

Taking care of editions

Interview with Gary Schultz, the director of the experimental label and art platform Care Of Editions.

Giuliano Obici

»Downloads become available as soon as we can afford to pay you.« That is the basic business model of *Care Of Editions*, the Berlin-based music label and art platform run by Michigander Gary Schultz. Between 2013 and 2016, the label released six albums, »exploring the relationship between physical and digital distribution through the means of an experimental business model called Negative Money«. As more records sell more downloads become available and for larger sums. The amount of money is always tied to the download number, so it keeps going up until the edition is sold out: from one to forty-five dollars, which is funded by an edition of 118 vinyl. Through this inverted capitalist model, the project negotiates and redefines the ideas and concepts of experimental, alternative and commercial music. The Brazilian artist and theoretician Giuliano Obici, who himself has developed projects that challenge the economic basis for art consumption, spoke with Gary Schultz about *Care Of Editions*.

GIULIANO OBICI: How was the idea for *Care Of Editions* born? What was the reason?

GARY SCHULTZ: It started with the idea of using a record label as a material, which went back to college around 2005. That's when I began collaborating with Seth Weiner and we had a lot of conversations about it, but nothing developed until much later. In the meantime, we made some detours that would eventually inform our

approach to the label: One of those being an art collective we formed in Los Angeles called *Untitled Collective*. There were five of us, coming from law, theory, music, architecture and public policy, and we pursued site-specific artistic research, often times through performance. So the label carries with it some of the lessons we learned as a group and applies them to the site of distribution. Also, when I moved to Berlin, a lot of my interests changed. I wanted to explore the parameters of distribution. With services like Spotify, it felt like the market had finally responded to the threat of Napster. Their genius was to make it seem more attractive to pay for music than to go find it for free. These services, even if they're a great benefit to listeners, offering them endless amounts of music, they still put a limit on the reproducibility of digital media, denying what makes digital media unique. It's an attractive bargain that persuades us not to explore the more radical potential of digital media so that we don't disrupt the market. That said, I never much appreciated the alternative of just giving away everything for free. I think it avoids the issue. At least with paid subscriptions you can admire the seductiveness of how they obscure the paradigm shift. So what motivated me was to embrace the tension between physical and digital media.

GO: You describe *Care Of Editions* as a »performance project in the shape of record label.« Could you describe what exactly that means? How do you

contextualize it in terms of performance? What is the content of the performance? Who are the performers? Who is the audience or the recipient?

GS: Performance practices have dealt with materials that are intangible for a long time, and I think the label dives into the reservoir of performance strategies to try and grasp with a new set of intangibles, which are digital. Also, when you look at Spotify and Pandora, these are compositions. They have discovery modes based on user profiles where a curated playlist is suggested for each listener. They're algorithmic compositions, or algorithmic mixes. A mix is still a composition. I think you can even argue that derivative forms are among the most contemporary forms of composition. In any case, these streaming platforms are composed by a team of programmers and researchers and ultimately completed by the listeners. The compositions are shaped by input gathered from listener activities. That's already performative, but I would even take it a step further. Today, most traffic on the internet comes from scripts and bots that are programmed to visit websites and scan for information. If we can imagine these scripts as being independent from specific services, more like malware or viruses, I think it's easy to exaggerate the scenario in which scripts are gathering and processing information on and for listeners, to the point where, scripts are also on the receiving end: So a system in which scripts are shaping compositions and listening to compositions, without needing to be mediated by human involvement. The field of distribution is performative with needing to add anything human, or artistic, to it.

GO: I first got to know about the project at the *Relevante Musik* festival in the summer of 2013. At that time you had released three albums, by # / TAU, Scott Cazan and Ezra Buchla. The fourth,

with music by Marc Sabat, came out in 2014. The project was supposed to include six albums in total and the last two releases, *Lucrecia Dalt* and *Jib Kidder* came out in 2015 and 2016 respectively. Is it over now? What do you think the reaction was and will be? What have you learned from this project until now? What will the next step be?

GS: Almost. We're down to the last 5 downloads and I imagine *Negative Money* will finish up at the end of summer, so I have plans to launch a new model around the same time. This one focuses on streaming and we have a handful of releases ready to go. Mostly they embrace what streaming offers that other formats can't, so some of them are open-ended, generative etc.

At this point, I see the project as a continuation of medium-specific performance practices that started with vinyl and continued into CD, but, once distribution enters the picture, we're talking about a much larger field of study with an older history. Now the project, along with many other curatorial and artistic practices, seems to me like a supplement to sciences that haven't fully adapted to our world. For instance, I have the impression that the divide between ethnomusicology and musicology is largely misconceived as a question of content, whereas the real divide is most likely a question of methodology. I'm drawn to methodologies that can balance a concept with how the concept inhabits the world – not just one or the other. I'm inspired by researchers in the expanded field of urbanization who not only immerse themselves in a given culture, or who can weave together interviews and dialogue with quantitative research, but who can actually engage with the imaginations of those who live in a site of exploration or define its use. I think the sciences are just beginning to address the gap between their traditional methodologies and new landsc-

c/• editions
exploring the relationship between physical and digital distribution through the means of an experimental business model

releases

- MARC SABAT
Les Dureses / April 2014
- EZRA BUCHLA
At The Dose / March 2013
- SCOTT CAZAN
Doubles / January 2012
- # / TAU
First / Dose / January 2013

vinyl	you pay us	\$18.00	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	€
download	we pay you	\$35.00		35				36					37			

info /

Marc Sabat uncovers an opening of tonal possibilities that he roots in an unfinished composition for solo violin by Morton Feldman. From its enigmatic notation and the conceptual tendencies expressed by Feldman, Sabat determines that the fragment is written in an alternate tonal space. Throughout *Les*

MARC SABAT
Les Dureses / 2014

MARC SABAT
Les Dureses (a book of pieces by Joel Bernstein) 2014

MORTON FELDMAN Composition 1961
Rehearsal MF 2014

vinyl and/or download
vinyl / nothing more other
vinyl / nothing more other
vinyl / nothing more other
vinyl / nothing more other

SIDE A /
INTONATION AFTER MF 1
INTONATION AFTER MF 2
TWO COMMAS

SIDE A /
A CRUEL MAN
HIS THRSTS
HAIL NOTHING

Printscreen: *Care Of Editions*. ©

pes opened up by digitalization, massive urban growth, deterritorialization and so forth. My interests have broadened. The label is a place where I can check in from time to time, but I'm curious what performative distribution, in general, can offer this picture.

GO: Can you say something about the exhibition at Relevante Musik?

GS: This was a cross between exhibition design and a visualization of our business model. The main foyer at the Villa Elisabeth has a semi-circular bar that's near the main staircase, and we setup another semi-circular merchandise table face-to-face with the bar, with just enough room for one person to pass through, who could then get a drink in one hand and a record in the other. So I was selling merch and giving people a tour of the website, while one of our artists, Lucrecia

Dalt, was producing her album at the same desk, creating a stop-and-start kind of background music. We also made a series of custom furniture that looked like little chairs, but you could stack them up and put records inside. So the amount of records in each chair was equivalent to the number of records needed to sell before a download was made available. We scattered these throughout the main entrance, with some listening stations setup, so people could lounge out and listen to the records, or to Lucrecia, or browse through the record bins, while having a seat on our inventory, both digital and physical.

GO: People first have to buy a certain amount of vinyl record before the downloads will be available and checks being sent to those who download. Considering the past few years, what has happened regarding the value of the checks, or the downloads? What has happened to the physical

and non-physical items of this project in terms of value?

GS: It's hard to tell. About half the checks get cashed. The rest, I can only imagine. Maybe half of them are kept? The downloads pop up once in a while on places like mixcloud or youtube. I don't really mind so much. If it's just after a release and some radio station posts the whole B side, then I might ask them to take it down at least for a while, but it's like a river; anytime you place a rock in it, the water just goes over and around. Sending checks keeps getting harder and harder. Actually I'm looking forward to that being done. In the beginning, I had an account with the Swiss postal bank, which could print the checks locally in the currency of the recipient, but the IRS has made this increasingly difficult. Now they want Swiss banks to give them more information on US accountholders than Switzerland gets on any of its accountholders. So I've also had to find alternative routes myself. If the checks do acquire value over time, then these difficulties will only add to their value by making them more rarified and unique.

GO: Digitalization has radically changed the ways in which music is produced, distributed and consumed. Never before have we produced or listened to as much music as today. The way we listen to and store music as data in our media devices, such as a computer, mp3 players, iPods, mobile phones etc., has changed the value of music in different ways. I would like to hear what you think about it. How do you relate *Care Of Editions* in this context?

GS: I'm interested in how the ways we navigate the world of music and the ways we present music affect its curatorial value, not just its monetary value. Record stores have always been access

points that play a curatorial as well as educational role. Today, we have new access points, and many of them, being digital, are dispersed across the internet or across devices. They streamline our access to music while making the search for music, and even how we queue up and choose tracks, increasingly hands-free. So these modes of presentation start turning anything we listen to into background mixes. We could resist that trend, but I'm curious what could happen if we flesh out the potential here. It's akin to studying networks, distribution systems, economic relations, migration routes, and all kinds of processes that happen almost without notice and that span a great many things and people. I'm interested in giving these attention, maybe even building time and space into them so we can better analyse them, rather than reach into the network and pull out some shiny object to study. I would say *Care Of* started by touching on the system of distribution and it has branched out over the years out into the territory of background music, mixes and spaces of presentation.

GO: As a »conceptual project« it also involves music. I guess it's an important choice what kind of music you are dealing with. Or not? What kind of music does the label cover? Could you describe the criteria of the albums and music related to the label?

GS: Absolutely it's important, but I'd say it's equally important for the label to do its part in making it possible for almost any kind of music to be released. Otherwise, if we developed a certain sound, then you have to ask, how experimental can the music really be. To my mind, experimental music shouldn't belong to any specific sound world. It should be able to reinvent itself. I look at labels like Ghostly International, who have such

a compelling brand narrative, it allows them to release any music they want, even if they don't take advantage of that. I want to. It's fair to criticize *Care Of* for sometimes taking the spotlight off the music we release, to the point where our curatorial approach might not seem central, but I would argue to the contrary: That's what allows us to follow the twists and turns of what experimental music might be, even if it doesn't sound experimental on the surface.

GO: But if the music that is released on these LPs and downloads are, as you also imply, not necessarily experimental music, rather tends to be a »general« alternative music, in-between pop and art music, isn't that a paradox in a project which aims at critically challenging the structure of the market?

GS: If the records were only experimental, the business model would seem like a gimmick to help sell records that wouldn't sell on their own. On the other hand, if we only release music that already had an established place in the market, then the project would be a critique or an interruption of the market. Instead, the aesthetic coherence comes from a collaborative starting point, set together with the musicians and without being so tied-up in the Spirit of Capitalism or the Critique of Capitalism.

GO: You discuss how not only the format of distribution and commerce but also how the patterns and labels of music influence the reception and perception of the audience: The struggle of adapting formats, pieces and albums to distribution and how the shaping of duration, for example, causes a shift in scale and character. Could you explain it better?

GS: Intonation has a lot to do with mobility in music. Before equal temperament, you had to be more selective in moving between tonal centers. You usually had to pick and choose which intervals and keys were in play and which ones were off limits, or you could tune to the harmonic spectrum and not transpose at all. Today, equal temperament's the most widely-used tuning system, but not because of purely aesthetic reasons. Its standardization started with colonialism and the shipment of Broadwood pianos around the world. So the push to open up tonal borders was helped by a push to open up commercial borders. When you open up those tonal borders, you also flatten out the richness of harmonic tuning. You lose both the consonant and the dissonant extremes, so to make up for that loss, a system like equal temperament often leads to more showmanship, or what we could call »the circus act«. By contrast, harmonic intonations generally favor long-durational music, like drones, where there's no need or even room for movement. There's a richness that springs out of the elements in place. Experimental music is also generally at odds with showmanship. There's less responsibility placed on the composer's shoulders to add something to the situation, if, instead, the situation can be made to speak for itself. Still, I think rejecting showmanship altogether can be naïve. It's not just a question of musical materials or ideals. As listeners, we've become accustomed to movement and to sound with a compelling surface quality. That's partly why I'm so intrigued by music that negotiates between the expectations of commercial music and experimental music, without resorting to caricatures. Marc Sabat, for example, has a practice that's informed by the history of intonation. On his album, *Les Dureses*, which is the fourth in our series, released in 2014, he stays within a harmonic tuning, but he finds a way of changing keys by pivoting to other spectra, so he's

playing with different kinds of inertia – some that push towards longer durations, and others, towards shorter, more popular forms: What he calls an imaginary folk music.

Giuliano Obici is an artist and researcher working primarily with sound. He holds degree in music, communication and psychology. He wrote the book *States of listening: medias and sound territories*. Currently teaching at Fluminense Federal University in Rio de Janeiro and is Positionens Brazilian stringer.

Gary Schultz is an artist and musician whose works often merge with various curatorial and derivative forms.

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