

Exploring the Art of Sound and Memory with Dani Gal



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Back in January, I visited the exhibition “Knowledge is a Garden” at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich. “Knowledge is like a garden: if it’s not cultivated, it cannot be harvested.” Starting from this West African proverb, “Knowledge is a Garden” asks what possibilities arise if we understand knowledge, which is supposedly fixed, as something organic and growing.

While walking through the rooms, a very peculiar “wall of sound” caught my attention. It was **Dani Gal’s HISTORICAL RECORDS** project.

I decided to get in touch with Dani because analyzing the social and political power of music is an important part of my research on the path to discovering the process of democratizing art.

In this interview, **Dani Gal** shares his journey into the art world, his creative process, and his exploration of historical and political themes through unique projects like **HISTORICAL RECORDS**. With exhibitions at well-known institutions such as the Venice Biennale, Centre Pompidou, and Documenta 14, the artist offers a fresh perspective on how art relates to memory, politics, and technology. He also discusses the evolving concept of art, the role of sound in his work, and his future projects and exhibitions.

Q.: Can you tell me more about yourself, your background, and your first steps into the art world?

D.G.: I am originally from Jerusalem and have been living in Germany for the past 25 years. I studied art in Frankfurt and in New York before moving to Berlin in 2005. Since then, I have been an active interdisciplinary artist and filmmaker. My work has been shown widely around the world in various international group and solo exhibitions and in film festivals, including the 54th Venice Biennale (2011), The Istanbul Biennale (2011), New Museum New York (2012), Kunsthalle St. Gallen Switzerland (2013), The Jewish Museum New York (2014), Berlinale Forum Expanded (2014), Kunsthaus Zurich (2015), Kunsthalle Wien (2015), Documenta 14 (2017), Centre Pompidou (2018, 2013), and more. One of my earlier works, which I started as a student, was HISTORICAL RECORDS. I started to collect records that contain non-musical content and later focused the collection on political/historical content.

Q.: I recently attended the press conference where Marina Abramović introduced her retrospective at Kunsthaus Zurich. At some point, she said that there are young people asking her to teach them how to become an artist. She pointed out that “you do not become an artist, and nobody can teach you how to become an artist. You are born as an artist.” Do you agree with her view?

D.G.: It sounds to me like a very gloomy and counterproductive answer on her part. If young people are asking for advice and help, it means that they are curious, and we should try to give them something from our experience. I simply don't know if some people are born artists. I do not have the scientific data to prove it. I once heard a good answer from Pauline Oliveros. When she was asked by a young person for advice on how to make an art career, she replied: “Don't build a career, build a community.” I relate to that, especially in our political times.

Q.: The concept of “art” has changed over the years. What is art, or what can be considered as “art” today?

D.G.: I believe that technology has changed, and therefore the means of making art have adapted, but art essentially has not changed. Social structures have changed too, but their function in society is essentially the same. At the end of the day, I can feel very close to artworks from hundreds of years ago and understand the motivation behind making them. This answers your very last question, too.

Q.: I had the chance to see your project, HISTORICAL RECORDS, while it was exhibited at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst. Could you explain the concept behind it? When did you start, and how has it evolved over the years?

D.G.: This phenomenon of putting historical and political records on vinyl really fascinates me. As I mentioned, I started to collect these records around 2005, and I ended up with over 700 pieces divided into three display installations. Now the three parts are in three collections: Migros, a private collection in NYC, and at Centre Pompidou Paris. There is also a book with 400 reproductions and a website. The principle of collecting was to buy only recordings that happened at a certain time—records that captured a certain moment in current affairs, be it a speech, riots, or a war in sound, for example. Recorded sound, for me, is fascinating because it has an uncanny ability to bring an event so close while using a rather primitive recorded medium. Sound is spatial and spectral. It can simulate an experience in space in a way you don't get with film, bringing it back to life. I guess the main question in this work is: What motivated people to replay a record of a speech as if it were a piece of music? That is the moment when the collective, the political intertwines with the personal. The project examines how recorded political events were commodified and what role sound documentation has in the interplay between personal and collective/national memory. It is also interesting to look at vinyl culture, which is strongly associated with Pop and the fetishization of music but instead carries the historical events that shaped the 20th century and which we continue to live with the consequences of this violent century.



Q.: How/where do you search for these vinyls? Is there anything you would like to add to the project that you have not yet been able to find?

D.G.: I searched for these records for years in second-hand stores, flea markets, thrift stores everywhere I travelled, and on the internet. Some very rare records were given to me as gifts from people who had them at home and appreciated the collection. There are a few records that I saw exist on the internet but never found the physical object, like a record by Jimmy Carter or a speech by Meir Kahane, a notorious far-right Israeli politician in the 1980s, whose political views since have become mainstream in Israel.

Q.: The sound is an important part of this project. Why do you think it is so important that people listen to these speeches directly from the original recordings?

D.G.: When I started to think about these political recordings as material, it created an opportunity to listen to them severed from their historical context, and sometimes even from their specific content. This process revealed the mechanism of their production and helped to understand them in a new light. The records stand between what ‘happened’ and the listener. They contain all the filters, all the stages from the ‘real event’ through to what was recorded, including the noise from the microphone and the transmission. These recordings were later edited, selected, and distributed. Now it is that process which defined what will be remembered. Beyond that, they are simply interesting as historical documents. I always find it magical to hear a recording of someone who lived in the past, especially if they are not famous—the so-called “wo/man on the street.”

Q.: Can you tell me more about other projects you are currently working on or some exhibitions you have already planned for 2025?

D.G.: I have just finished a new video work titled “Report on the Re-education of Germany, 6.1945.” It was commissioned for an exhibition about Munich at the end of WW2, but my project uses the past to address current issues or as a proxy for the now, which is a central method in my work. As part of the process of denazification and democratic re-education in occupied West Germany by the U.S. military government (1945-1952), military officials used surveys and studies to understand and influence the occupied population. Found in the OMGUS (Office of Military Government, United States) archives in Munich, are psychological surveys made by the U.S. military to map the democratic tendencies and the psychological attitudes of Germans who, until recently, lived under National Socialism. While reading these surveys from today’s perspective, much of the information corresponds with current political debates in contemporary Germany regarding the rise of the far right, militarization, war, anti-democratic tendencies of youth, and the future of Germany. In the new video work/podcast, I transform a selection of these studies into conversational forms and wrap archival material into the contemporary genres of video-podcast and TikTok selfie videos. By recontextualizing surveys from the late 1940s post-war Germany into today’s styles of presentation, fixed notions of temporality are challenged as viewers face the present while listening to the past, reflect on the past while watching the present, all with the possibility of being haunted by the future.

I will also make my first vinyl record this year. It will be a new sound piece that is too early to talk about but will involve an EMS Synth from 1972, which is in Radio Belgrade.



All pictures courtesy of the artist

