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Imagem: Maurizio Cattelan, *Bidibidobidiboo*, 1996, instalação. Arquivo da autora.

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Abstract

Maurizio Cattelan's poetics is filled with wrong and irreverent details. It can be a pigeon inside a room at Venice Biennale or a chasm in the floor of a museum, it is the inscription "Hollywood" in the wrong place, it is a strange door in an alley of Chelsea in New York, an ambiguous word in a sign or a stolen expression in an interview. Details of stories and interiors then become devices to activate interpretative practices, relational aesthetics and postproductions, to create misunderstandings because – as the artist claims – "truth is only the moment when you claim something like yours".

Keywords

Maurizio Cattelan. Detail. Nancy Spector. Nicolas Bourriaud. Venice Biennale.

Resumo

A poética de Maurizio Cattelan está repleta de detalhes incorretos e irreverentes. Pode ser um pombo em uma sala da Bienal de Veneza ou uma fissura no chão de um museu; a inscrição "Hollywood" no lugar errado; uma porta estranha em um beco em Chelsea, Nova York; uma palavra ambígua em uma placa ou uma expressão roubada em uma entrevista. Detalhes de histórias e interiores tornam-se, portanto, dispositivos para ativar práticas interpretativas, estéticas relacionais e pós-produções; para criar mal-entendidos porque – como afirma o artista – "a verdade é apenas o momento em que você reivindica algo como seu".

Palavras-chave

Maurizio Cattelan. Detalhe. Nancy Spector. Nicolas Bourriaud. Bienal de Veneza.

In Maurizio Cattelan's work, detail is something amiss, false, irreverent, provocative, misleading but it does also indicate a revelation: it's a pigeon at the Biennale or a real hole in an art gallery floor, a door in a Chelsea alley in New York City that opens onto a "Wrong Gallery", or an ambiguous word in a sign or a stolen expression in an interview. Details of stories, interiors and architectures thus become devices, helping him to create misunderstandings and irritations, but also to activate interpretive practices.

The first detail is a stress, a pronunciation matter: though the artist was born in Padova, and hence his surname in Veneto dialect is pronounced Cattelàn, he is now mainly known as Cattelán, as has happened with a number of other oxytonic or foreshortened surnames which have suffered the same fate (such as the Benetton clothing brand), who after becoming famous abroad, attempted to use a more "Milanese" or Anglicized pronunciation and, together with Vanessa Beecroft, Cattelan is in fact probably the most famous Italian artist on the international scene from the '90s¹. Sometimes his 'wrong' details are so insidiously hidden: it is the case of a work of art where the title is partly counterfeit: *Bidibidobidiboo* is the title of a well-known 1996 piece by Cattelan, exemplary in its use of minute details and in its evocation of a specific interior design, depicting a squirrel which has committed suicide in a mini-kitchen, but inspired by a tune from the 1950 Disney film of *Cinderella*. The chorus, sung by the Good Fairy as she magically transforms the pumpkin into a carriage and the mice into white horses, thereby changing Cinderella's social status, is "*Salagadoola mechicka Boola bibbidi-bobbidi-boo*", and not *Bidibidobidiboo*. And that fake title may already provide a clue to the possible interpretations of the piece.

While the detail opens up various possible meanings and is a code we have to interpret, the title would suggest a happy ending, a transformation, but in actual fact the opposite seems true: centre-stage is a squirrel – so not a mouse as in the fairytale, and in many literary tales for children and adults alike – sitting on a chair, with its head lying on a small table with a yellow Formica top, with a glass next to it, while behind it we see a small sink, abandoned crockery and a water heater on the wall. Its paws hang limply down, directing our gaze to a revolver that has fallen to the ground, the essential revelation which immediately clarifies what has happened. It all seems to have taken place in a doll's house kitchen, rather than in an architect's scale model, but the setting is a 1950s bourgeois kitchen which on the one hand accurately reflects the modernist dream in post-war Italy of better living conditions, proving itself the rightful heir to the 19th-century theories of America's Beecher sisters or the so-called Frankfurt Kitchen by Austrian architect Margaretha Schütte-Lihotzky, presented at the Bauhaus exhibition in Weimar in 1923 (Bois; Reinhold, 2019), or Luisa Liverani's *House of the dopolavorista* for the 1930 Monza Triennale, while on the other hand it still expresses a symptom of modest social class. So the magic spell doesn't seem to have worked: it doesn't look like a scene from a children's fairy tale, but rather a cry of despair.

The curator Francesco Bonami underlines the fact that Cattelan often makes use of animals treated with taxidermy in his work, evoking situations from cartoons, because he claims that, as in the animated film *Bambi*, this leads the viewer to empathize and thus seek to share the feelings of the protagonist: this also holds true for the squirrel, which resembles one of the Disney pair Chip 'n Dale, thus leading us to wonder just what happened to his partner (Bonami 2003: 81). Sometimes the stuffed animals actually become an alter ego for Cattelan, like the donkey sent to pick up the honorary doctorate from the University of Trento that Cattelan had been awarded in 2004; he also started his creative career as a

furniture designer in Forlì, in the 1980s, and after meeting the designer Ettore Sottsass created a catalogue of his own anthropomorphic creations, including the *Cerberino* table, which he sent to various galleries to promote his work, so he's certainly used to creating sets.

Bidibidibidiboo was purchased by the collector Patrizia Re Rebaudengo at London's Laure Genillard Gallery in 1996, later leading *Guardian* art critic Mark Brown (2012) to wonder "Is it a meditation on social mobility?" also noting, however, that "no one was ever going to transform this squirrel, living in such dingy surroundings with little hope of escape to a better life. It was, in every sense of the word, stuffed". So this may be "a much more personal piece", since "the kitchen is modelled on the one Cattelan grew up in and the artist has talked about how his mother accidentally left a hot iron on the yellow Formica table. To save it, his father sawed off the end with the burn mark leaving the family to always eat their meals on an absurdly shrunken table" (Brown, 2012). As the artist does enjoy trying to hoodwink his audience, we can't tell whether this story is true, like a statement he made elsewhere, saying it evokes the kitchen of his ex-girlfriend, whom he had gone to live with when he was still very young: that would make this not so much a representation of suicide due to debt problems, but rather of a jilted lover taking his own life.

However, the squirrel is not just a fast-disappearing rodent – hiding behind disguise and mockery is one of Cattelan's specialties – but, according to an allegorical interpretation of the Renaissance, it has the power to awaken from death, as it does every spring when it comes to the end of its hibernation, an apparent death, as symbolized in Lorenzo Lotto's 16th century *Portrait of spouses* (1523-1524), in which the husband is seen pointing his forefinger at a squirrel lying asleep on the table, holding a scroll in the other with a Latin inscription, "Homo numquam", or "Man never", i.e. unlike the small squirrel, man never wakes up from death (Gentili, 2000: 5-38). Perhaps then, as in fairy tales, thanks to the miracle implicit in the title, so too the protagonist of Cattelan's apparently so cynical piece really will be resurrected... moreover, as we learn from Joseph Beuys in his 26 November 1965 performance at Düsseldorf's Galerie Schmela, entitled *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, wild animals have a special relationship with the land and its deepest secrets, and thus embody the spirits who have a far better grasp of the magic inherent in art than the general public do. And in 1993, Cattelan had held an exhibition at the Massimo De Carlo gallery in Milan, closing the gallery to the public, as Beuys did, and the only way of seeing the artwork inside was through a slit in the gallery entrance: *Untitled* (1993), made up of a little teddy bear moving back and forth on a tightrope, powered by an electric motor, and it was on that occasion – says Bonami – that Cattelan first represented "human feelings grafted onto an animal's form" (Bonami, 2003: 78).

Cattelan has been making use of stuffed animals since 1995, including dogs, mice, donkeys and horses, generally personifying them, making them into narrators of a story, through their poses or by giving them something to "wear" and using the title to hint at its meaning, as in the 1995 piece *Love Saves Life*, evoking the Grimm Brothers' four *Town Musicians of Bremen*, where the animals save each other from the robbers by teaming up together, or in *Novecento*, a horse hanged up at the ceiling (Verzotti 1997), maybe recalling Bertolucci's film masterpiece, a metaphor of the difficult rite of passage from one century to another. Some of the most successful artists of the 1990s used stuffed animals (Hoffmann, Mallouk, Plummer, 2016), such as Damien Hirst, who debuted with the so-called Young British Artists, and was

commissioned by the collector and advertising tycoon Charles Saatchi to create *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, made up of a tiger shark preserved in formaldehyde in a vitrine. Hirst's piece, however, acts as a *memento mori*, somewhere between a butchery scene/autopsy table and a valuable Renaissance study displaying the wonders of the natural world, though set in a frame reminiscent of Sol LeWitt's white minimal art structures (an attitude that Cattelan has never had, even in works such as *Love Lasts Forever*, from 1997, because he retains such a strong sense of sarcasm). However, taxidermy had already appeared in New Dadaist combine paintings, such as in *Monogram* (1955-59 Stockholm, Moderna Museet) and *Canyon* (1959) by Robert Rauschenberg, one with a taxidermy goat and the other with an eagle, but depictions of animals also abound in the paintings of the 1980s, both the artists of the Transavantgarde (Enzo Cucchi's donkeys, pigs and dogs, Mimmo Paladino's crocodiles and lizards), and in Basquiat's paintings.

American critics, but also Nicolas Bourriaud, often claim Cattelan is part of a "noble" lineage handed down from Italian Arte Povera, because of what they interpret as a certain "naturalism", because of his use of nature-related items and "poor" subjects, in the sense of "minor" ones, such as beasties or ropes but – although he himself boasts of having known Alighiero Boetti (who is also one of critic Hans Ulbrich Obrist's favourite artists) – he has no desire to explain a passage of vitalist energy, as in Arte Povera, nor does he use the natural world in all its manifestations, having no plant matter (such as wood, straw, lettuce), ice or metals in his work. He is totally immersed in a post-pop and post-modern international universe, if anything with a post-1980s Italian feel to it, a time when the economy was still thriving and there was no place for that same bitter mischievous irony that appears in the paradoxical situations staged by Jeff Koons, who knows how to take a little children's toy and turn it into a monument in *Puppies* or create provocative puppets of celebrities in ceramic or marble, as reflected even in advertising campaigns for many international fashion brands. If anything, he aims to challenge a certain "morality" and an Italian "condition" from which he intends to escape. Most of all he wants to *épater le bourgeois*: remembering schooldays (as in the 1997 *Charlie don't surf*, with details of hands pierced by pencils), and as much as for *Bel Paese* (1994), the title of an old book and therefore a figure of speech, but also a recognizable brand of an Italian cheese, ready to be devoured by the most various appetites. So is a reason of resentment for the public his trio of "puppets" depicting children hanging from a tree in Cordusio Square in Milan in 2004: they are actually an evocation of Pinocchio's story, hanged on a oak, because Pinocchio is a sort of alter ego for Cattelan, as in *Daddy, Daddy* (2008), but also a statement against our opportunism, when children are the focus of rhetoric but then terrible things happen to them often right in front of everyone's noses.

Just as the *Stone Dead* dogs (1997) at Castello di Rivoli and *Good Boy* (1998), which look as though they are fast asleep, propped up on an armchair or in the corners, are alienating because they look as though they're alive, they lack the hyper-realistic yet false textures of Duane Hanson's work, and create a *trompe l'oeil* effect, evoking famous ancestors such as the stone dog at the feet of Ilaria del Carretto's reclining figure. You need to look at them very carefully and closely to ascertain whether they are stuffed, and if this causes horror we should remember that up until about the 1960s taxidermy was a common way, especially in the countryside, of remembering of our faithful friends.

So the detail of the pose here is fake, but pretends to be true: it looks like they're asleep, but they're dead. The peculiarity of the "material" used on one hand makes the scene seem true, while on the other the details of the installation and their apparent rigidity raise suspicions.

What's more, Cattelan himself said that, even before he started working as an artist, he was struck by the sight of Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Mirrors* which he had seen in an art gallery in the city of Padua, in Italy, which create an alienation by pretending there are other people in the room, doing so by applying cardboard cutouts and then screen printing on the surface: he is fascinated by deceptive details and stuffed animals are a perfect citationist deception.

Apart from anything else, he also fits into an irreverent Italian tradition, dare I say typical of the Po Valley, ranging from the artist Gianfilippo Usellini or the writer and painter Dino Buzzati's giant cats, ancestors of the giant cat skeleton *Felix* (2001), to Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit*, given that his magazine is called *Toilet Paper*. Indeed, Cattelan worked with his magazine and the Seletti brand to create a series of objects showing irritating, apparently household, details, and an exhibition curated by him in Turin in 2014 was entitled *Shit and Die*. He has also worked in advertising and his taste reflected the typical 1990s climate using disturbing details, like the photographer David LaChapelle did, but without any of his fetishist obsession, preferring to use opportunity as the mother of invention, just as in the 1960s Pino Pascali had worked on the TV prime-time advertising programme *Carosello* and probably also taking inspiration to that invented world that had created "strange animals" such as *Bristle Worms* or *The Dinosaur*, made up of multiple modules of incongruous materials, in other words: of details.

Cattelan's *modus operandi* is not a ready-made solution, but rather a postproduction, in the sense intended by Nicolas Bourriaud: he takes a real situation, rather than a piece already done by others, and transforms it into a surprising opportunity (Bourriaud 2002).

That is what happened at the 1993 Venice Biennale, in the Aperto section curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, in the sub-section run by Francesco Bonami. Cattelan stated that he had sold the space to a perfume company to promote a new fragrance, so as to avoid the embarrassment and the fear of competing with other artists, because – he claimed – he would be "afraid of big machinery like the Biennale", that "it's just a big fair. It's like a big window where all people come to stare". The room indeed held a large poster advertising of a mysterious perfume, but looking at the details on the label, turned out to have been invented by Lancetti just in 1993, under the name *Suspence*. Cattelan's work, however, is titled *Working Is a Bad Job* (1993): so of course he used the operation with full awareness, creating the legend of his shyness, while it must not be forgotten that reproducing packaging of consumer products was a speciality of Andy Warhol's, a reference artist for Cattelan and the neo-pop movement in the 1990s.

At the 1997 Venice Biennale, curated by Germano Celant, he presented *Tourists*, consisting of 200 stuffed pigeons on the roof trusses of the Italian Pavilion: apparently, the intention to evoke the state of neglect into which the pavilion falls between exhibitions came to him during an earlier visit, but these typical Venetian presences at the exhibition itself, high above other artists' pieces, keeping watch from above in a sort of less scary Hitchcock-style nightmare, simultaneously playing a prank on the artists

featured in the exhibition and its visitors for whom, as the title shows, they are a *doppelgänger*. And the detail that makes them alienating, irritating and funny at the same time is that the ground is covered with real pigeon excrement, in a room where other artists as Enzo Cucchi and Ettore Spalletti were exposed (Celant; Soldaini, 1997). In an interview with curator Nancy Spector (2003: 18), Cattelan claimed he "really just take advantage of the exhibition situation", because he likes "all the little stories behind the work", and he represents the pigeons again, but as an invasion using 2.000 of them, with the title of *Others*, at the 2011 Biennale curated by Bice Curiger².

Significant details in Cattelan can also refer to the list of materials his artwork is made of, which give the effect of an illusion, or the microscopic rendering of plastic detail, thus creating the illusion that allows us to focus on a vision and – together with the incongruous pose – create provocation, as in the case of the *Ninth Hour* (1999) in which a life-size effigy of Pope John Paul II, recreated by specialists using a mannequin with an effective mixed media of wax and fabric, is hit by a meteorite: this becomes a B-movie sci-fi-style event, but also a quote from the absurdism of René Magritte. The shards of glass around him are a narrative clue telling us what has happened, suggesting that the stone came crashing through the glass windows of a church during a service, and – as the title suggests – at the hour which, according to the Gospels, was when Jesus died on the cross. Then, once again, the detail of the hour specified in the title is a possible key, which on the one hand leads to a comparison with martyrdom, even sharing a destiny with other famous leaders like him who were attacked, from Martin Luther King to Kennedy, but also with the tyranny of the "modern age", of the future, over the pompous rites of the Church, so much so that during one exhibition some Polish Catholics – offended by the contempt they saw in the pose – damaged the piece in protest.

One gossip detail is that in 1998 – just the year before – the well known Venetian writer Tiziano Scarpa published a story in which a pope was caught by a landslide in the Dolomites (a place dear to the real-life Karol Wojtyła), remaining "imprisoned by a boulder, lying on the ground with a broken leg", and when he was saved decided to revolutionize his life, "stripping off his identity". The novelist stated with no little irony in a spoof self-interview in 2004 that Cattelan's piece was quite different, since

there was a lot of work behind rendering the details in the *Ninth Hour*. The complexion, the clothes, the porosity of the rock, the shards of glass. An artist has to take the trouble to show these things, and the risk of getting it wrong, or putting on a pile of mere kitsch, is always lurking just around the corner. *Ninth Hour* continues to impress me in its visionary, almost brash, power... But at the same time it's also a very elegant piece (...) explicitly political, halfway between blasphemy and a satirical joke (Scarpa 2004).

Similarly, *Him* (2001), featuring a kneeling Hitler, with real human hair but a slender boy's body, is also impressive for its lenticular precision: both in his facial features and pose, pleading for forgiveness with clasped hands and tiny perfectly-clipped fingernails, as well as in the fine cut of the rather bourgeois cloth. With his back to the public, he only reveals his alienating identity when approached, alluding to the nightmare that Hitler may have survived, so much so that in 2012 when the piece was displayed in the Warsaw ghetto it aroused a storm of controversy³.

In Boris Groys' *Art Power* (2008), the chapter titled "The Hero's Body: Adolf Hitler's Art Theory" points out that the figure of the hero is exalted by totalitarian regimes such as Fascism, National Socialism and Nazism, and the hero's body is transformed from a medium into a message, that "distinguishes a hero from a non-hero". He notes that the dictator was thus not only obsessed by the thought of being admired in the present, but also by whether he "would be admired and idolized in the indeterminate, indefinable future of eternity". As

Historically, Hitler embodies exemplarily the figure of a loser who was unable to bring to conclusion anything he started – not even the work of reduction and annihilation. Amazingly, Hitler succeeded in losing utterly, not only politically and militarily but also morally – something that is almost unique as a historical achievement, for defeat in real life is usually balanced by moral victory and vice versa. As an absolute loser in this sense, Hitler holds a certain fascination for our time, because modern art has always celebrated the figure of the loser – this is the very penchant for which Hitler condemned modern art so vehemently. We have learned to admire the figure of the *poète maudit* and the *artiste raté* who earned their places as heroes of the modern imagination not by victory but by spectacular defeat. And in the competition among losers that modern culture has offered us, Hitler was exceptionally, if inadvertently, successful (Groys 2008: 139).

and this makes his apparition in Cattelan's installation even more disturbing.

The artist is also an assembler of detail during interviews, in that he deliberately uses phrases taken from other people's statements, or even sends others to be interviewed in his place, as he did at length with Massimiliano Gioni: that too – he claims – is an "opportunity to observe how I work"⁴.

At times, though, detail is the wrong word: like the name of the exhibition space he opened in New York along with Gioni and Ali Subotnik, *The Wrong Gallery*, which mocks one of the fears of the art system, exhibiting in the wrong place with the wrong critic; or in his deliberate reversal of the letters in the sign for a *trattoria* in Milan, changing *Carpaccio* into *Crepaccio* (meaning *Crevasse*), and turning it into a venue for meetings and performances; or the Z for Zorro on a canvas in *Untitled* (1993) instead of Lucio Fontana's slash, which Bourriaud also exalted as an example of the postproduction practised by many 1990s artists, as he transforms "Fontana's heroic gesture" into one "worthy of an operetta executioner", using what he identifies as Cattelan's typical creative procedure, taking a structure that initially seems familiar, or done by others, but undermining our perception of it by radically changing it (Bourriaud 2002: 57).

Finally, for his narrations Cattelan also uses true or invented architectures, making sets as if they were for a film, as he did for his first exhibition at the Daniel Newburg Gallery in New York in 1994 where all he used was a live donkey in a beautiful room with an elegant chandelier, titling the exhibition *Warning! Enter at your risk. So not touch, do not feed, no smoking, no photographs, no dogs, thank you* (re-used for the Frieze fair in homage to the gallery owner). It has references to the 1966 Richard Serra exhibition at the La Salita Gallery in Rome with live rabbits and chickens in wooden cages, or to the twelve live horses by Jannis Kounellis at L'Attico Gallery in Rome in 1969, or Joseph Beuys' American action *I love America and America loves me* (1974) with a coyote, but at a detailed level we can see that Cattelan's

totemic animal is the donkey, not nearly as dangerous as feared, but also a symptom of the trick being played on us.

He has put in place "misuses" of museums, has done the unforgivable: for example, he ran away on the eve of an inauguration, leaving a rope dangling from his window as if he were an escaped prisoner, even though the event was at a castle (2nd edition of *Manifesta*, at the Castello di Rivara in 1992); he created an effigy of himself peering out of a real hole in the floor in a room of paintings (*Untitled*, 2001 at the *Out of Senses* event, at Rotterdam's Boymans Van Beuningen Museum) as if it were part of a Woody Allen film with robbers; with the curator Jens Hoffmann he invented a non-existent biennial, the *Sixth Caribbean Biennial*, in 1999 to mock the proliferation of such events, from which we have photos with his friends published in a book (Cattelan, 2001).

In 2011, for his retrospective at the Solomon Guggenheim Museum in New York, he asked to create a monumental piece made up of his detailed artworks, entitled *All* (2011), an incredibly expensive installation, using his artworks from the collections of the rich and famous, as well as statically complex, because it looks like a vortex, the eye of a tornado, as everything hangs from the ceiling of the museum, with no other embellishments. That the work was intended as a whole, made up of individual parts, of details, like a Christmas tree, and not as a series of pieces for a true retrospective, becomes clear in the answer given by top curator Nancy Spector in the face of criticism: this isn't a retrospective, but "a new latest work that contains all the previous ones" (Spector 2011: 63). Another way to gamble with the art system.

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Notes

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¹ Those observations are sharply and ironically reported also in a 'false' self-interview the writer Tiziano Scarpa wrote in 2004 for the art magazine *Work. Art in progress*, on the occasion of the *laurea honoris causa* in Sociology given to Maurizio Cattelan from the University of Trento (Italy), then published also on SCARPA, T. 2004.

² He expanded the installation to the whole pavilion, which meanwhile has changed its name from Padiglione Italia (Italy Pavilion) to Palazzo delle Esposizioni (Exposition Palace).

³ As claimed the notorious exhibition *Post Human*, curated in 1992 by Jeffrey Deitch at FAE Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lausanne, that then traveled to Castello di Rivoli, Turin; Deichtorhallen, Hamburg; Deste Foundation, Athens and Israel Museum, Jerusalem, which showed works by artists working on the concept of hybridated or artificial body, as Matthew Barney, Jeff Koons, Christian Marclay, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, Mike Kelly, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Damien Hirst. In their vision a 'new' postorganic and manipulated body, American works of art have always a sort of more realistic violence, while Italian ones are more ironic, or are inspired by story or chronicle, as for Cattelan. Many of those artists also made use of hiperrealistic sculptures, as for *Him*. Ten years after he made it, he exhibited it in the Varsavia ghetto, raising great protests: the realism of its details, despite its 'strange' dimensions, is so impressive to become disturbing.

⁴ Nancy Spector, interviewing Cattelan, is concerned about the truth of his statements, she feels responsible for what she will write about their conversation. He responds: "but, you see, the truth is not out there. It's just the moment that you claim something as your own. This is my truth; that is yours. Besides, if we use other materials, you will still have the opportunity to observe how I work, and I will have the opportunity to learn more about other people". "When I read other interviews, there are always parts that strikes me, and I ask myself, 'Why don't just take this section since it's so interesting?'" (Spector 2003: 18). Cattelan uses sometimes to cut up phrases picked up by other people, or from famous ones; also his magazine *Permanent Food* is made by collages taken from other magazines. In those years, interviews seemed a new way to make art history or to create a specific way to be a critic and is particularly promoted by Hans Ulrich Obrist (but this method has a long story behind, since the Italian art critic Carla Lonzi in the 1970s, as in her *Autoportraits* that reports interviews with 13 artists, taken by a recording device, edited in 1969). See also (Choi, 2004).

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