

***Punto cero. Aragón***  
***A few ideas about***  
***making sound portraits***

At this juncture, we all know that photography is not objective, despite the fact that, in Spanish, camera lenses are called “objetivo.” Still, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when photography was struggling to be accepted as an art, proponents of painting were quick to exclude it for its supposed lack of human involvement in the generation of the image. In 1919, Roland Chavenon wrote: *‘an artwork is something containing the object and the subject, and it should contain more of the latter than of the former. In fact, a photographic image contains only the object. As such, no artistic character should be attributed to this mechanical image. An image belongs to the world of art when it has been created by a sensitive, thinking subject.’*

This defense of the subjective image has always been strong in the area of portraiture, where innumerable painters have been praised for capturing the sitter’s personality, his ‘inner self’ or any of a number of other more-or-less felicitous expressions intended to imply that painting a good portrait involves not just observing a sitter’s appearance, but rather *reacting* to the sitter. At its extreme, this practice has led some critics to say that a portrait painter always paints himself, no matter who the putative model may be.



Lucien Freud  
*Portrait of Queen Elizabeth II*

But where this approach seemed most interesting or, at least, most fecund for me in the preparation and elaboration of Aragón Punto Cero, is in some of the concepts underlying Cubism,<sup>1</sup> especially the thoughtful work of the Puteaux Group,<sup>2</sup> rather than the more hands-on approach of Picasso and Braque, who were based in Montmartre. The Cubists did not conceive the artist as someone

---

1 I should emphasize that, while these ideas influenced my personal approach to this work, I neglected to share them with my colleague, Luis Tabuenca, at that time. This was the subject of some discussion when I shared the present text with them, and with a critic, after the disc was released.

2 Puteaux is a suburb of Paris located on the left bank of the river Seine.

who simply reacts to, or depicts, what he sees. Beginning with the idea that the artist has a mind, they took a more platonic view, accepting that an artist knows an object is much more than the mere fleeting impression it offers to the eye. The latter was enough for the Impressionists, they would say, but not for us. This presence of the mind allows the cubist artist to depict objects in an entirely different way, painting not so much what he sees as what he knows. So we have a depiction that is more subjective, as it draws directly on the subject's knowledge and conception of the object being portrayed, but perhaps less sensual, as that portrayal no longer slavishly follows the demands of the senses. That does not mean that the experience of the finished artwork is any less sensual, only that its elaboration is no longer based exclusively on what the artist's senses told him about the object he has portrayed therein.

When we began work on *Aragón Punto Cero*, these ideas were quite clear. We were interested in making a series of sound portraits, not supposedly objective depictions of the sonic characteristics of given locations. We wanted to portray what we knew and had lived in those places, not simply how they sounded at the moment we were recording their noises. By all means, the experience of these pieces could be sensual, but we were not constructing them exclusively on the basis of a few fleeting experiences offered by the senses. The field recordings were fundamental, but they were important as sound sources, not as determinants in the structure, or even the nature, of each location's sonic narrative.

Beyond the overall approach described above, we drew on two more Cubist concepts to create the portraits of our chosen places. The first was *collage*, which we exploited both as the capacity to glue apparently disparate elements to the surface of an ongoing discourse and as the creation of a composite discourse made exclusively from an accumulation and ordering of such elements. Both interpretations of the semantic possibilities of collage are present on this CD, and both serve to create different planes, generating levels of meaning that range from purely sonic qualities such as density, rhythm, timbre or duration to referential qualities of the sort offered by identifiable sounds like voices or water sprinklers.

Of course, the field recordings are only part of this CD; electronic synthesis and percussion are equally present and important, and both were improvised in the recording studio as Luis and I dialoged with each other and with the field recordings. And here, we find the second of the two Cubist concepts I mentioned above. Juan Gris put it very succinctly: *'from a cylinder, I make a bottle.'*



Juan Gris  
*Bottles and knife*

In other words, Gris is not reducing objects to their constituent shapes—he is not reducing the bottle to a cylinder—instead, he is deriving the objects from the platonic shapes they somehow embody. Just so, in making these portraits of places in Aragon, we did not set out to derive the sounds from the place, but rather, to build the place *with* the sounds it embodies and others we were making as we listened. The result is a sort of catachresis—not the audacious type that allows Shakespeare *to take arms against a sea of troubles*, but the more humble sort that produces words like *pineapple*, two sounds with other meanings and origins that combine to designate a delicious fruit that grows where there are no pine trees and tastes nothing like apples.

Wade Matthews

*Madrid, 19 January 2012*