

Room/Noise:

The Modern West and the Lo-Fi Lens

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Spring 2024

You look upon the horizon at sundown and see nothing but a 50/50 split of the land and the sky; grass moves like a river, pieces of derelict machinery stand at attention to the continually unfolding orange of the bowl shaped heavens; the sun is split in half, then in a third, all stands still; when it finally submerges below the rich, dark blue blanket of land leaving the air colder and the sky a slight green, then blue, then black; you turn and head back inside; you walk back into the house, visible in the staining blue of the early dusk; you pull the metal cord upon the only bulb, pull down the curtains on all sides of the bungalow, for the light leaves you visible to the outside world in 360°; you lay down on your thin mattress, upon your thin rusting metal bed frame and listen to the wind whirl outside in the quickly changing temperature; bugs are scarce but not silent, crickets chirp occasionally amongst the whispering chorus of frogs; you become deeply aware of your body, your surroundings and how you belong in them; a body on a bed in a landscape blanketed in the never ending, never stagnant sky.

This is what the southwest does, makes one aware of their body, a type of permanent self consciousness. A complete understanding that there is a bodily experience to existing that cannot be replicated through technologies.

The idea of Lo-Fi comes naturally to those that reside or grew up being familiar with the common aesthetics of the Southwest. Time and nature are not kind here, this is similar to the current discourses revolving around the lo-fi and its origins, for both regard themselves with the disintegration and the patina of time.

The term Lo-Fi in many ways sticks most easily to practices that depend upon dissemination through technological reproductions. This is said with music primarily as Adam Harper's *Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse* discusses. Within this article I will primarily be focusing on the areas of recording described in the section "sense of room" within

the recordings of the musician Jandek.¹ Described as a “paranoid compression... that makes it feel a little bit claustrophobic.” The space in which it is recorded functions in tandem with the compressive quality of the recording. I will then compare this to the chapter of *In Ruins* by Christopher Woodward entitled *A Perverse Pleasure* in which Woodward writes in the first person a suite of specific interactions with sets of ruins in Italy. This type of writing lends itself outside of an academic insight and to an *affect* that can be more directly inflicted upon the reader through the first person point of view. I will then with the aid of these two formats of writing and analysis construct an in-depth speculation upon the photographic work of Christopher Wool and attempt to reverse engineer the concept of Lo-Fi to argue that Wool is in fact one of the few Lo-Fi painters to exist.

Part 1: Room

The house in which Jandek recorded his music is not known specifically. The acoustics of the space make it seem to be an abandoned building on the edge of a derelict cotton field, flanked on both sides by marshland, not another human for at least fifty miles. When thinking about Jandek’s house, or Jandek’s room, I get the same uneasy feeling from when as a child I first watched the exterior shot of Courage the Cowardly Dog’s home in the countryside. The twanging of the out of tune guitar lushly seeps into the rotting peeling beadboard and bare mattress.

¹Adam Harper, *Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse* (Oxford: Warham College, March 2014) , p. 218.



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While there is little known about the actual room in which Jandek created his dystopian songs, it is known that it was based somewhere outside of Houston, Texas. This very sparse knowledge tinges the music with a certain saudade, a certain dense humidity of the gulf coast. The mystery around Jandek is not a novel concept when tied to an artist of any kind from the southwest, think of the lone genius, strumming their guitar in complete isolation, on a porch surrounded for hundreds of miles with nothing but dust and rotting fences. It is from this area of thought that Jandek mined his persona; the elegance of Lo-Fi gets a whole new meaning when put through the ringer of the modern Southwest, and it is through this in which the product, that echoey out of tune sound, gets its certain cerebral emotional heft.

In the documentary *Jandek on Corwood* there are multiple facsimiles of the house in which Jandek resided and recorded. These recreations of the environment become incredibly

²Courage the Cowardly Dog, Cartoon Network, 1999.

significant to the sound that is heard in *Naked in the Afternoon* alongside all other recordings of Jandek.

Harper describes in his thesis the reliance of the discourse regarding Jandek relying on the fact that he was in a *room*. This reliance on cramped quarters becomes even more significant in contrast to the sprawling landscape found just through the walls; it is through this contrast that Jandek's oeuvre, alongside all other art made in the southwest, gains a psycho-spiritual weight. He might be singing a meandering narrative about clothing and a city, but through this eeking recording it gains momentum, Jandek must be withholding some secret fable in reference to the universe, but why is he not telling us it?

The home recording set up of Jandek does not hold a similar directness as that of say Daniel Johnston; in which the mediation of the medium becomes the most efficient way that Johnston can communicate, indicating an earnest and eager desire to be heard. Jandek's recordings are brief glimpses of a ghost, cryptic messages through an oracle of sorts. This is also attributed, as Harper suggests, to the album covers of Jandek's in which "sparsely furnished and often darkened interiors"³ decorate the sleeves of a record that is equalling as sparse. The photo on the cover of Jandek's 1983 album *The Rocks Crumble* is taken with a camera that holds the same type and amount of grain as his tape recorder. The picture is backlit and shaky with its main figure, a drum set, creeping in front of a gauzy spectral curtain. The door is old and appears to be solid wood, the floor is completely non-descript and lends itself to be more of a void than a carpet.

³ Harper, p. 222



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Jandek is a builder of decay. Creating a degraded landscape; working like rust on a windmill, Jandek guides the natural ruin of the recording formats he uses in service of a more complete portrait of not only himself, but of the underbelly of the southwest.

Part 2: Degradation

Chapter two of Christopher Woodward's book *In Ruins* speaks in a searching syllogistic monologue; rounding corners of his own experience like wandering through an ancient city. This

⁴Jandek, *The Rocks Crumble*, 1983.

first person perspective works similarly to auto-theory in which the writer inserts their own lived experiences to pedal in tandem with their theoretical and academic insights. This I believe to be the only way to address the lo-fi, or its affective repercussions. Woodward's recounting of "break[ing] ice on the cattle trough with a puerile clattering of sticks and stones"⁵ brings to the reader an instance that can only be recounted through poetic mediums. This can also be said of the lo-fi tendency within experiencing art forms of any kind. What is it about this experience of nostalgic romanticism that evenly draws human interest? What is it about this writing style in reference to the historical precedents to lo-fi that works so effectively?

Throughout the rest of the narrative of *A Perverse Pleasure* the reader gets drawn closer to Woodward as an author and an individual, one sees him no longer as a stuffy intellectual, but clearly gazes through the tulle curtain of professionalism to see his honest interest in ruins. The recounting of travel, listening to traffic, partying with friends is juxtaposed with not only the format and content of the book itself, but with the content and form of the chapter, all the while—at least in the edition I was reading—the story being printed upon a manila slightly textured paper with a cover finish that seems only to be saved by academic presses for books that go straight to paperback. This praxis of theoretical research brings the grist to the mill for lo-fi, the cow to market; or any other types of outdated idiom that convey a larger point and are still used in our modern neoliberal world. I should note too that while writing this paper I referencing the photocopied edition of this paper, therefore referencing a reference that is referencing a ruin.

This elongated translation of medium, this derivation of original meaning for the sake of dissemination grants the reader further information into the affective qualities of what lo-fi is and can be. This, similar to Jandek's choppy melancholic static, says more about, not only the creator

⁵Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (New York: Chateau & Windus, 2001), p. 35.

and disseminator, but of the greater society, for we all play a part in the degradation of materials, and— as Woodward would say— is indeed a perverse pleasure.

While Italy— where Christopher Woodward largely places *In Ruins*— contains many similarities within popular culture to the American Southwest (think spaghetti westerns), there is a distinct difference in their appreciation and relationship to ruins, with similar results. The southwest relies on only three decades of cowboy adventure to dog ear an entire culture, Italy is resting on seemingly endless ruin. The nostalgia, I would argue, of the southwest for the cowboy years is much larger than that of Italy for the distant past. This I believe is due to its abbreviation. Western expansion was furious and unrelenting, until it reached its climax leaving in its dust endless jungle gyms of rusting oil derricks and machinery.

The recounting of the near past is what differentiates lo-fi from saudade, unplaceable yearning.

Part 3: Noise

This pseudo conservational tendency within the producer— writing alla Woodard, recording alla Jandek— this inefficient way of purveying a substance for the sake of translating a feeling is core to lo-fi. Where then does painting reside within this area of aesthetic study? For painting in all forms— in most cases— takes center stage in the discourse of aesthetics. Where then has the poster child gone in a post Benjamin world of reproducibility? All roads, in this case, lead back to Christopher Wool.

Mostly known for his now lobby art tinged text paintings, Christopher Wool primarily works abstractly in sculpture and paint. He then traces the progression of these works through photography, working primarily in black and white and polaroids, two outmoded technologies

for conservation. The work that I will be primarily focusing on will be the polaroids of large scale abstract works on canvas executed from 1999-2001 alongside recent photographs of Wool's of unpaved roadways in his adopted home of far West Texas.

The works themselves are sideways polaroids of works in progress, like photographing runway models to see how they appear in a magazine. However within Wool's practice the work becomes almost indistinguishable; glares obliterate whole regions of the composition, the exposure is either over or under exposed, the white balance completely yellowed. Wool questions what painting dissemination can be in a world where the vast majority of art seen is through photographic representations of the work.

These polaroids grasp something much larger than simply the composition, rather— I would argue— that they become closer akin to Wool's practice than the paintings themselves; the disintegration of the strength of painting, the undermining of abstraction as a gesture. The paintings themselves (a hilarious phrase to use in a paper that can only allude to what a physical thing can be through photographic or linguistic simplification) are made through various silkscreening and gestural moves, complicating the artistic hand to the point of absentee authorship.

It is useful to note that when speaking about Wool's photographs that they are for the most part seen only in artist book reproductions of his own work that Wool himself plays a huge part in organizing. Similar to Liz Phair, Wool goes to extreme lengths to ensure the proper shoddy dissemination of his work for the sake of the continual regeneration of the lo-fi as a place and a feeling.



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In 2007 Christopher Wool moved with his wife— the incredible painter Charline von Heyl— to the small West Texas town of Marfa, Texas⁷. Both inhabiting derelict cavernous studios, Wool started photographing the surroundings of his home and studio culminating in the artist book entitled *WESTTEXASPSYCHOSCULPTURE*. Lo-fi reigns supreme in these images akin to the nature of the earlier photography, glimmer and obliteration give way for more direct illustrations of ruin, repair and an unforgiving almost martian landscape. The lo-fi within Wool’s work finds its earnest counter.

⁶ Christopher Wool, *Secession* (Cologne: Erste, 2001), p. 4-5.

⁷ Bollen, Christopher, *Christopher Wool in the Studio: The Iconic Artist on His Ambitious New Directions*, W Magazine, 2018



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Defined in its sense of voyeurism, Wool— who was born and raised in Chicago— photographs his seemingly first interactions with the West, like a lone alien settler harvesting information about his new home. His next photographic body of work began to focus its frame down upon unpaved roadways. Everything in its frame becomes in focus, the textured ground functions as teeth of a canvas, the rough veneer of a collapsing building, a comforting static. I argue that these photos of roads, while only sharing the utensil with lo-fi mediums, are the culmination of an artistic career concerned with lo-fi aesthetics, for everything is left behind other than the formal qualities inherent to the end goal. Depth is flattened for the sake of clarity, however Wool’s brand of clarity is closer to television static than real estate photography. Texture becomes noise.

⁸ Christopher Wool, *WESTTEXASPSYCHOSCULPTURE* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2017).



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The qualities of the lo-fi are intrinsic to encountering the American Southwest. This is derived from its shallow history and its unforgiving landscape, its earnest human trial and error and the conquest of an alien land. This settler perspective is deeply problematic yet laced with hope and yearning, a nostalgia for a time of new opportunity where the only way in which this new frontier, this new psychological spiritual state could be directly cataloged is through scratchy handmade means. Directly recalling the rough landscape and ruinous rusted ironwork as well as alluding to grander conceptions of spiritual states within an imperfect modern world pushed past its limit, Jandek may offer oracular pseudo-serious folkloric impressions of life within a stale confined room, Woodward of a past far removed that can still smolder unrelenting power in its decay and Wool within his personless still encounters with a washed out West. These three authors forge a path forward for the lo-fi and its cul-de-sac.

⁹ Christopher Wool, *Road*, 2018.