

Hoezenpoezen: a primer

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Jan van den Dobbelsteen's *Picture Discs* might be called the most literal version of "picture disc" that one could think of. They reduce "picture disc" to purely a disc with a picture and nothing else. When vinyl records and CDs are called "discs", this actually is a metonymy - a property of a thing used to name the thing as a whole - for a disc-shaped storage medium. When vinyl records are called picture discs, then because their vinyl itself is imprinted with a picture, in addition to the sound pressed into its grooves. Their precise literal name should be "sound and picture disc" rather than only "picture disc". This slippage in language shows how the metonymy had ended up replacing the proper meaning of the word: At the historical peak of vinyl sales, roughly between 1950 and 1985, a disc simply *was* a music record in the popular imagination. Not only did the CD take over after that period, but CD-ROMs and later DVDs diversified the notion of what a disc could look like and what it could hold.

The *Picture Discs* also reduce the notion of "picture" to its stereotypical essence: to a visual signal that attracts voyeuristic gaze, in this case even most stereotypically, the male gaze. Departing from the concept of the gaze by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Experimental filmmaker and feminist theoretician Laura Mulvey defined the male gaze as a particular mode of depiction of the female body in film in which camera angles and movement put the viewer into the perspective of a heterosexual man voyeuristically looking at a woman's body. Women are thus objectified, and gender roles and power relations fixated.¹ By cutting out photographs of vintage female models and gluing them to discs, the artist not only reproduces this gaze. He both intensifies and emasculates the gaze, bringing it even closer in a manner of zooming into the original pictures while deflecting it from the lower body to only the faces of the models. "Picture" and "disc" are not simply added but morphed: by virtue of their similar shapes, disc and face complement each other. The photographed women are decontextualized and abstracted not only from the rest of their bodies, but also from the studio setting of the original photographs, including the original frame dimensions in their reference to the photographic medium, the rectangular film still. The morphing of disc and face reminds of the French word "face" for the side of a record.

The female body is the stereotypical picture in popular culture, not only in voyeuristic commodification, but also for technical purposes. From the 1950s to the 1990s, "Shirley", the face of a white woman, served as Kodak's reference picture for calibrating the colors of its films; only in 1996, the "Shirley card" was replaced with

¹Mulvey, Laura. *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1989.

a multiethnic card showing an Asian, white and black woman.² This reminds of the fact that, next to catering to the male gaze, the faces on the *Picture Discs* constitute a visual database that documents normativity - of ethnicity and standards of beauty. The discs function as browseable index cards of this database, and uncannily remind of 19th and 20th century anthropological photographic databases that document different ethnicities.

Fetishism

In short, the *Picture Discs* could be read as a conceptualist reduction of the popular cultural concepts of “picture” and “disc” to (a) their bare-bones essence and (b) their lowest common denominator, cutting out the middle man, namely the audio recording. However, the reality of the work is not that simple. It *does* reference the disc as an audio record in many ways. First, through the hole in its middle, suggesting to put and spin it on a turntable player. Second, by the included instruction to “play at any speed”. Since there is no audio on these discs, “playing” becomes visual instead of auditory. But whatever speed one chooses, especially those available on a standard record player, spinning a disc will visually wipe the image it contains. After gazing and cropping/zooming into it, “playing”, with its sexual connotation, will only end in frustration. The discs thus play a dark-humorous joke with the gazing viewer. They become “obscure objects of desire”, to quote Luis Buñuel’s last film from 1977 in which a horny older man chases a young woman without avail (and without releasing that he actually chases two different women) until everyone dies in a terrorist bombing.

In the *Picture Discs*, the obscure object of desire is not one or more women, not even their picture that playing will destroy, but ultimately the medium of the disc itself. The box is not just a visual database, but most of all a miniature record collection reminiscent of the boxes in record stores and at record sales fairs which record collectors obsessively browse. Even without vinyl, the *Picture Discs* embody vinyl fetishism. It reminds of another surreal film classic, David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983) in which a sexualized TV screen with female attributes sucks in and swallows the male viewer, an emblematic scene that gives Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze a McLuhanian turn: If the medium is the message, then the male gaze and desire are no longer directed towards the depicted female bodies, but towards the medium itself, whether it is video or a vinyl record.

Cronenberg’s vision is the present projected into a dystopian future in which media transcend themselves in order to become “the new flesh”. The *Picture Discs*, however,

2Del Barco, Mandalit. “How Kodak’s Shirley Cards Set Photography’s Skin-Tone Standard.” NPR. NPR, 13 Nov. 2014. Web. 09 Mar. 2016.
<http://www.npr.org/2014/11/13/363517842/for-decades-kodak-s-shirley-cards-set-photography-s-skin-tone-standard>. Jean-Luc Godard and other filmmakers boycotted Kodak in the 1970s because of the racial bias in its film color science.

reflect a present that fetishizes the past. “Retro” and “vintage” are two self-evident labels for both the photographs and their turntable medium. Less evident for an international audience is a specific Dutch and Belgian cultural context of those photographs. They were taken from the covers of domestic folklore pop, easy listening and popular classical music LPs from the 1950s to the 1970s that featured, without any particular relation to the music, semi-nude or nude female pin-up models on their covers. These cover designs were a widespread phenomenon, typically used to sell compilations of cover tunes played by lesser-known artists or studio musicians. Today, these records can still be found on practically any Dutch or Belgian flea market, often for a dollar or less.

In 1960, popular Dutch writer Annie M.G. Schmidt wrote a song for singer Conny Stuart that gave this phenomenon its own particular name. Their song *de hoezenpoezen* begins with the following lyrics: “My picture is on each LP / that leaves the factory. / I don’t know anything, can’t play a note / I’m on Brahms, partly nude”.³ Schmidt and Stuart make feminist fun of the phenomenon: “For, really, the record industry / knows its business / Nobody buys a symphony anymore / without a pretty lady / I’m the mistress from the record cover / the cover kitten, the cover kitten / on 33 1/3 micro grooves [...] / I’m in bed on top of a brass sextet / more sex than tet [...] /

With their song, “hoezenpoezen” (pronounced with internal rhyme “[’hu:zən’pu:zən]” and meaning “cover kitten”) became a common word in colloquial Dutch and Flemish. Unlike easy listening LPs from other countries that, from the early 1970s on, also featured nude or semi-nude cover models, the Dutch and Belgian “hoezenpoezen” LPs weren’t exploitation products made by backyard

³Complete text: “Mijn foto staat op elke plaat / Hallo, die de fabriek verlaat / Ik weet van niets, ik ken geen noot / Ik sta op Brahms ten dele bloot / Op elk kwartet in c mineur / Ziet u mijn boezem in majeur / Zo sta ik op ’t Brandenburgs concert van Bach / Met dit gebaar, met deze lach ’t / Ave Maria van Gounod / Daar sta ik zo, daar kijk ik zo / En op de Pastorale / Wuif ik met deze waaier / Want heus, die platenindustrie / Die weet van wanten / Geen mens koopt nog een symfonie / Zonder mooie tante / Ik ben de juffrouw van de platenhoes / De hoezepoes, de hoezepoes / Op elke drieëndertig minigroove / Kunt u me zien, van onder of van boven / Zo sta ik op Valse Triste van Sibelius / De juffrouw van de hoes, hoes, hoes / De juffrouw van de hoes / Ik sta op Katsjatoerijan / Met enkel mijn ceintuurtje an / Op ’t blaassextet lig ik in bed ’t / Is duidelijk meer sex dan tet / En op de plaat van Debussy / Sta ’k in de vijver tot m’n knie / De wind speelt door mijn haute coiffure / In Händels suite in F dur ’k / Ren door het bos gelijk een hert / Op Mendelssohns vioolconcert / O Mensch, wie raffiniert das ist / Die tweede Rhapsodie von List / Want heus, die platenindustrie / Die weet al jaren / Waar Abraham de mosterd haalt / Uit haren en snaren / Ik ben de juffrouw van de platenhoes / De hoezepoes, de hoezepoes / Op elke drieëndertig minigroove / Kunt u me zien, van onder of van boven / ’k Sta met blote voeten op Te Deum Laudamus / De juffrouw van de hoes, hoes, / hoes De juffrouw van de hoes”.

producers, but they were published by big companies like Philips which, back then, also operated as a major record label. In 2013, Belgian record collector and writer Kris Dierckx documented cover kitten culture in his self-published book *Hits and Tits - Hoezenpoezen*.⁴ Its subtitle, “Hoe sexy meiden de huiskamers van de Lage Landen veroverden”, confirms that this phenomenon was regionally specific: “How sexy girls conquered the living rooms of the Low Countries”.

If semiologist and critic Roland Barthes had analyzed Dutch-Belgian instead of French everyday culture in his 1957 book *Mythologies*,⁵ he might have classified the *hoezenpoezen* as empty signs in which, to use his terminology, signifier (the naked women) and referent (the recorded music) are perfectly disjointed. Because of this, they express nothing but their own individual pleasure and masturbatory fetishism (unlike, for example, in an erotic novel where a cover pin-up illustration would connect the imaginary of the text to a materialized visual imaginary). This pleasure ends up being directed towards each medium as such, the photograph and the record. Not only is this a textbook case for a medium being the message. It also amounts to a fetishistic seduction strategy optimized towards enticing collector’s instinct. The record screams “pick me up” at its potential buyer, as if to make a salacious pun on its intimate relation with the buyer and the one with the record player (with its pickup system). The *Picture Discs* cabinet is another such pick up device - the one in which collector eroticism becomes most obviously visible and tangible.

Hauntologies

Picture disc thus amounts to a partly imaginary reconstruction of post-World War II consumer culture where vinyl records with their printed covers were the only widely available audiovisual mass media for home consumption. It could also be read as a monument and necrologue of this culture: the cabinet a graveyard, each disc a tombstone bearing a youthful photograph of the deceased person, with the vintage signifiers (1950s-70s film stock colors, hairstyles, makeup, jewelry, fashion) giving away the time that has passed. In a contemporary art context, an immediate association are the vintage photograph installations of Christian Boltanski (who showed pictures of children murdered in the Holocaust) and Hans-Peter Feldmann (whose work “1967-1993 Die Toten” [“1967-1993 The Dead”] showed portraits of everyone killed in conjunction with the German Baader-Meinhof group, no matter whether they were the terrorists or their victims). The *Picture Discs* are lighter in their historical reference but still macabre. What happens when the pin-ups of the past are dug out, revived, and newly fetishized?

⁴Dierckx, Kris. *Hoezenpoezen. Hoe sexy meiden de huiskamers van de Lage Landen veroverden*. Laakdal: Kdx BoOks!, 2014. Print.

⁵Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Seuil, 1957.

The necrophiliac proposition of the *Picture Discs* corresponds to what is being debated in contemporary pop music criticism: the “hauntology” of a culture obsessed with its own past. The term was coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida in the early 1990s as a portmanteau word of “haunted” and “ontology”.⁶ Derrida specifically referred to Marx’ and Engels’ 1848 Communist Manifesto in which “a spectre is haunting Europe - the spectre of communism”. Against the American neo-conservative philosopher Francis Fukuyama who had proclaimed (with Hegel) the “end of history” after the fall of the wall and the collapse of Soviet communism, Derrida wisely insisted that Marxism was far from dead. In the 2010s, British music critics Simon Reynolds and Mark Fisher revived “hauntology” to describe retro phenomena, fetishism of dead media as a reaction to the loss of political, social and culture utopias after the neoliberal and -conservative “end of history”.⁷

Hauntology and necrophilia, however, are in the eye of beholder. The *Picture Discs* cabinet could just as well be read as a theater of memory for the *hoezenpoezen*, analogous to Renaissance theaters of memory and curiosity cabinets with their inventories of collected things.⁸ The *Picture Discs* could be used as a memory card game, like the Dutch-invented *kwartet* in which the players need to collect sets of pictures that belong together. Since the pictures have been cropped, the game could involve guessing to which records the photographs originally belonged. It is a game that the *Picture Discs* play with any viewer, anyway. In this sense, the anonymous *hoezenpoezen* photographs also function as mug shots for a detective investigation. Conversely, they could be seen as stolen objects: covers lifted from record shops to complete one’s collection of home-taped music, a common phenomenon in the 1980s (which in the 1990s continued as the stealing of VHS and DVD covers for home-copied film collections).

With this libidinous economics of collecting and stealing, the *hoezenpoezen* picture disc reveals a semiological paradox: On the one hand, its signs/media are maximally disjointed, as pointed out above, on the other hand, the experience of the record is incomplete, lacking and abstract without the cover. The cover thus is not merely wrapping, illustration or marketing vehicle, but reminds of what Roland Barthes’ analyzed, thirteen years after *Mythologies*, in the Japanese everyday culture of gifts and their wrapping:

“Yet, by its very perfection, this envelope, often repeated (you can be unwrapping a package forever), postpones the discovery of the object it contains-one which is often insignificant, for it is precisely a specialty of the Japanese package that the triviality of the thing be disproportionate to the luxury of the

6Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*, New York and London: Routledge, 1994.

7Fisher, Mark. *Ghosts of my life: Writings on depression, hauntology and lost futures*. John Hunt Publishing, 2014.

8On the former: Yates, Frances A.. *The Art of Memory*. Routledge, 1966.

envelope. [...] It is as if, then, the box were the object of the gift, not what it contains: [...] Thus the box acts the sign: as envelope, screen, mask, it is worth what it conceals, protects, and yet designates.”⁹

Arguably, the original *hoezenpoezen* records had the same quality of form over content. The *Picture Discs* amplify it by completely removing the original content and wrapping, cover and disc, into one single object that confuses the categories of what is inside and what is outside.

Iconologies

There are forerunners for these picture discs, not in mass media and popular culture but in modern and contemporary art. First presented in 1968, Marcel Broodthaers' imaginary *Musée d'Art Moderne - Département des Aigles* (“Museum of Modern Art - Department of Eagles”) consisted of a collection of diverse objects - documents, pictures, films, everyday commodities - bearing the picture or name of an eagle. In this way, it resembled a baroque curiosity cabinet, yet it differed, just like the *Picture Discs*, in its focus on a single subject and iconology. In 1927, cultural historian Aby Warburg had begun a conceptually comparable project, a purely visual *Mnemosyne atlas* consisting of picture reproductions and cut-outs both from canonical art history and everyday mass media, reconstructing art history as the migration of symbolic forms from ancient Greek gods to “the classical tradition today”. This formed the iconological method of the scholars from his circle, including Erwin Panofsky and Ernest Gombrich, only that Warburg's eccentricity got lost in the canonization of the method.

The Warburg school was classicist in its view on art and cultural history and oriented towards cultural heritage. Broodthaers' museum, however, is a surreal and openly constructed cultural heritage, a hauntology rather than a classicism of the eagle. In comparison, the *Picture Discs* cabinet concerns itself with nothing but vernacular culture. Art critic Rosalind Krauss observes a “loss of specificity” in Broodthaers' piece with its many different objects and media. She therefore interprets it as emblematic for “art in the age of the post-medium condition”.¹⁰ In contrast, the *Picture Discs* are, despite their reconfiguration of the original disc, as medium-specific as it gets.

In this respect, the *Picture Discs* better fit the history of artists' multiples that officially begins with Fluxus in the 1960s, but actually has its origins in the 1940s with Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (“box in a suitcase”). In 1962, Fluxus' founder and organizer George Maciunas, a communist, tried to democratize art by switching art production from autographs as unique collector's items to inexpensive objects published in editions. Among those were a 16mm reel of *Fluxfilms* (1966) containing

⁹Barthes, Roland, *Empire of Signs*. Noonday, 1989, 45-46.

¹⁰Krauss, Rosalind, *Voyage to the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

Paul Sharits' *Fluxfilm no. 26: Sears Catalogue 1-3* whose frames were photographic reproductions of America's most popular mail order shop catalogue back in that time. Just like their (more traditionally art market-oriented) pop art contemporaries, Fluxus artists worked the visual vernacular of everyday consumer culture and mass media. Accordingly, Maciunas had demanded in his *Fluxmanifesto on Fluxamusement* that Fluxus should be "Vaudeville - art", "simple, amusing, concerned with insignificances, have no commodity or institutional value".¹¹ Consistent with these demands, Maciunas' graphic design for Fluxus, including the one for this manifesto, used the visual language of late 19th/early 20th century American Vaudeville and circus flyposters. In other words, Fluxus already contained a vintage and retro popular cultural element that mainstream pop art lacked, but which can also be found in the *Picture Discs*. On top of this, their release as limited edition multiple objects puts them into the direct footsteps of Fluxus.

Furthermore, Fluxus artists were the first to experiment with the vinyl record as a sculptural medium. Nam June Paik, who had joined Fluxus when he studied musical composition with Karlheinz Stockhausen, was likely the pioneer of this subgenre of "media art" (a term he had coined in the 1960s). His 1963 *Exposition of Music* at Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, featured among others a "Schallplatten-Schaschlik" ("record shashlik"), with layers of records spinning on two vertical rotisseries and visitors being given a portable pick-up arm with which they could randomly play segments of the records, in a manner of proto-scratching. Around 1965, Fluxus artist Milan Knížák manipulated vinyl records by breaking and painting them and gluing together fragments from different records, from which he created his *Broken Music* compositions in the 1970s. In the mid-1960s Danish Fluxus artist Knud Pedersen repurposed a commercial jukebox to play avant-garde and sound art records and made it public at his self-run space where anyone could cheaply rent artworks. From the mid-1980s on, Christian Marclay revived such sculptural work with vinyl records; audio artists Claus van Bebber and Philipp Jeck continued the tradition of working with manipulated records in live performances.

Jan van den Dobbelsteen is a founding member of a generation of audiovisual artists that revived vinyl as an experimental medium and art object in the 2000s - among them, the Danish musician and artist Goodiepal with whom Van den Dobbelsteen temporarily shared his identity. The Rotterdam-based art space De Player, with which he is closely associated, is one of many contemporary publishers of handmade vinyl records and record objects as artists' multiples. The *Picture Discs* put themselves into this lineage that began with Nam June Paik, last but not least with their deliberately ambiguous instruction "to play at any speed" - which could also mean to play them with the record player's needle to obtain the sound of the needle scratching their surface.

¹¹Maciunas, George. "Fluxmanifesto on Fluxamusement." *George Maciunas Foundation Inc.* N.p., n.d. (1971) Web. 11 Mar. 2016.
<http://georgemaciunas.com/about/cv/manifesto-ii/>.

On the other hand, the *Picture Discs* contradict the Fluxus and Broken Music tradition which is all about destroying the consumer product and its aura. All these works are iconoclastic, leaving nothing of the original cover artwork. The *Picture Discs*, on contrary, revolve around the aura of the original pin-up records, distilling the auratic essence into icons in a cabinet. This brings them in closer vicinity to Duchamp and his ironic yet obsessive reflection of fetishism and eroticism in relation to space and kinetics in all of his major works. The *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) kept this obsession within the two-dimensional frame of a late cubist/futurist painting, the *Great Glass* broke it down into an almost life-long series of sketches, installations and variations including the aforementioned *Boîte-en-valise* (a suitcase with reproductions of Duchamp's major works and sketches), the posthumous *Étant Données* distilled it to a pornographic-fetishistic-voyeuristic tableau. In the context of the *Great Glass*, Duchamp had experimented with kinetic pictures on rotating discs, the *Rotoreliefs*. They partly consisted of abstract, proto Op art images of shapes that would create the illusion of three-dimensional vortices and spirals when rotating, partly of French language puns written as spiral-shape texts on discs.

For viewing the *Rotoreliefs*, Duchamp built a propeller-like stand-up device; alternatively, they could be put on grammophone record players. Duchamp's short film *Anémic Cinéma* (1926) consists of nothing but these rotating discs and manifests the third way or medium with which the *Rotoreliefs* could be shown. The *Rotoreliefs* thus were thought to be their own medium (which could be parasitically slipped on top of other, more common media technology such as turntables and film projection) rather than a cultural reflection on existing mass media like later in Fluxus and in the *Picture Discs* cabinet. Except for his Mona Lisa with a mustache, Duchamp's fetishism and eroticism was synthetic construction, not pop cultural recycling.

Media

If one reads the art history Duchamp - Fluxus - Van den Dobbelsteen as a media history, then time is reversed in it: It starts with the disc as a projection into the future, continues with the disc as the popular cultural present and ends with the disc as a reference to the past. At the same time, it describes a circular history from (a) the record player turn from a device for audio reproduction into a visual display device, (b) the record player as a reprogrammed audio device back to (c) the record player as a visual display device. The last stage, however, isn't simply a return to Duchamp. In combination with the reversal of time, where the disc becomes a reference to the past instead of the future, it describes a status quo where the turntable record has acquired an enormous history and cultural baggage in the meantime. Not only are the *Picture Discs* testimonies of a time after digital technology - first CD, then mp3 downloads, then music streaming - killed the vinyl star (and the *hoezenpoes*). They are also testimonies of a time after digital technology.

In 2016, vinyl records are the fastest-growing segment of the music industry. Although they in no way threaten the digital mainstream, they affirm that contemporary artists are still the forerunners of mainstream culture. Ten years ago, vinyl records had shrunk to fringe medium of DJs, experimental artists and analog nostalgics, today, factories for pressing LPs are booked out for months, globally. The *Picture Discs* are therefore not simply retro, but also very contemporary. Today's post-digital culture has freed vinyl from its original function of being a record of music. As pure storage of music, digital files fulfill their purpose (with only few audio fanatics arguing over the fidelity of the one or the other medium). What remains of vinyl, if sound reproduction is no longer its *raison d'être*, is the visuality and tactility that digital files lack. The *Picture Discs* document exactly that, even in their name, by leaving out sound reproduction completely.

In that sense, the work affirms Marshall McLuhan's dictum that the "content" of any medium is always another medium"¹², but arrives at the opposite conclusion that the content which has been taken away by the newer technology opens up a space for the overlooked content of the older technology. This doesn't make the fetishist *picture disc* cabinet a feminist artwork, but gives the *hoezenpoezen* due homage.

¹²McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, 1964, 23.