently the first time? I certainly wouldn't make that claim."

[9] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 126. Quoted in Grubbs, *Records Ruin the Landscape*, 137.