

José Val del Omar (b. 1904, Granada; d. 1982, Madrid) began composing *Auto Sacramental Invisible* (Invisible Auto Sacramental) in 1949. In the form of a sound installation, he conceived this device to dovetail with a crafted outline that carefully distributes sound (voices, music, different noises...) across more than a dozen speakers. The process shaped an aesthetic proposal heralding the reflections that in the 1960s would engender the term "sound art."

The virtually unknown work—it would only be presented in June 1952, and partially and tentatively at that—can be understood as a kind of "missing link" inside a "Valdelomarian" aesthetic evolution. Moreover, the *Auto Sacramental Invisible* goes some way to explaining the leap from the young filmmaker and photographer—akin to documentary realism and connected to the Misiones Pedagógicas (Pedagogical Missions)—and Val del Omar—now wholly *cinemista* ("cinema alchemist"), abstract, poetic—who, beginning in 1954, would present, starting with *Aguaespejo granadino* (Water-Mirror of Granada), his magnum opus *Tríptico elemental de España* (Elementary Triptych of Spain).

From today's perspective, the fact that this evolution was channeled through an aesthetic reflection primarily linked to sound and its perception takes on greater relevance. *Auto Sacramental Invisible. Una representación sonora a partir de Val del Omar* (Invisible Auto Sacramental: A Sonic Representation from Val del Omar) incorporates, in a complex intermedial synthesis, elements of theater, music, and installation that, in Niño de Elche's interpretation, are decentered—exploited—through multiple voices that are directed simultaneously at both the Spain of 1952, which witnessed the emergence of this work, and of 2020, as the Museo Reina Sofía presents it for the first time.

In the belief that the museum should foster a learning experience by generating diverse relationships over time and in various contexts, the Collections Department together with Niño de Elche has embarked on the project *Invisible Auto Sacramental:* A Sonic Representation from Val del Omar, a production of a piece by one of the fundamental artists in the collection, José Val del Omar. The museum thus proposes an act of rereading, an experiment in which no specific time is extracted from the past. It is a complex narrative for imagining the future in which ambiguity and experimentation flow between the two artists—working in "excesses" and resisting the temptation to definitively define their times and meanings.



Portrait of Niño de Elche Photograph by Juan Carlos Quindós

The Indisciplinarity of Val del Omar as Semantic Field

Niño de Elche

It is always a rather difficult undertaking to think about the place one occupies—or should occupy—in a museum as a musician, as few musical references have habitually been related to the different spaces forming part of contemporary art, and if there have been any, most were conditioned by the aesthetic concept of the militant label of sound art.

Here and now, thinking a museum from a musical or sound perspective not only means thinking about its architecture, its reverberation, and the power of its structured space to recompose any sound piece that can be exhibited or heard within its walls, but the verb "to think" here also takes on a more active dimension (what else is listening if not active?) to approach everything signified by the whole in a historical, material, and philosophical context.

For an artist, contexts invariably involve enabling frameworks in order to outline semantic fields from which to tackle a series of themes that are, due to their contemporaneity, of particular critical interest. In the case of what concerns us here, the picture is paradoxically delimited by the often indeterminate career of the artist José Val del Omar. It is a visual/sound collage in which we find aesthetic references that might well be related and reconnected to the formalizations proposed over the last ninety years by disciplines as disparate—and, fortunately, increasingly diluted and unlimited—as video installation, musical graphics, concrete music, flamenco, electronic remix, and sound installation, among others.

Lately, I have been letting go of the idea of reading history as an archaeological archive, thus giving myself the chance to uproot myself and move toward attitudes that will help me develop an

artistic practice capable of confronting those material records as evidence of a deformed memory, even one capable of being reinvented or reconstructed. In short, memory and oblivion as a fruitful and productive fiction.

As the thinker Ramón Andrés rightly states in one of his numerous quotable aphorisms, everything we do is *in memoriam*, so the invitation from the Museo Reina Sofía to propose a work that would integrate its collection, and could therefore be exhibited in one of its galleries, made me reflect on which of the discourses generated and developed by the institution gave me the greatest creative space to contribute a personal vision, one which would amplify, complicate, and (why not?) broaden the critical reading of those same discourses.

Since 2014, I have been trying out different approaches to the always unfinished and, by extension, open work of Val del Omar. Most of these approaches were formalized as vocal improvisations inspired by the visual rhythm generated, above all, by his varied and valuable filmic exercises recorded on Super 8. By contrast, and with respect to my own vocal and sonic overflow, my practice consisted of attempts at mimicking Val del Omar's soundtracks with the machinery of my voices, which could be considered a cyborg experience. That is why my first experimental incursions into flamenco and the most contemporary electronic music cannot be understood without the influence of the sound work accomplished by the Granadan artist in his different film projects of the early 1950s.

When I learned from the heirs of Val del Omar's archive that they had worked in collaboration with the Museo Reina Sofía on digitalizing the sound of most of his tapes and reels, I became interested in the possibility of making a recording whose conceptual basis would consist of that warehouse of sounds, and from there connect the figure of José Val del Omar and his whole sound legacy with the musical and artistic practices of our time.

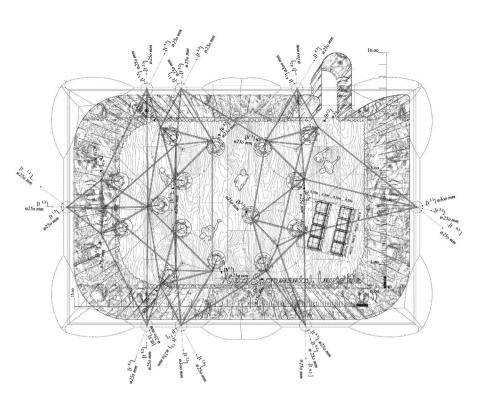


Portrait of Niño de Elche Photograph by Juan Carlos Quindós

From that conviction, and with the collaboration of the producer and composer Miguel Álvarez-Fernández, the idea emerged of approaching such a vast treasury of sound through Val del Omar's unfinished Auto Sacramental Invisible. El mensaje de Granada (Invisible Auto Sacramental: The Message of Granada), a work contained in a series of scripts annotated and revisited by the artist over several years. Thanks to the objectual and architectural creations of Lluís Alexandre Casanovas, the sound engineering of Juan Andrés Beato, and the lighting of Carlos Marquerie, we were able to carry out the complex task of implementing the sound-installation concept—which still receives scant attention within the codes used by today's museums—to which he aspired. Val del Omar's drafts, together with the inclusion of the term "invisible" as a conceptual frame, were the most transgressive part of his sound/aesthetic proposal, and his creative intuition and knowledge offered us various possibilities for responding to a series of architectural and spatial concerns suggested by the artist himself somewhere amid those irregular and suggestive outlines.

Let us recall, as a form of footnote, that until his proposal, the *auto sacramental* had always been thought of and created in terms of the stage, on the basis of a theatrical vision, and never in terms of sound (or the sonorous) as the source and matrix of the piece.

My manner of facing all this rests on the idea of the inevitable dialogue understood as difference. A dialogue where we can observe and understand the distance between the technical and artistic practices of José Val del Omar and those of other artists and events in another space and time. The reading proposed here in the context provided by the status of Val del Omar's *auto sacramental* as a missing link, as a decisive yet enigmatic work within the Granadan artist's production, has thus been developed and extended in a first space of contextualization where, under the curatorship of Lluís Alexandre Casanovas, there is reflection on the social, political, and cultural atmosphere that disturbed and composed the eye and ear of José Val del Omar during the first



two years of his artistic production, and was to accompany him to the end of his days. Due appreciation of the passage of Val del Omar through this world means once more asking ourselves his questions, which equates to continuing to question ourselves on the basis of his experience and his projection.

The Spanish verb partir can mean "to split or cut something into pieces." but it can also mean "to leave" or "to depart." The second definition refers us to a base from which to begin a journey, but it also invites us to break away from that same starting point. Thus whenever I have begun a creative process by approaching a specific artist, I have always been adamant that the specter of the homage should never cease to be the central axis underpinning the discursive form of the development and formalization of the artistic work. Figures like Miguel Hernández, Francis Bacon, Ernesto Cardenal, and Manuel Agujetas, among others, have served me as creative inspiration, as discursive crutches on which to support different artistic yearnings, and also—why not say it?—to take advantage of the media platform they represent to propose spaces for thought on different personal and collective preoccupations, always with a critical and therefore self-critical interest. For this reason, I could not allow my approach to the figure of José Val del Omar to turn into a fetishist prison that would prevent me from broadening, enlarging, and developing new artistic forms, the result of experimental processes fed by a creative spirit akin to Val del Omar's, bearing in mind his revelatory practice in the various fields where his vision had remained relevant despite the passing of the years. Thus my interest in his indisciplinarity in the face of an art and culture in a state of continual crisis.

This cohesive chain allows me to raise topical issues against an *endless* background, and gives me the opportunity to continue to ask questions related to it. These still relevant fields of debate connect with the vindication of flamenco as an elementary expression of popular music; the eternal problem of Spanish

national identity; the positive instrumentalization of the Spanish language as a politico-cultural empire with the capacity to unite different identities and their sensibilities; the necessary return of a cultural revaluation of Spanish folklore seen as a popular example of the ritualization of life: the continuing cultural war inherited from our extremely complex twentieth-century history; the concept of a mysticism in artistic practice that converts it into an art of life: the supernatural: human animality with its intrinsic violence. Although we live in the twenty-first century, that much vaunted era of technology, they also connect with the imagined possibility of an educational technology that might act as a muscle driving the development of a socially and culturally aware society. This possibility is offered by the understanding that the legacy bequeathed to us by José Val del Omar's life and art is a series of works that are constantly waiting to be revisited or intervened in, since they are imperfect, cracked, and even confused (often because of their powerlessness, at other times because of the utopian impossibility of his ideas, and still others because of the dearth of cultural and political contexts favorable to his work. or simply because of his obsessions or aesthetic demands).

Difficulties are posed by communicating a vision full of original nuances, with a new language developed between the grammatical and the artistic, as well as by the challenge of supporting chaos from an elementary coherency. A spirit like Val del Omar's helps us to continue climb up or dive down into the enigmas of creation. If I have believed—and here the resonance and meaning of the verb "to believe" are different from their usual ones—that his footprints are worthy to be trodden in at this very moment, it is because their existence is of importance only when traversed by the light of the other. Not a light that speaks to us of speed and the immediacy of being, no. A light that speaks to us about what illuminates and reflects, like the cinema screen, which is important—as Val del Omar would say—not because it is gazed at or observed by a subject, but because it bathes the other in its grandiose light to make new men whose soul resides in the skin, in the eye, in the ear.





















It's not a concert, it's not a play, it's not a film... What is the *Auto Sacramental Invisible* by José Val del Omar? Preliminary Notes on a Sound Installation

Miguel Álvarez-Fernández

One of the prejudices most deeply rooted in European consciousness since the nineteenth century is the consideration of music as a *temporal* art form. This thus distinguishes it from other artistic practices, in which, according to the same dogma, the *spatial* dimension supposedly predominates.

This unique association between music and time—whose most perverse effect has been to eliminate from our imagination the obvious spatial components of every sound event—is so deeply entrenched in our minds that musicologists and sound theorists have virtually abandoned any hope of even qualifying it.

However, the idea that all music has—or, indeed, *is*—a space (as well as a time) was in fact predominant for centuries. Until the arrival of the terrible and excessively long nineteenth century—in whose sensibility so many of our fellow citizens continue to slumber—and until a thriving bourgeoisie, drunk on colonialism, succeeded in homogenizing listening spaces, these had not yet been standardized and subjected to the rules of "good sound" that for many are still valid. Those spaces maintained their individual, specific, irregular character... and promoted types of music that shared the same attributes, long before anyone had spelled out the term "site-specific."

In other words, people did not listen to music where they were *supposed to*, but where they *could* (in the case of the popular classes) or *wanted to* (in the case of the aristocracy or the clergy, some of whose privileges—in civilized countries, it should be understood—were lost, not entirely coincidentally, at the

threshold of the aforementioned century). By inventing an institution like the concert, it is true, the bourgeois revolutions extended access to certain aesthetic experiences ("democratized" them, in huge inverted commas) for new segments of the population. In retrospect, however, the cost was very high.

The implantation of the notion of the concert as the "ideal" way to relate to music was, undoubtedly, tremendously successful (it is true that everything incorporating the flag of idealism had a great chance of success in the nineteenth century). So much so that it has survived virtually intact until today.

It survives not only in those auditoriums where it is hard to find works, even today, that do not originate in the aforementioned nineteenth century or its adjacent decades (nor is the sclerosis of that precise and endlessly repeated repertoire a coincidence). The social rite of the bourgeois concert, with all the dogmas associated with it (the need for silence, a clearly defined beginning and end, a predictable and often standardized duration, frontal listening, the pastoral performativity of the interpreter, the tendency toward virtuoso performance, the ordered alignment of the listeners so similar to that of workers in factories, soldiers in armies, and children in schools..., and several other contributions from that same tiresome century), was rapidly projected onto the two outstanding cultural practices of the twentieth century, cinema and rock music.

Where the first is concerned, it is worth recalling, albeit in passing, that José Val del Omar should be counted as one of the first artists—and one of the very few filmmakers—to question the unreflecting application of the historical paradigm of the bourgeois concert to the film experience (with his "apanoramic overflow" and his "diaphony"). In general, however, we still go to cinemas with the same silent, static, and contemplative attitude that we learned to develop by listening to Beethoven and his contemporaries.

As for the second practice, if we understand rock (or pop-rock, as some theorists prefer) in a broad sense as the result of the electrification of popular musical forms from blues to reggaeton and from punk to easy listening, we shall have to admit that any potentially subversive character these musical forms might have had was very quickly subjugated by that aesthetic model born with the very foundations of capitalism, the bourgeois concert.²

This is why José Val del Omar's daring *Auto Sacramental Invisible. El mensaje de Granada* (Invisible Auto Sacramental: The Message of Granada) is so valiant. A failed project: that should be the starting point for any analysis of this work. For its first (and only) public performance, fragmentary and tentative, at the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica in Madrid in 1952, it had to be adapted—precisely—to a space designed for concerts, not only from an architectural perspective but also, as we have tried to explain, aesthetically and, by that token, ideologically.

Although the work never fully came into being, we are left with its script, produced from 1949 onward in four successive versions. This, together with some very brief and specific phonograph recordings, has constituted the starting point for what now, some seventy years later, is presented by Niño de Elche at the Museo Reina Sofía.

In the different versions of the script typed up by Val del Omar, there are precise indications on the right-hand side of each page on how each sound was to be projected through one of the fourteen loudspeakers that were to form, in his concept of the work, something like a sphere.

It is important to emphasize that at that moment in history no other artist in the world—of whom we are aware—was operating with such technically complex devices for the diffusion of sound as these. Even more striking is the fact that not until decades later, as we shall see, is anything equivalent to be found with the aesthetic

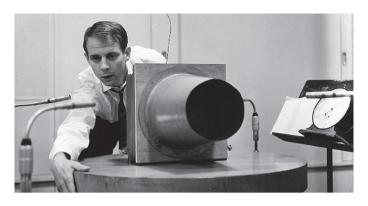


Pierre Schaeffer with the phonogene in his studio, 1951 Photograph by Serge Lido © Institut national de l'audiovisuel categories articulated by Val del Omar in his *Auto Sacramental Invisible*.

Val del Omar certainly never used the expression "sound installation" to refer to his *Auto Sacramental Invisible*. This comes as no surprise when we recall that the first use of the term "installation" for a form of artistic creation is generally associated with the texts written by Dan Flavin around 1967. If we trace the term "sound installation" back to its origins, its earliest use is conventionally attributed to the percussionist and later composer and sound artist Max Neuhaus in 1971.

Beyond these terminological questions—by no means idle, as they reflect changes in ideational modes and categories—the history of musical thought reminds us that the first public presentation of *musique concrète* (that is, the earliest theoretical and artistic productions of Pierre Schaeffer) was broadcast on French public radio, on October 5, 1948, as a Concert de bruits (Concert of Noises). Certainly, other artistic uses of recorded sound can be identified before that date, such as Wochenende (Weekend). a piece produced by the filmmaker Walter Ruttmann already in 1930. It should be stressed at this point, however, that the aesthetic thinking annotated by Val del Omar on his script for the Auto Sacramental Invisible incorporates many of the premises that only since the late 1940s had been defined by Schaeffer. especially those concerning the phenomenology of the sound object. The transformations of the acoustic material that allow reduced listening, that is, to abstract it from conventional forms of signification, are present at many points in Val del Omar's script, just as they also dazzle us—already in their sonorous plenitude—in the film Aquaespejo granadino (Water-Mirror of Granada), made between 1953 and 1955.

Having said all this, in order to situate the contributions of the *Auto Sacramental Invisible* in the proper perspective, it must also be emphasized that the tradition of concrete music has



Karlheinz Stockhausen working on Kontakte, ca. 1959 Archiv der Stockhausen-Stiftung für Musik, Kürten, Germany

maintained, in fact to this very day, stereo as the basis for any possible spatialization of sound. And while the engineer Jacques Poullin devised a primitive quadrophonic system in 1951 for concert performances of the works produced at the Studio d'Essai of Radio France, and the aesthetic heirs of Schaeffer have dedicated themselves since then to the creation of enormous orchestras of loudspeakers (like the Acousmonium, since 1974), all these devices have always been used to multiply paths of diffusion for just two sound channels, but otherwise without questioning at all the traditional concert situation (the invocation of the idea of the orchestra, even one of loudspeakers, does not disguise this aesthetic conservatism).

In this sense, the multichannel compositional approach implicit in the script of the *Auto Sacramental Invisible* may more closely resemble certain aspects of the German tradition of the early years of *elektronische Musik*. Composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen did indeed conceive their works for a precise number of loudspeakers, each of which was to emit a specific content recorded ad hoc on a defined channel of the magnetic tape. He began to do this in 1956 with the masterly *Gesang der Jünglinge* (Song of the Youths), which was initially composed for five

speakers but had to be reduced to a quadrophonic system for its premiere in the auditorium of the WDR broadcasting company in Cologne, whose laboratory produced the piece. Besides the years of difference with Val del Omar's composition, note should be taken of the jump from those four loudspeakers to the fourteen—or more, depending on the version of the script—imagined by Val del Omar for his work (which was to have a duration of sixty minutes, in contrast to the thirteen minutes and fourteen seconds of Stockhausen's piece).

If we want to find a more ambitious multichannel system, we must move ahead to 1958 and the particular context of the World's Fair in Brussels, Among the ephemeral constructions presented there was the Philips Pavilion, the result of a commission offered by the Dutch company to Le Corbusier, who replied, "I will not create a pavilion for you, but an Electronic Poem (Poème électronique) and a vessel containing the poem; light, color image. rhythm, and sound joined together in an organic synthesis." In practice, the person who developed the project was his assistant Iannis Xenakis, who then worked more as an architect than as a composer. Le Corbusier demanded that Edgar Varèse be responsible for the musical composition that was to be broadcast over a system of 325 or 425 loudspeakers (depending on the source consulted), which emitted sounds around the audience that were recorded on three tracks of magnetic tape. The audience took turns visiting the space—on whose inner walls both static and moving images were also projected—and their entrance and exit was accompanied by Concret PH, a brief work by Xenakis that was likewise created expressly for the pavilion.

These last indications on the staggered access of the public to the building, including the hearing of an interlude during the process, confirm that the temporal dimension of this project remained subordinate to the aesthetic premises of the concert, at least with respect to a predetermined beginning and end as well as a linear chronological development between them. The spatial experience



of the *Poème électronique*, however, was not so linear, as audience members could move around during their visit, and could direct both their gaze and their listening at different places—garnering different experiences, to a certain extent distinct and unrepeatable for each attendee.

One can deduce from the script of the *Auto Sacramental Invisible* a situation and a set of aesthetic expectations similar to those just described for the *Poème électronique* by Le Corbusier/Xenakis/ Varèse, even though Val del Omar's system was less ambitious technically (as was the institutional and financial support the artist received) and aesthetically (as theatricality played a key role—perhaps more than musicality—in the Granadan's work).

This is an aspect that, following the previous reflections, deserves to be made explicit. With the sole exception of the multimedia *Poème électronique*, all the other works cited so far as potential (late) counterpoints to the *Auto Sacramental Invisible* are inscribed within the tradition of what the great Carl Dahlhaus called "the idea of absolute music." In other words, they are compositions whose aesthetic value derives from their self-sufficiency as *purely* musical creations, with no interference from visual, literary, or even performative elements.³

From today's perspective, the aesthetic evaluation of a proposal such as that laid down by Val del Omar in the script of his *Auto Sacramental Invisible* has to rest largely on the *impurity* of his intentions. This can be appreciated both in the work's combination of elements of theater, sculpture, and lighting design, and—specifically in the field of sound—in the juxtaposition of "musical" elements (in a traditional sense), noises (with very different degrees of semantic charge), and words (occasionally departing from meaning through repetitions or acoustic transformations that are precisely detailed by Val del Omar).

This last observation obliges any analysis of the work to shift away methodologically from the different European musical traditions mentioned in the previous paragraphs, and suggests rather a connection with the aesthetic universe of John Cage and his transdisciplinary lessons (or "intermedial" lessons, to borrow the expression coined by his disciple Dick Higgins in the mid-1960s).

Besides the evident historical fact that Cage's thinking—so heavily influenced, in this respect, by Duchamp—permitted the beginning of what we today call "sound art," an aesthetic category that, for the reasons given above, now represents a much more productive paradigm than "music" for listening to the *Auto Sacramental Invisible*, future research in this direction might look more deeply, for example, at the connection between Val del Omar's mysticism, already so evident in this early piece, and Cage's relationship with Zen Buddhism (through the teachings of D.T. Suzuki).

Or perhaps, in a sense not unrelated to this, it is worth meditating on the relationship between the type of listening proposed by Val del Omar in his work and those forms—allegedly merely primitive—of relationship with music that were mentioned at the beginning of this article as existing long before the institution of the concert. In this way, perhaps it would be revealed to us even more clearly that in the acute aesthetic consciousness of the Granadan "mechanical-mystic," as in that of his friend and fellow Granadan Federico García Lorca, the ancient, the primitive, and the primeval are by no means opposed to the modern, the avantgarde, and even what is yet to come.

Notes

- We are not only thinking here of the compositions of Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli for the cori spezzati (split choirs), which took advantage at the end of the sixteenth century of the peculiar architecture of Saint Mark's Basilica in Venice. The musical forms emerging from the end of the twelfth century in the context of the school of Notre Dame (Magister Leoninus, Perotinus Magnus, etc.) are hard to dissociate from the cathedral spaces that first heard them reverberate. Not to mention the relationship in the first centuries of our era between the most archaic forms of Hebrew cantillation and the origins of that prehistory of Western music that we would much later call Gregorian chant. The catacombs where the early Christians took refuge to pursue their worship imposed acoustic conditions that undoubtedly determined the form of such chants. In another context, we might also recall the Tafelmusik, or "table music," created specifically to accompany banquets, above all in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although the practice may go back to ancient Rome, to Greece, to the Jewish tradition, and even to the Egyptian civilization. All these musical forms engaged in dialogue with their respective spaces (and times), generating a diversity of approaches to listening that the appearance of the bourgeois concert practically succeeded in eradicating.
- 2 We could say the same of the rave, the most important phenomenon in musical aesthetics of the end of the last century. In a matter of months, raves ceased to be endless multifocal parties held in unpredictable places and based on anonymity (both among the audience and those who limited themselves to the role of DJ, rejecting any association with the role of the "artist"), and became a lamentable imitation of the rock or classical music concert (that is, of the structure of the religious service: brief snippets of transcendence delivered by an identifiable would-be messiah).
- 3 The ideology underlying the integral serialism of the *Gesang der Jünglinge*, a way of thinking that does not differ greatly in this respect from that of Schaeffer and his concrete music, saw a desirable form of emancipation from the need for a performer in what were then the novel possibilities of recorded sound. As regards the presence of text in Stockhausen's composition, it could be argued that the aesthetic program of the work consists precisely of the progressive acoustic disintegration of those words, syllables, and phonemes until they become abstract musical material.

The *Auto Sacramental Invisible* and the Electroacoustic Art of José Val del Omar (1932–52)

Lluís Alexandre Casanovas Blanco

One of the distinctive features in the career of Niño de Elche. who counts among the great modernizers of the contemporary flamenco scene, is his emphasis on the musical and performative traditions of which his art forms part, thus revealing its political and social implications. In this case, the artist turns to the "sound imagery" and electroacoustic production of the artist José Val del Omar, still recognized primarily for his film work despite his pioneering contributions to various fields. Niño de Elche, who had already engaged with Val del Omar's oeuvre on previous occasions, concentrates here on the Auto Sacramental Invisible (Invisible Auto Sacramental), his one work based entirely on sound media, of which only a few fragments were performed in 1952. The Auto represents the culmination of Val del Omar's experiments in electroacoustics—that is, the storage. amplification or transformation, and repetition of sound by electrical means—to which he would dedicate much of the 1940s. and in which he would pose some of the questions that would mark his film production in the subsequent decades.

In this respect, the *Auto* should be contextualized within the introduction of radiophony and phonography, together with the role played by active listening in the 1940s with the consolidation in Spain of media dedicated to propaganda and mass communication. Adapting a Baroque theatrical genre, this piece focuses on the vicissitudes of a modern culture characterized by mass media. These media, which Val del Omar represents as the biblical Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, can be manipulated with different objectives that the artist judges from a moral point of view—a diatribe that is finally resolved with a nostalgic vindication of an ideal past without these media, of

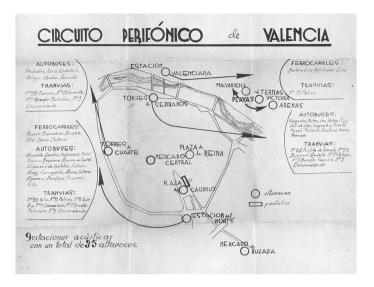
the Granada of his childhood. For Val del Omar, perception, and in this case listening, is not something intrinsic to the spectator's body, but the product of a historical juncture and the evolution of technologies that control the body. Aligned with the avantgardes, in his writings Val del Omar would praise the ability of media such as film or, in this case, radio or the phonograph to adapt itself to the psychological and perceptive capacities of contemporary spectators, a potential that, at the same time, can also be used to psychologically manipulate them converting them into consumers or mere members of the masses.

From the beginning of his career in Madrid in the 1930s, Val del Omar was already interested in the intellectual and artistic possibilities of electroacoustics. During the Second Republic, access to sound recording technologies like the phonograph revolutionized both the diffusion of and experimentation with music and the voice. In 1931, the philologist Tomás Navarro Tomás created the Archivo de la Palabra (Archive of the Word), modeled on similar projects around Europe, whose goal was to record and catalogue speech, music, and traditional ballads in order to formalize the systematic study of the evolution of spoken Spanish. Moreover, the popularization of the phonograph coincided with the "popular education" project of the Second Republic, one of whose organizations, the Misiones Pedagógicas (Pedagogical Missions), had a "music service" that supplied to the villages they visited a phonograph along with several records for interchanging with neighboring localities.² Val del Omar worked with the Misjones as a cinema technician and director of the Museo del Pueblo (Museum of the People) between 1932 and 1934.

The start of the Spanish Civil War consolidated electroacoustics and radiophony as instruments of political propaganda in a process analogous to that which had accelerated in other European countries with the outbreak of World War II. The storage, amplification, repetition, and diffusion of the voice

was a key means of persuading people to embrace or reject certain ideologies. Both sides were aware of the power of the spoken word, as we can appreciate from Gonzalo Queipo de Llano's famous speeches on Radio Sevilla, the founding of Radio Nacional de España in Salamanca by José Millán Astray, and the introduction of loudspeakers to the battlefield by both sides as a means of convincing the enemy to surrender. Not surprisingly, the consolidation of electroacoustics has been identified as the origin of the reorganization of the spectacle as an instrument of power, an origin inseparable, in turn, from the rise of totalitarianism.³

After the war, sound played a key role in the subjugation of the population by Franco's regime. Among the various initiatives adopted with a view to gaining this control, one worth highlighting is the Circuito Perifónico de Valencia (Periphonic Circuit of Valencia), an urban radiophonic network devised by Val de Omar in 1939 to broadcast political propaganda and commercial advertising at strategic points in the city. "Now that the war is over." says one of the promotional leaflets for the Circuito, "the loudspeakers ... withdraw to the city, but not to disintegrate and stain their purity—won through exposure to danger and the elements—with the shrill and smoke-ridden acetylene atmosphere of street parties, but to line up like soldiers, ordered and disciplined, within the tight ranks of the instruments that are cooperating in national reconstruction."4 Unlike visual propaganda, which requires the attention of the citizen, radio demonstrates a great capacity to permeate a passive audience. As the leaflet says, the Circuito "takes advantage of the wandering attention of passers by, unknowingly infiltrating them with new ideas." It was precisely the technical crew responsible for the Circuito who took charge of what was possibly the most sophisticated electroacoustic installation in Spain until then, the system set up for the Falangist rally in Valencia in April 1940. This event has been seen by various historians as the closest thing in postwar Spain to the large fascist rallies in Germany and Italy.6



José Val del Omar (in collaboration with Francisco Otero and the brothers Víctor and José López Ruiz), Circuito Perifónico de Valencia (Periphonic Circuit of Valencia), 1940 José Val del Omar Archive, Library and Documentation Centre, Museo Reina Sofía © Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga

Influenced by the Archivo de la Palabra, in 1942 Val del Omar founded the Corporación del Fonema Hispánico (Corporation of the Hispanic Phoneme). This was a service based on a photoelectric recording technique borrowed from cinema that, according to the artist, permitted the compilation of samples of Spanish speech more economically and efficiently than with previous systems. In the written program for the project, Val del Omar explained that because "our culture and memory are preferentially visual," new instruments like "the phonograph and the radio, bringing us novelty, the still little considered sensation of the sound *document* in the world—with an acoustics that incites us to feel space and define movement—stimulates us to leap irrevocably along the reflex arc, to memory and to visual representation." In other words, the introduction of the "sound

document," its electrical registration, triggers hitherto unknown perceptive processes in a viewer accustomed to the visual codes of spectacle, replacing the flatness of images with new spatiotactile sensations. According to Val del Omar, in the face of the "host of technical possibilities" developed by the industries of the English-speaking world, Spain and the Castilian language—"conduit of a mystical code"—presents an alternative to the audiovisual spectacle with purely commercial ends.9"

During the 1950s, the phonographic and film industries investigated the possibilities of the spatialization of electroacoustic sound, concentrating mainly on binaural sound or stereophonics. Understood as better adapted to the distribution of our ears on our left and right sides, its application was tested in the cinema to generate an illusionistic representation of the space shown in the image on the screen. Although stereophonic sound did not come into general use until the early 1950s, Hollywood experimented with binaural sound in films like Disney's Fantasia (1940), with speakers in the center and to the right and left of the screen. In 1945. Val del Omar challenged these initiatives by patenting his "diaphony," a system whereby a second channel at the back of the theater, behind the spectator, introduced sounds unrelated to the onscreen source. In line with avant-garde cinema, Val del Omar was trying to explore how the disjunction between image and sound activated perceptual processes in the spectator's unconscious. The artist aligned diaphony with the psychophysical models of the European aesthetic tradition, opposing it to the "primary, sensory, physical" experience of stereophony, which he associated with the United States.10

The consolidation of new radio formats in the second half of the 1940s, particularly the radiophonic novel and the radio drama, led to increasing experimentation with the voice, both from a dramatic point of view and from that of its electroacoustic exploitation with artistic objectives. In this context, Val del

E S P A N A necesitaba

- : disponer de un instrumental técnico y de gran latitud
- : un sensibilizador capaz de recrear poéticamente todos los fonogramas que le vinieran del mundo hispánto para su esquema, difusión, y archivo.

ais 1949

eguipo Altegracia



José Val del Omar, Collage, 1949 José Val del Omar Archive, Library and Documentation Centre, Museo Reina Sofía © Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga Omar joined Radio Nacional de España as a technician in 1946. There the artist founded the Laboratorio de Electroacústica Experimental (Experimental Electroacoustics Laboratory) of the Directorate General of Broadcasting, where he investigated possible alterations of recorded sound in order to give it spatial characteristics such as echo or reverberation.¹¹

From 1948, Val del Omar continued with his electroacoustic experiments when he joined the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica (Institute of Hispanic Culture) as an audiovisual technician. His arrival there coincided with the appearance in Spain of the tape recorder, an instrument that made it easier to store and broadcast prerecorded sound. Founded in 1945, the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica sought to respond to the general isolation of Franco's regime after the defeat of the Axis powers by reestablishing cultural and political ties with the former Spanish colonies in Latin America and the Philippines. The institution gave a privileged role to the common use of the Spanish language, setting up analogous centers where it could organize the circulation of publications and tape recordings between Spain and its former colonies.

Upon his arrival at the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, Val del Omar insisted to its director, Alfredo Sánchez Bella, on the need to produce certain "Messages of Hispanic Civil Religiosity." Over the subsequent years, the artist experimented with the theatrical form of the *auto sacramental*, a dramatic genre specific to the Spanish Counter-Reformation, traditionally performed at Corpus Christi and based on the use of allegories. Employed as an educational tool to vindicate strict Catholic tradition in the face of the rise of Protestantism, its marked propagandistic character and flashy visuals clashed with the spread of Enlightenment ideas at the end of the eighteenth century, resulting in its prohibition. Revived in the early twentieth century, the *auto* was secularized by the avant-garde movements, the most celebrated example being the 1932 staging

	EL MENSAJE DE GRA	N A D A
- 1 > m a	Or fano Valuer troi peter	canal: A altavoz: 3
2 y m2.	Variación de la luz en la sala. Al fondo, se ilumina una lámpa- ra votiva.	[A B]
<u>3</u> ≯m.€.	Mombre, enérgicor "Del principio al fin"	canales: A - B altavoces: 4 a 3
**i	Voces resonantes, como un true- no, envolventes:	canales: A - B
5	Timbalas, rítmicas, obsesivas, hasta el n# 9.	canales: AB A
6 x1	Hombre (2*), dogmático: "/Alégrate de tu cansancio/"	canales: A
- 7 ×1	Hombre anterior, más sexual:	canales: A

José Val del Omar, *Auto Sacramental Invisible. El mensaje de Granada* (Invisible Auto Sacramental: The Message of Granada), script, February 1951

José Val del Omar Archive, Library and Documentation Centre, Museo Reina Sofía

José Val del Omar Archive, Library and Documentation Centre, Museo Reina Sofía © Archivo María José Val del Omar & Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga

canales: A Hombre anterior, con voz sexual, femenina, silbante como el de la serpiente: "/Alégrate del dolor y del plaaltavoces: 3 . 9. ~ canales: A Hombre anterior, muy silbante: "/Alégrate de poder ser Dios/" altavoces: 3 - 10. -canales: A - B H ombre anterior, silbante, con ecos, modulando en crescendo: al timpo elspisaciones en "Dios altavoz: 5 recuerdos poder altavoz: 3 ser altavoz: 6 - respinaciones Dios altavoz: 4 Moder altavoz: 5 poder altavoz: 6 Dia girando vertiginosamente.

A partir del primer 'ser', empiezan a fundirse respiraciones que van acelerándose. 11. - Continuación de canales: A - B Respiraciones aceleradas, de un hombre y de una mujer, de nuestros primeros padres. مانكم Respiraciones prolongadas, horizon-tales, Aspiraciones que silban has-ta un plano de aproximación máxima altavoces: 4 5 en que el silbido aspirante sexual 3 prolongado, degenera en soplo de fuego que nos ciege, quema y corta a nuestro alrededor por la cintura, confundiéndose con un desgarro del mundo todo que nos rodes y que en este instante se abre en sus entra-fas, dejando caer a la materia y e-levarse el espíritu.

Tímbalas prolongadas, rítmicas

Pitido ininterrumpido, enervante.

canales: B - A

altavozes: 7

altavoz: 2

of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's *La vida es sueño (Life Is a Dream*, 1635), directed by Federico García Lorca and performed by his company, La Barraca. After the civil war, Franco's regime appropriated the genre, restoring its original religious sense and using it to extol the culture of the Golden Age. ¹⁴ Val del Omar transgressed this format to convert it into an "invisible," primarily sound work.

The *Auto* started to take shape during a visit by Val del Omar to his native Granada in 1949. The artist started drafting the definitive version in February 1951, had finished it by September that year, ¹⁵ and in May 1952 he presented fragments of the *Auto Sacramental Invisible*, subtitled *El mensaje de Granada* (The Message of Granada), at the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, together with some of his other audiovisual pieces. ¹⁶ Although Val del Omar would not continue in this direction, the *Auto Sacramental Invisible* should be understood as an ambitious, pioneering intervention to establish electroacoustics as a means of artistic expression.

Votive Loudspeakers and Nuclear Explosions

Niño de Elche's "sound performance" of the *Auto* extricates—from a very specific historical and intellectual substratum—highly relevant issues about identity and of a spiritual and intellectual nature that also run through his own work as a musician and performance artist. For this reason, his "sound performance" is based on a comparative analysis of the four existing versions of the script, all dated February 1951, which speak of a totally dark auditorium lit here and there by votive lamps, and a total of fourteen audio channels. ¹⁷ In Niño de Elche's piece, phantasmagorical sounds move across the vestiges of an almost-dark auditorium. This set design approaches different historical moments simultaneously. On the one hand, it recreates the presentation of the *Auto* at the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica

in May 1952. On the other, the space appeals in a more abstract way to the techno-ritual—or "mechanical-mystical"—imagery developed by Val del Omar in the 1940s and 1950s, an imagery at times attuned to, at others in complicity with, the reactionary official culture of the time.

Upon entering the installation, the visitor will see a wire structure outlined against the characteristic vaulting of the Sabatini Building. It contains tangles of cables, spotlights, and light bulbs plugged into power strips and sockets. Hanging from this infrastructure are fourteen loudspeakers whose horns point challengingly at the visitor, as did the militarized loudspeakers of the radio program La Voz del Frente or the Circuito Perifónico. Embellished with fairground lights typical, as the critic Juan Eduardo Cirlot pointed out, of entertainment in postwar Spain, the loudspeakers become votive lamps. This assembly of electrical, audio, and lighting components refers back to the places where Val del Omar worked at different times in his career, each one halfway between a scientific laboratory and a mechanical workshop. 18 In the context of the avant-garde movements, facilities of this kind not only became spaces for artistic experimentation but also places for imagining the psycho-physiological transformation of the spectator. It is no wonder that the journalist Luis T. Melgar compared one of these laboratories to the "cabinet of Doctor Caligari," 19

The perimeter of the space is covered by a stage curtain similar to the one installed to improve the acoustics of the auditorium at the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica. Created specially for Niño de Elche's sound installation, this curtain features a pattern whose legibility varies according to the movement, perspective, and attention of the viewer. Its design illustrates the life/death dialectic present in the *Auto* by using some of the imagery Val del Omar describes in his scripts. On the one hand, the curtain starts with an allusion to the species that inhabit the Generalife in Granada, obsessively pictured by Val del Omar in many of

his films. ²⁰ As it rises, this "natural history" of the Alhambra dissolves into abstract textures that allude to another of the Auto's concerns. The textures at the top of the curtain come from high-speed photographs taken by the Los Alamos National Laboratory milliseconds before the first nuclear tests were carried out in the desert of New Mexico in 1945. These images represent the threatened *destruction* of this "natural history" by the development of atomic energy after World War II. For Val del Omar, the new advances in nuclear science meant a paradigm change destined to revolutionize thought and aesthetics. As he wrote in 1952, "it is about time this incipient nuclear technology afforded us with a broad physical base for our thinking, provided us with an expansive reasoning."21 The *Auto* inaugurates the research that seeks to identify the right aesthetic for this new era. In Niño de Elche's installation, the curtain acquires an ambivalent significance. On the one hand, the overall effect recalls the tapestries, thick drapes, and murals that were favored by Franco's regime in some of its first official interior designs, where they were used for their decidedly antimodern character. 22 On the other hand, we must not forget that the use of such drapery in the 1940s and 1950s, when many venues were converted into cinemas, was a response to acoustic requirements determined by the modern functionalist architectural discourse.

Ultimately, the scenography of Niño de Elche's piece explores spatially the different tensions present in Val del Omar's work—the dichotomies of modernity/anti-modernity, control/emancipation, power/counter-power, official culture/popular culture—while reviewing their relevance in the context of today's challenges to the globalization of culture. With his sound performance based on Val del Omar, Niño de Elche not only offers the visitor a first encounter with this artist's little-known audio production but also, as in his previous work, lays bare the political implications of what we listen to and how we listen to it.

Notes

- 1 In this sense, Val del Omar's work illustrates processes like those analyzed by the art historian Jonathan Crary, who explores the modern construction of visual perception and attention as a biopolitical mechanism of control. See Jonathan Crary, Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).
- 2 The director of this service, the musicologist Eduardo Martínez Torner, also worked as a researcher on the Archivo de la Palabra, taking advantage of some of his travels with the Misiones Pedagógicas to record the speech and ballads of these villages.
- 3 This convergence has been pointed out by various authors, among them the philosophers of the Frankfurt School and the French philosopher and filmmaker Guy Debord.
- 4 José Val del Omar et al., Circuito
 Perifónico. Ventana Cinegráfica. Falla
 Ambulante. Radio Mediterráneo.
 Creaciones Movísono (Valencia: La
 Semana Gráfica, 1940), n.p. José
 Val del Omar Archive, Library and
 Documentation Centre, Museo Reina
 Sofía
- 5 Ibid. Val del Omar reflects on the problematics of his political activity in a later writing, "El Camino de la Deformación," n.d. José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Reina Sofía.
- 6 "As a demonstrative example of the technical capacity of the Circuito, we have the sound-amplifier installation verified in Valencia on the occasion of the great provincial rally of the Falange on April 21 of this year. / It had forty-five strategically distributed focal points of sound. It

- employed more than fifteen kilometers of wire, forty-five loudspeakers, and a set of amplifiers with a total output of 600 watts." In Val del Omar et al., *Circuito Perifónico*, n.p. For a description of this rally, see Ismael Saz Campos, *España contra España*. Los nacionalismos franquistas (Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2003), 13–34.
- 7 In a text written in the 1980s, Val del Omar insisted on the importance of the Archivo de la Palabra for the formulation of the Corporación del Fonema Hispánico. José Val del Omar, "Sobre la Corporación del Fonema Hispánico a los 38 años de proponerla," n.d., n.p. José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Reina Sofía.
- 8 Ibid., 14.
- 9 Ibid., 12.
- 10 José Val del Omar, "La diafonía es un nuevo sistema" (1944), 1. José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Reina Sofía.
- 11 Among other initiatives at Radio Nacional de España, Val de Omar is credited with the recording of various advertisements, the initiation of the "first historical archive on photoelectric tapes," and the introduction of the "first Spanish system of reverberations and echoes." José Val del Omar, "Currículums y listados de trabajo. Listado de trabajos 2." José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Reina Sofía.
- 12 José Val del Omar, letter to Alfredo Sánchez Bella, Madrid, September 24, 1951. José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Beina Sofía.
- 13 In the use made of allegory in the *auto* sacramental, Walter Benjamin saw the possibility of a new non-realist art, an

- alternative modernism to that proposed by the nineteenth-century Symbolists. See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998).
- 14 In any case, as the historian Carey Kasten has pointed out, the reappropriation of the *auto sacramental* by Franco's regime maintains some of the aesthetic and conceptual modernizing introduced to the genre by avant-garde artists during the Second Republic. See Carey Kasten, *The Cultural Politics of Twentieth-Century Spanish Theater: Representing the Auto Sacramental* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press, 2012), 11–68.
- 15 In all, there are four versions of the script of the *Auto Sacramental Invisible*, currently deposited in the José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Reina Sofía.
- 16 The program also included a screening of *Liberación de Valencia* (Liberation of Valencia), a documentary on the taking of Valencia by the National troops that was filmed by Val del Omar in 1939, and a sample of programs on Latin America made with the Diamagneto, an invention of Val del Omar's that synchronized slide projections and sound.
- 17 Val del Omar explained after the event that the script of the *Auto* included "instructions for lights, smells, and flames," but there is no indication of the sort in the scripts that have been preserved. José Val del Omar, "Currículums y listados de trabajo. Currículum 1," 3. José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Reina Sofía.
- 18 They are as follows: the Laboratorio de Electroacústica Experimental, which the filmmaker claimed to have founded at Radio Nacional de España in 1949 (and of which no photograph exists); the Laboratorio Audiovisual (Audiovisual

- Laboratory) of the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica, which Val del Omar set up in 1953: the basement used as a film set. during the shooting of Fuego en Castilla (Fire in Castile) at the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid in 1959: the illfated laboratory of the Investigaciones v Experiencias (Research and Experiments) section of the Escuela Oficial de Cinematografía (Official Cinematography School) in Madrid during the 1960s; and the grand synthesis of all these spaces, the celebrated laboratory PLAT (Picto-Lumínica-Audio-Táctil), where the filmmaker spent the last years of his life in seclusion.
- 19 Luis T. Melgar, "He vivido 15 días en el gabinete del Dr. Caligari," Film Ideal, no. 19 (May 1958), reproduced in Val del Omar: sin fin, ed. Gonzalo Sáenz de Buruaga and María José Val del Omar (Granada: Diputación de Granada, 1992), 183.
- 20 There are representations of animals like the hoopoe, the kestrel, the frog, the turtle, and the butterfly; vegetables like the pomegranate, the iris, the rose bush, the lemon tree, and the orange tree; and fungi like the parasol mushroom. Many of these species appear in Val del Omar's films centered on Granada and the Alhambra, such as Vibración de Granada (1934–35), Aguaespejo granadino (1953–55)—where turtles feature in numerous scenes—or Variaciones sobre una Granada (ca. 1979).
- 21 José Val del Omar, "Que estoy soñando," (1952), n.p. José Val del Omar Archive, Museo Reina Sofía
- 22 On this penchant for "old-style lordliness" among the bourgeoisie of the 1940s, see Alexandre Cirici, *La estética del franquismo* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1977), 148.

PROJECT

Niño de Elche

TFAM

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Lluís Alexandre Casanovas Blanco: Historical contextualization, script, and architectural design

Carlos Marquerie and David

Benito: Lighting

Juan Andrés Beato: Sound

engineering

ARCHIVO JOSÉ VAL DEL OMAR

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First page Curtain for *Invisible Auto Sacramental* by Lluís Alexandre Casanovas Blanco with Matteo Caro and Luis Lecea Photograph by Juan Carlos Quindós

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