

# MUSIC AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

22.09.2023–10.03.2024



CARLES  
CONGOST  
AND JEREMY  
DELLER

## MUSIC AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Tolo Cañellas

Music, that universal language that unites us all, without distinctions of any kind, is the common thread of this exhibition in which we immerse ourselves in a two-way connection/conversation between Carles Congost and Jeremy Deller, two artists who have never met each other personally but whose work has a lot in common. Among other elements, they both talk about politics based on and through the history of dance music and club culture. Thus, two key works in their careers will be shown as a nexus: *Abans de la casa / Un biopic inestable a través del sonido Sabadell* [Before House / An Unstable Biopic via the Sabadell Sound] (2015), a sort of abstract documentary by Congost with contributions from personalities such as Àngel Casas and Eduard Escoffet, among others, and *Everybody in the Place: An Incomplete History of Britain 1984–1992* (2018), a masterclass Deller himself taught to a group of British A-level students, many of them from migrant backgrounds, featuring a vast selection of archival footage from the BBC. With these two video pieces as a starting point, the exhibition expands throughout the space with works on paper that include silkscreen prints, posters and photographs, as well as sculptural pieces and works in other formats, in some cases related to the films, but not necessarily, some corresponding to different periods of their careers and others made expressly for the exhibition.

On the one hand, Congost is interested in the Sabadell sound as a symptom of an era, of a certain cultural, economic and political conjuncture. With this idea in mind, he develops a highly fragmented script that operates based on that which is symbolic, the purpose being

Carles Congost, *HITS* (demo), 2018. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist

to generate associative thinking and allow the story to be told in a different way. The film offers a subjective, poetic and, at the same time, critical look at the cultural aspirations of Catalan society during a period when the neoliberal theories imposed by Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States permeated every aspect of society, culture and the economy. At one point, Congost even makes use of Jeremy Deller's iconic and historic piece *The History of the World* (1996), in a nod to him and his work. Said piece is a diagram that explains the evolution of the different musical styles and trends that appear in his video, related, in Congost's case, to Italo disco. On the other hand, Deller carries out an analysis of social (r)evolution in the UK between 1984 and 1992, linked to the emergence and explosion of (illegal) raves, techno and acid house as a reaction to a set of deep fissures that emerged in British culture and society, and which spread from the heart of the city to the most isolated rural areas of the country, crossing barriers of class, identity and geography.

Following the appearance of synthesisers, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a new style of dance music emerged, Italo disco, also known as spaghetti disco. Derived from disco music, although completely electronic, it featured catchy melodies that ended up invading dance floors, not only in Italy but also in the rest of Europe and even in the United States, and also had a huge influence on the beginning of house music. This cosmic, sometimes hypnotic sound sounded like the future, thanks to producers who promoted it, such as Giorgio Moroder, who began to lay the foundations of electronic disco, followed by Alexander Robotnick, Stylóo, Gazebo, P. Lion, Miko Mission and Pierluigi Giombini, among others, thus forming the flagship of artists who defined Italo disco's identity. Its impact on a global level was so strong that many mainstream acts flirted with the genre by giving an "Italian touch" to

their songs, as can be heard on "Domino Dancing" by Pet Shop Boys.

The Spanish music industry also wanted its piece of the pie, and the Blanco y Negro Music company, founded in Barcelona in 1978, specialising in the import and distribution of international dance music in the Spanish market, became a record company in 1983. Its first release was Jules Tropicana's "Come On", which could be considered the birth of what is known as the Sabadell sound, a sub-genre of Italo disco. At that time, everything that was considered "good" came from abroad, and precisely because of that sort of inferiority complex, so to speak, all the songs that were created in the Sabadell area by a specific group of producers who hid behind different aliases were released with the typical "import" sticker, to make their records more attractive to the public, deceiving them in a way, not only because of that supposed inferiority complex, but also as a very good marketing strategy. I cannot be sure whether or not the buyers of these vinyl records actually knew the origin of these tracks, but what is clear is that the lyrics are sung in a macaronic form of English that gives them away, although it should also be noted that there is an isolated case: a production by Laura Martí entitled "De què vas?", from 1988, which was sung in Catalan. The two venues par excellence were the Albatros and Concor discotheques, both in Sabadell. Nuria Miralles, director of the Albatros between 1978 and 1995, says that "it all came about because of a few partners [...] they were all friends and that's why they decided to invest a little, to take a risk. They had no idea it was going to take off as much as it did".<sup>1</sup>

1. From the "Discoteca Albatros, bailando en Sabadell" [Albatros Discotheque: Dancing in Sabadell] episode of the *Las Radianes* programme, presented by Manolo Garrido on Radio Sabadell 94.6 (March, 2008). It can currently be streamed on Spotify and Ivoox.

In the Congostian universe, irony and humour play a crucial role. His work is often presented as a witty parody of stereotypes and social conventions, challenging established norms with subversive elegance. Through his pieces, the artist invites the spectator to reflect on the artificiality of cultural constructions and to question the very nature of the reality we inhabit, as well as traditional gender roles and social conventions by means of fictitious characters or alter egos, as in the case of the Mr. CD Eyes puppet, who appears in his piece *Supercampeón* [Super-champion] (2000), in which he parodies television shows such as *Sesame Street* and interviews musician Genís Segarra. His work often challenges established norms and promotes a critical reflection on how identity and gender are constructed and represented in contemporary society.

In the summer of 1987, four party-going friends, Danny Rampling, Paul Oakenfold, Nicky Holloway and Johnny Walker, went on holiday to Ibiza together, attracted by all the hype they were hearing through various channels about the music being played in the open-air clubs and discos—something new, unique and almost exclusive, at least at the time—scattered mainly around the southwest of the island. They were particularly interested in Amnesia, and it was there that the story began. All of them, especially Rampling and Oakenfold, had an epiphany when they listened to the sessions played by Alfredo Fiorito, an Argentinean DJ based on the island, better known as DJ Alfredo, as well as Leo Mas, who both incorporated these sounds in their sets, and christened it the Balearic sound, a label Fiorito did not quite agree with. Balearic beat could be defined as an amalgamation of sounds and musical styles in which anything from film soundtracks and EBM tracks to jazz can be mixed with other more accelerated rhythms. In other words, a sort of eclectic soundscape, a way of telling a story via the musical selectors transmitting their sensations to the

patrons. Fiorito himself states: “They copied absolutely everything from me.”<sup>2</sup> The fact is that everyone copies everyone else. They were fascinated by it all and wanted to export it to London, creating different seminal clubs for both the Balearic sound and acid house in the city, with the desire to relive the Ibiza experience of that summer of 1987. This is how Shoom, Future, The Project, Spectrum and The Milky Bar were born, representing to a greater or lesser extent the (counter)culture of acid house and British raves—most of them illegal and therefore persecuted by the authorities—which were held in remote places on the outskirts, not only of London, but also of other cities like Manchester, and which were not announced until the last minute to avoid police presence and their more than likely dissolution. Even faced with all these obstacles, many of these gatherings took place, where there were even ravers with video cameras who recorded the event and later sold the tapes to other ravers as souvenirs, as if it were an amusement park. “It would be interesting to compile all those tapes and create an archive,” Deller told me one day.

And so it transformed, probably unwillingly, into a very powerful subculture, breaking with the dominant class system. All social strata and races, regardless of their sexual preferences, came together under one roof, completely changing the concept of clubbing in England. Inevitably, the presence of drugs, and specifically MDMA, in this environment cannot be ignored. 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, commonly known as ecstasy, played a major role in the development of the scene. Although it was first synthesised in 1912 by German pharmaceutical company Merck, it was not until the 1970s that

2. Statement made in the book *Balearic. Historia oral de la cultura de club en Ibiza* [Balearic: An Oral History of Club Culture in Ibiza], by Luis Costa and Christian Len, published by Editorial Contra in 2020, which I highly recommend reading.

chemist and pharmacologist Alexander Shulgin, considered the father of MDMA, began to carry out research with it, describing it as a substance with unique psychoactive properties, full of stimulating and empathogenic effects. It is often associated with feelings of euphoria, increased empathy and emotional connection with others, as well as decreased anxiety. It can also produce altered sensory effects, such as increased perception of music and lights. Following its emergence, the authorities decided to take matters into their own hands and eventually banned it (in Spain, in July 1986). In this way, a pure and very cheap substance became expensive and adulterated, and as the philosopher and founder of Taller del Olvido (later renamed Amnesia. Yes, the Club!) Antonio Escotado stated: “A drug isn’t banned because it’s harmful, but because a lot of people have a desire to take it.”<sup>3</sup>

In exploring themes such as identity, politics and history, Deller deploys insightful intelligence and an acute social sensitivity. His projects are based on in-depth research and collaboration with diverse groups and communities, allowing him to address contemporary issues and challenge dominant narratives. Through his interdisciplinary approach and commitment to the public’s engagement, Deller manages to destabilise the traditional hierarchical structure of art and highlights the importance of marginalised voices and perspectives. As an artist and cultural activist, his work has left a lasting mark on the field of public art and collaborative production, redefining the relationship between art and the spectator, as well as being a testament to his ability to combine the popular with the profound. He often uses music, sport and youth subcultures to explore broader issues of power, inequality and resistance. His ability to fuse mass culture

3. Escotado, Antonio. *Historia general de las drogas*. Alianza, 1992 (3rd revised and expanded edition).

with social critique reveals an exceptional intellectual astuteness, challenging artificial divisions between that which is considered intellectual and that which is considered common.

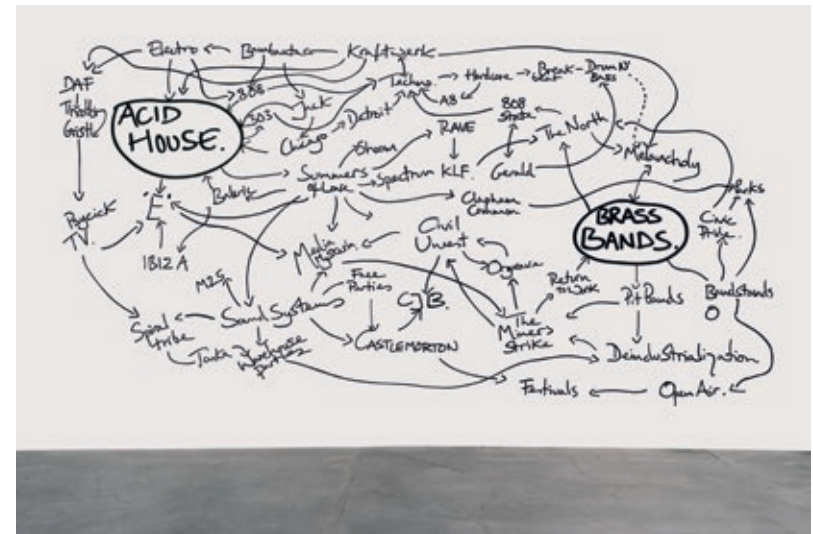
The concept of remix put forward by Nicolas Bourriaud is present in the work of Deller and Congost, as both artists explore the idea of appropriation and reinterpretation in some of their pieces. Bourriaud defines it as the practice of taking pre-existing elements and combining them in new ways to generate something original. The notion of remix moves away from the traditional idea of originality and creation from scratch and instead emphasises the importance of recontextualisation and reconfiguration of (pre)existing cultural elements. Their works often include references to popular culture, music and television, which they appropriate and remix in order to recontextualise them, even adding new elements of their own and generating new narratives. Congost, as a regular practice, returns to certain inputs and plot lines from previous pieces; we could say that he remixes himself, as is the case of the character that appears in *¿Para qué sirven las canciones?* [What Good are Songs?] (2020), Jimmy the Banshee, based on Jimmy Somerville, recognised as one of the icons of pop music and one of the first openly gay artists to achieve international fame in the 1980s. As a member of bands Bronski Beat and The Communards, his songs “Smalltown Boy” and “Don’t Leave Me This Way” became anthems for the LGBTQ+ community and directly confronted the issues of homophobia and exclusion, turning him into a sculptural instrument.

South Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, known for his ideas on achievement society and burnout society, analyses how the neoliberal system has influenced our lives and resulted in a society characterised by competition, productivity and lack of rest, leading the individual in the digital age to exhaustion, depression and

overexploitation. Han criticises the culture of spectacle and the superficiality in which contemporary society has immersed itself.<sup>4</sup>

Both Congost and Deller engage in critical analysis of popular culture and the entertainment industry, using elements of popular culture in their work to subvert dominant narratives and question power structures. An experiential immersion intertwining both worlds and creating a single one, understanding and approaching their themes as if it were a spectacle on a big stage, exposing subjects that are at times difficult to deal with, through visually and aesthetically pleasing works, seemingly stripped of any wickedness.

4. “Only human beings can dance. It may be that boredom seized him while walking, so that after—and through—this ‘attack’ he would make the step from walking to dancing,” Byung-Chul Han emphasises in *La sociedad del cansancio* (Barcelona: Herder Editorial, 2022, 3rd edition).



Jeremy Deller, *History of the World*, 1996. Wall painting, dimensions variable. Edition of 3 + 2 A.P. Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute, Toby Webster Ltd, Glasgow





Jeremy Deller, *Everybody in the Place: An Incomplete History of Britain 1984-1992*, 2018. HD video, single channel, colour, sound. Running time: 61' 35". Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow



Carles Congost, *Abans de la casa / Un biopic inestable a través del sonido Sabadell*, [Before House / An Unstable Biopic via the Sabadell Sound], 2015 (video still). HD 4K Video. Single-channel, colour, sound. Running time: 22'. Courtesy of the artist



Carles Congost, *Supercampeón* [Superchampion], 2000  
(video still). Betacam SP video transferred to DVD.  
Running time: 4' 10". Courtesy of the artist



Carles Congost, *Noi de província (Smalltown Boy)*  
(work in progress), 2023. Wood, nylon strings, varnish.  
Courtesy of the artist





Jeremy Deller, *I ♥ Melancholy*, 1993. Gloss black paint on matt black painted wall, with participant. Dimensions variable. View of the installation "Joy In People", Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis, 2013. Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute/ Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow



Carles Congost, *Albatros (Memorabilia)*, 2023. Colour photograph, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist



Jeremy Deller, *New Dawn*, 2023. Poster, dimensions variable.  
 Courtesy of the artist and The Modern Institute /  
 Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow

## HEDONIA IS A NON-PLACE

Peio Aguirre

Looking back, the 1980s and 1990s have become a kind of vast cultural reservoir for pop culture and youth movements. We tend to perceive that period as a shrine full of over-canonical deities. However, it's difficult to recall feelings and impressions from when one was young without being accused of nostalgia. So, without a single hint of melancholy, I present here a moment for a brief process of periodisation based on a vague biographical recollection. Easter holidays during the remarkable year of 1989, Palma (Mallorca), or more specifically, the beach and bars in El Arenal. Like so many other teenagers, I abandoned myself to the centreless inertias of the dynamics of organised "study trips", a mere euphemism to describe the combo of "cheap partying and an opening up of the senses". In the same way as our school did, gangs of young working-class Brits flocked to the island for a cheap holiday. It's all about the mix (of drinks, fluids, styles and attitudes). That frenzy seemed to mark the beginning of a type of endemic tourism that has since been accentuated. The images of those hangover days now wander around faded, as I try to salvage something useful for cultural analysis. At that point, I hadn't yet cultivated a solid taste in music. It took me a few years to discover that that same spring, in neighbouring Ibiza, one of my favourite bands—New Order—were recording *Technique*, an album in whose artwork Trevor Key and Peter Saville reflected the acid zeitgeist of an entire era in a dichromatic, lysergic print.

It was on that journey of initiation that I discovered acid house and its culture first hand and close up. It was there, I can still see it clearly now, that I caught sight of one of the most widespread, viral and mutant emblems in the history of pop: the smiley. The most successful logos almost always

boast great simplicity. A yellow circle with two vertical ovals and a large, upturned semi-circular mouth. Its yellow colour stood for spring, for radiant sunshine, for full-time happiness. The smiley face signified the blossoming of acid house in the UK, and soon became the semi-official mascot of a burgeoning dance scene. Smileys hadn't yet made their appearance where I lived and, although they did arrive eventually, it was nothing compared to what was going on in Palma. The Balearic Islands—with Ibiza at their epicentre—served not only as a service and redistribution station, but as a source of inspiration for a whole crew of British DJs, producers and party-goers who'd been visiting the islands from the beginning of that decade. The smiley quickly became a currency closely associated with a music scene and a drug, ecstasy. In a purely semiotic sense, it took aesthetic postmodernism to its paroxysm. Never had such a silly symbol been so popular. This was only the beginning of the conversion of smiley (or angry) faces into millennial txt options, into emojis and emoticons. A symbol of postmodern irony.

As acid house became mainstream, smileys became ubiquitous on consumer products and, by mid-1988, adorned all manner of objects such as stickers, pins, T-shirts, mugs, bracelets, you name it. Overnight and without warning, for two or three years (until the exhaustion of the acid movement), it occupied the role of the post-structuralist “empty signifier”, reconverted into a post-modern symbol that could be emptied and filled with whatever we wished. Half-way between hippie counterculture—and the 1960s ideals of freedom, hedonism and experimentation—the defence of ecstasy and the corporate-led campaigns that encourage us to “smile” and feel good, smileys seemed the perfect complement with which to adorn a new and ephemeral youth fashion movement where once again phat pants and wide-leg jeans became the dominant style. The comeback of hippie flower power filtered by way of Ibiza, London and Manchester.

At the same time, stealthily, the neoliberal creed began to creep into consumer habits in the most sibylline ways (happy hours, two for ones, night club bracelets, etc.). Not least, the culture of those types of bosses who exhort their employees with a “smile!” Acid house was an everlasting smile and good vibes. More than an economic system per se, neoliberalism can be described as the mode of subjectivity of Late Capitalism. It encouraged a hedonic infantilism and a culture that reproaches those who aren't being enthusiastic and positive enough. But we weren't aware of any of this at the time—and we didn't need to be!

Jon Savage, doyen of the British music press, wrote an article in *The Guardian* on the smiley's journey from its pre-history in the early 1960s as a simple children's TV logo, to signifying the strengthening of corporate morale-building in the 1970s, and finally to its explosion as an emblem of acid house.<sup>1</sup> Its history is well documented. Its postmodern renaissance began in 1985 and 1986 with DC Comics (Batman, Watchmen), where the smiley mysteriously appeared as a visual metaphor bearing a dark and dangerous symbolism, expressing (without saying so) the impending tipping of the worlds of good and evil along with the existential crisis of the superhero. Not long after, in February 1988, record producer Bomb the Bass released his hit “Beat Dis” with a blood-splattered smiley face on its cover. A few months earlier, another producer and DJ called Danny Rampling had opened a club in London with the intention of recapturing the atmosphere of extended party sessions in Ibiza. Shoom was one of the first clubs to adopt the smiley face in its promotional material. Rampling later confessed that he discovered the smiley in Ibiza, appropriating it and taking it

1. Savage, Jon. “A Design for Life”. In: *The Guardian* (21 February 2009). Accessible at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/feb/21/smiley-face-design-history>> (Last accessed 26 June 2023).

to back London. It spread like wildfire throughout 1988, to then disappear from circulation and eventually into limbo as one of the most outlandish symbols of the late 20th century.

Following on from the culture of individualism promoted by American yuppie consumerism in the 1980s, the 1990s were inaugurated in the heat of a new culture of collectivity. Generation X was also the “WE” generation. In 1990, *The Face* magazine featured the British authorities’ fight against illegal parties and raves on its cover. Against the backdrop of an overexposed photo of Sinéad O’Connor it read: “The Right to Party: HM Government vs. Acid House”. Inside, New Year’s Eve celebrations in East and West Berlin were compared to those of young people in London and the South East of England, where spontaneous parties were repeatedly thwarted by police and politicians. The editors of the magazine then asked: “Who Will Fight For The Right To Party?”.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the massive circulation of ecstasy was behind these raves that scandalised society, the press and politicians.

The democratising effects of dance culture at the turn of the decade (from the 1980s to the 1990s) translated into less focus on urban elites and instead on the rise of the regional. Whereas in early 1988 ecstasy was only available in London, by the end of the year it was available in virtually every small town. “Critical regionalism” moved from architecture to music, making post-1989 culture more egalitarian, more democratic. Between 1988 and 1990, so-called “summers of love” (remakes of the summers of free love in the United States in the 1960s) took place all over the UK. *The Face* highlighted three of these “summers” according to the typologies of spaces and events: the first summer of love took place in the clubs in 1988; the second in the secret raves during 1989; and finally, the most multitudinous in the form

2. Gorman, Paul. *The Story of The Face: The Magazine That Changed Culture*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2017, p. 191–195.

of festivals or gigs, just as acid house was merging with the new psychedelia of the “Madchester” scene. That so-called “third summer of love” began on 27 May 1990 with a massive concert by The Stone Roses on Spike Island, a huge dead zone in the middle of landfills and industrial complexes where 30,000 young people made the pilgrimage to from all parts of the United Kingdom. It was a fact, a whole new regionalisation of Europe was taking place at raves, clubs and festivals.

Vibrations are read on the surface of things. The punctual, ephemeral, intensely charged moments that one experiences in communion with others within the framework of a mythical time remain as if suspended in the air. The 1990s were fundamental for art and culture because the sphere of inter-human relations became artistic material. The evanescent Balearic beats of the enraptured ravers, off their faces, were the manifestation of an enlightenment through sensitivity. The primacy of the senses and the suspension of the self and the ego. These forms of communion amongst people opened up the way to new subjectivities.<sup>3</sup>

As we approached the end of the millennium, we began to enter the future through the sound of technology. Do you remember when Barcelona longed to be the most modern and avant-garde city? Do you recall the first Nitsa club nights? House and techno culture were “futuristic” or, at least, still carried the banner of the future and was forward-looking, just before the past was embalmed and packaged as a new retro commodity. Dance music, for all its international resonance, always retained a potent local and insular connotation, whether in the extreme fusion of genres and sub-genres or in the territorialisation of dance

3. On a philosophy of the sensitive that was reflected in the interpretation of youth culture and also in contemporary “relational” art, see Maffesoli, Michel. *Éloge de la raison sensible* [In Praise of Sensible Reason]. Paris: Éditions de la Table Ronde, 2005.

culture from countless interconnected nodal points (dance floors and clubs, architectures, radio broadcasts, magazines and fanzines, labels, roads and bars). A whole urban spatialisation was taking place through a phenomenon that could be mapped out, point by point. The cognitive maps of electronic music were highly artisanal and handmade. Archipelagos, non-places, islands. Meeting points for merchants and pirates, exchanging their latest plunder in bays of pleasure. Not everything was instantaneous, as it is now. Quite the opposite, information was mediated by layers and layers that had to be separated, then codified and interpreted. Those things and trends that arrive a little late, instead of shining seem to be bathed in the patina of overhandling and distortion. This gives them an allure for the appropriation, mistranslation and bastardisation necessary to give birth to new jargons and subcultural styles.

But the prophesied dance floor revolution never happened. The dance and techno scene began to decline with the consolidation of club culture, the enthronement of the DJ as master of ceremonies and the progressive absorption and privatisation of collective energies by capital. Theorist Mark Fisher wondered in 2008 whether the death of raves was a symptom of the general energy crisis in culture, that is, the first sign of an abrupt sense of the deceleration of time. The energies, infrastructures and forms of desire were quickly absorbed and reappropriated by the forces of neoliberal and corporate culture, which reintroduced freedom and pleasure into their ideology while the left missed the opportunity to successfully align itself with the collective euphoria of dance floor culture.<sup>4</sup> In his now essential book *Capitalist Realism*, Fisher coined the term “depressive hedonia”—inverting the clinical picture of depression as anhedonia, that is, a state

in which one is unable to feel pleasure—noting his experience as a teacher at secondary school, where teenagers experienced “an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure”. Politically speaking, this “depressive hedonia” was felt by young people entirely in demobilising terms, as a constant satisfaction-dissatisfaction loop or a vicious cycle of instant gratification that vanishes instantly.

There’s no doubt about it, the pursuit of pleasure is a political issue. I wonder now about the utopia of electronic and dance music in relation to the management of pleasure. What are the contemporary formations of pleasure? That is, what are the motivations through which people seek and find pleasure in cultural productions and in the organisation—as management—of all that we enjoy? Where can we discover the possibilities for creating new forms of pleasure in order to displace those that already exist? Every form of insularity contains a utopian seed. And as is well known, every island is literally a non-place (*u-topos*). Let us now think of a non-place called Hedonia and, then, let’s imagine that new forms of pleasure exist to be explored.

4. Fisher, Mark. “No Romance Without Finance”. In: *K-punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004–2016)*. London: Repeater, 2018, p. 419–425.





Carles Congost, *Keyboard*, 2023.  
Mixed media. Courtesy of the artist

*Music as a Foreign Language*  
Carles Congost and Jeremy Deller

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