

Factory-Fresh

The Vinyl Factory has gone from making vinyl records for a niche market to staging ambitious art shows for a broad public—last autumn’s *The Infinite Mix* being a case in point. Now the company is even starting to commission art. How did that happen? asks Elizabeth Fullerton.



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Opposite page
Carsten Nicolai
Unicolor, at The Vinyl Factory,
Brewer Street Car Park, 2015

This page
Christian Marclay and
Mats Gustafsson
In Hindsight, 2016
Etched vinyl edition



One explanation is The Vinyl Factory’s knack of tapping into the zeitgeist. “We’re in a period in art when artists aren’t restricted to any one material, so that’s a very open situation,” says David Toop, a musician, sound curator and author of several books on sound and music. Another factor is the appeal of sound for many visual artists.

I first became aware of The Vinyl Factory as an innovative force in 2013 when it released the album *Luftbobler* by the artist Dinos Chapman—a mix of danceable electronica and David Lynch moodiness that was a far cry from the atonal death-metal mash-up one might have expected based on the dioramas of depravity he has created with his brother, Jake. Chapman had been persuaded to make a record by The Vinyl Factory’s creative director, Sean Bidder, who went through hundreds of hours of material on Chapman’s hard drive. “I’d been fiddling around with computers for about ten years probably. I never really intended anything for it. Sean caught me at a vulnerable moment,” Chapman confided.

From such small-scale projects with individual artists (others have included Martin Creed, Jeremy Deller, Christian Marclay and Haroon Mirza), The Vinyl Factory steadily expanded its reach in the art world, bringing together music and art in intriguing combinations. In 2014, for instance, it presented Conrad Shawcross’s *The Ada Project*, in which a robot programmed by the artist performed to compositions created by four musicians. Such cross-pollination is, of course, not

a new thing. As Toop notes, “Look back at the art history of the twentieth century. Luigi Russolo is a good example of a painter who was interested in noise, in music. Marcel Duchamp composed. There are artists like Henri Michaux, even someone like Robert Rymann, who dabbled in sound or were composers. All of them in some way or another challenged the classifications we like so much that someone is a visual artist.”

The prevalent trend for blurring boundaries between disciplines and media has been sharply intensified by digital technology since the same tool, the computer, houses programmes for composing music and image sequences. The music industry has also undergone a sea change with the advent of the internet, making lucrative advances virtually a thing of the past. Musicians can now upload their songs directly to social media as visual albums, while younger generations have grown up consuming music and videos in tandem on their phones and computers. “We don’t really see too much of a distinction between art and music, and we don’t believe younger people see a distinction. They just really judge things on how good it is or how interesting it is or how influential or distinct or unique or exciting,” says Bidder.

The Vinyl Factory began life in 2000, just before the massive rebirth of vinyl, when the company’s founder, Mark Wadhwa, presciently bought EMI’s historic pressing plant at Hayes in Middlesex, once the cornerstone of British pop music, manufacturing the records of The

Beatles, Pink Floyd, the Sex Pistols and countless others. The idea was to target vinyl culture, supported by a dedicated magazine, and to use the specialist equipment and expertise developed over decades at the EMI plant to produce high-quality records, ranging in price from £10 to £500 collectors’ editions, that would be sold directly over the internet. The Vinyl Factory then set up its own label, commissioning groups such as Massive Attack and Florence + The Machine to produce limited-edition releases, often with specially designed artwork. To date, it manufactures around a million records a year for numerous labels including most of the majors and its own VF Editions imprint.

It wasn’t until 2010 that the company made its first record with a fine artist, Martin Creed. “What was brilliant about Martin, and generally about most artists, is that they look at the vinyl release as a complete conceptual idea, so their approach is always very open and creative,” Bidder notes. Rather than paint the record sleeve or create a print to accompany the record, Creed made the sleeve and record white and just painted the label so the record became an artwork in itself.

That was a light-bulb moment for The Vinyl Factory, realizing that they could span both ends of the music spectrum. “The way we envisaged the label moving forward was that we could have experimental records with Christian Marclay, but we could also release Pet Shop Boys albums, and actually if we were

quite careful and curatorial in our own way everything could hopefully become a little bit more interesting as a result of bringing certain musicians into the same fold as other artists,” Bidder explains. And that has been the company’s strategy ever since.

They approached Jeremy Deller next and the floodgates opened. It turned out that lots of artists were keen to make a record, whether to explore their inner rock star or pursue another strand of their practice. Ragnar Kjartansson, who admits he’s “always wanted to be a pop tart” but has “sadly” never managed to work with a purely commercial music venture, has in fact set up his own sub-label with The Vinyl Factory called Bel Air Glamour Records.

This openness to ideas is a big draw for artists, as is the opportunity to experiment. For example, for Marclay’s latest release, a live recording of his performance at Dalston’s Cafe Oto with Swedish saxophonist Mats Gustafsson, the artist insisted on having an unprecedentedly deep etching on the B side, which ended up taking several rounds of tests to achieve. “It’s a purely visual etching. It would damage your needle if you were to play it, and maybe scratch the design,” Marclay says.

Having made records with visual artists, the logical progression was for The Vinyl Factory to find a physical space to showcase art and music. “We always saw a record as an audiovisual object. It’s tactile, it’s physical, it’s the artwork, it’s the music, it’s the sound,” says Bidder. “It felt a very natural step for us to work with those artists and exhibit that work using a similar approach, i.e. let’s make it into an experience.”

Their first audiovisual show was with the British band The xx, followed by a project with Grace Jones and the light artist Chris Levine at The Vinyl Factory’s gallery in Soho. The company upped its game in 2014, mounting immersive solo exhibitions in the iconic Brewer Street Car Park such as Bill Viola’s 1970s sound composition *The Talking Drum* in the echoing basement and Kjartansson’s mesmerizing nine-screen installation *The Visitors*, shown to perfection in a vast space on the top floor. The Vinyl Factory’s penchant for raw, edgy spaces culminated in the lease of The Store at 180 The Strand, a brutalist office block, whose warren-like interior hosted ten audiovisual artworks for the exhibition *The Infinite Mix*, organized with the Hayward Gallery.

“The key thing is that the gallery model isn’t the only model and some of

these other models can be really interesting and perhaps less off-putting to people who don’t feel that comfortable in a museum or a commercial gallery,” says Hayward director Ralph Rugoff.

The Infinite Mix announced The Vinyl Factory’s arrival as a significant player in the art world—because of its large scale and its ability to tread a fine line between hip and critically important. “That was a huge project for us,” acknowledges Bidder. “Part of the reason we loved that name, *The Infinite Mix*, so much is it reflects the core ethos of The Store, which is a great big shared space where everything coexists, whether it’s music, art, fashion, film, workspace, food, retail. It’s not one thing or another, it’s everything together.” The Store London—not to be confused with the company’s other two The Store spaces, in Berlin and the Cotswolds—will be The Vinyl Factory’s flagship site and house a raft of creative companies including *FACT* magazine, The Spaces, Dazed Media and London Fashion Week, along with ten broadcast studios.

In October it will host the unmissable event of the autumn art calendar, *Everything at Once*, a group show marking the Lisson Gallery’s 50th anniversary in partnership with The Vinyl Factory. “It will be a knockout show. The way the work is displayed is site-specific and has to be experienced on scale so everything will feel fresh, even if the work’s not all new,” says Bidder. At the same time, The Vinyl Factory will display several independent commissions in the building, including a new iteration of Ryoji Ikeda’s immersive installation *Test Pattern No. 12*.

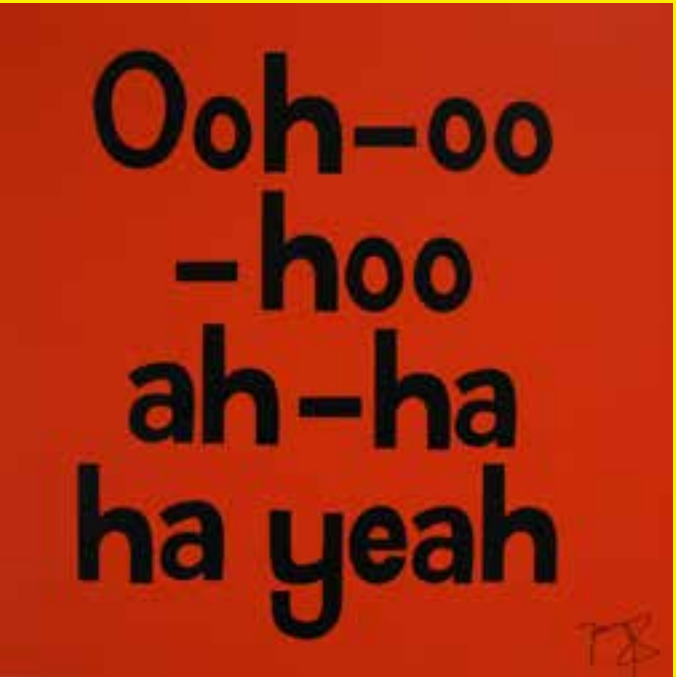
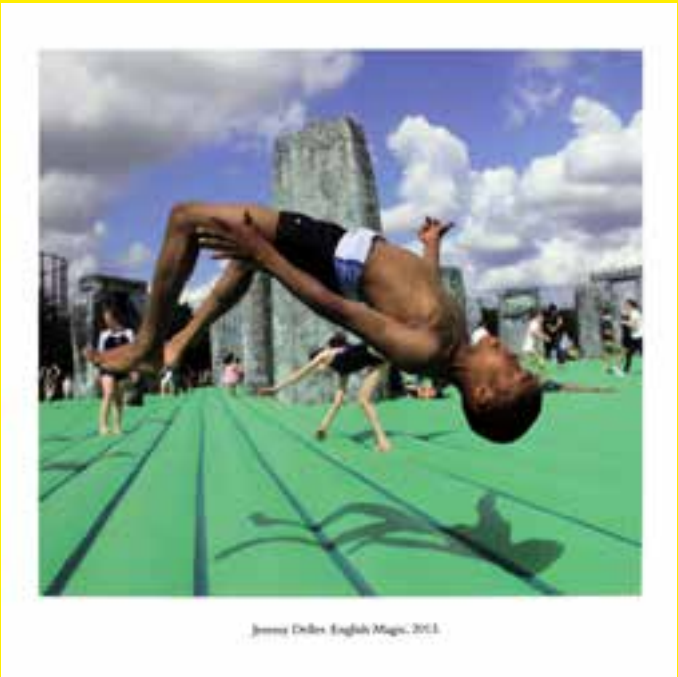
The commissioning of artworks is a new departure for The Vinyl Factory. The first of these, shown at *The Infinite Mix*, was Jeremy Deller and Cecilia Bengolea’s surreal *Bom Bom’s Dream* (2016) about a Japanese dancer following her dream to compete in a Jamaican dance-hall contest. Since then, it has commissioned (along with Tate) a new film by Kahlil Joseph reflecting on the rhythms of Harlem life that will be presented at the New Museum on 27 September, the Ikeda piece and forthcoming installations by Theaster Gates and Assemble “fusing music, art, architecture, performance and play”.

And Bidder is constantly on the lookout for new vinyl collaborations. The latest additions to the fold are Isaac Julien and Arthur Jafa, who both have limited-edition releases in the pipeline. It seems most people who work with The Vinyl Factory are keen to repeat the experience.

Marclay, for one, is brimming with plans. “I’d like to take over the pressing plant, to make LPs using the old analogue technology and really make audiovisual records, so that listening to them becomes an acoustic as much as an aesthetic experience. Who needs a recording studio when you can make records directly in the factory, from scratch?”

The Hayward Gallery is in the early stages of talks with The Vinyl Factory about another joint project when the museum opens again next year after a major revamp. “One of the great things about their approach,” says Rugoff, “is that they really are interested in opening up the range of people you might include in an exhibition—it might be musicians, it might be people from the fashion world and it might be people who are filmmakers.”

“Everything at Once” opens in October.



This page, clockwise from top left
Jeremy Deller
English Magic, 2013

Jeremy Deller
Voodoo Ray, 2014

Martin Creed
Work No. 1558, 2013

Dinos Chapman
LUV2H8, 2013