

# SUBBACULTCHA!

## Interview Nick van Woert

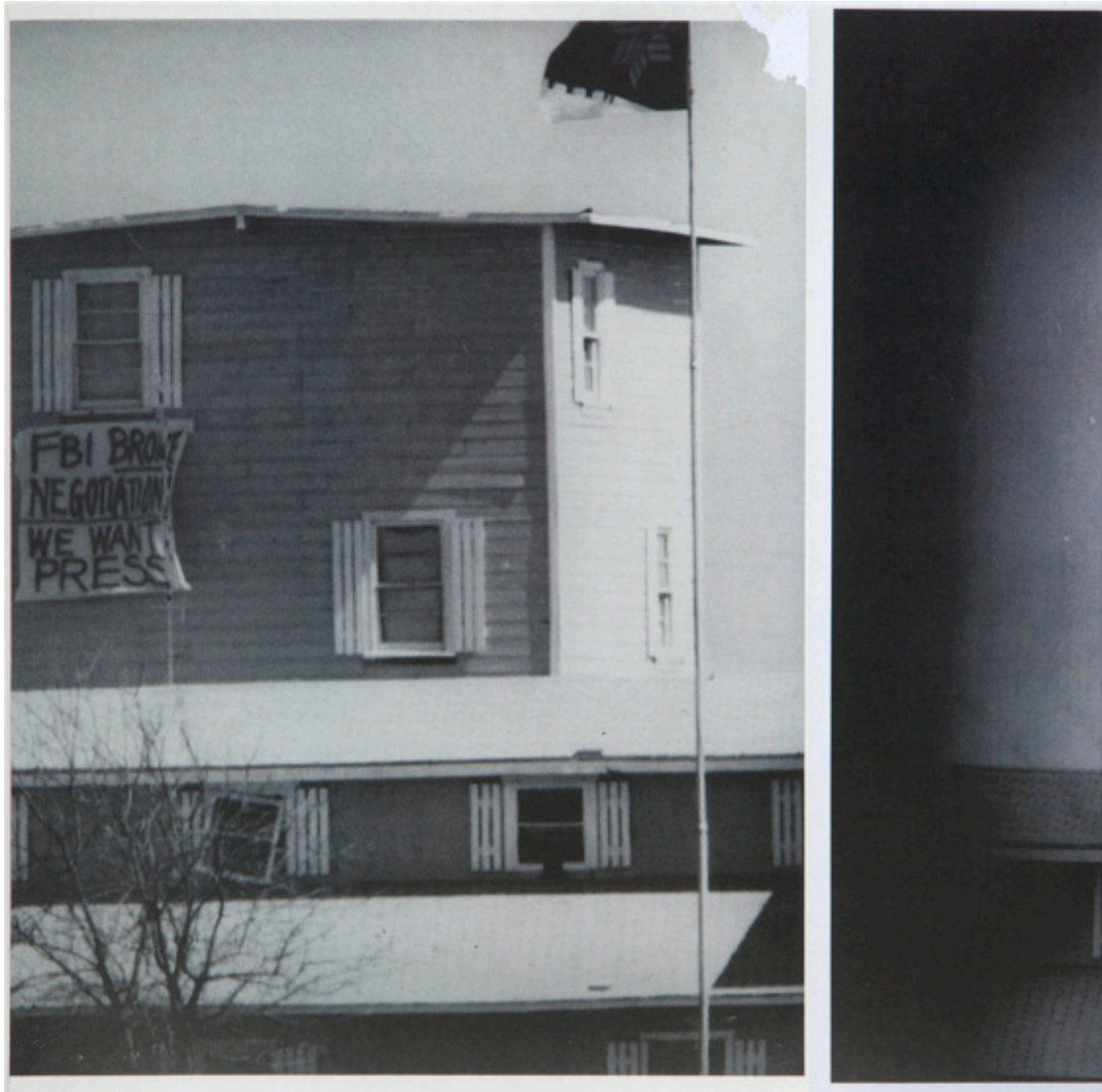
Skype interview by Floor Kortman

Though American artist Nick van Woert is known for making very large, amazing sculptures, we actually wanted to talk to him about his first music record, WACO.

Presented as part of his exhibition *Just Dropped In To See What Condition My Condition Was In* at his LA gallery Moran Bondaroff, it's not exactly a typical release, but more a "*twist of material*". As a whole, the exhibition was cohesive in its calmness – van Woert's works are aesthetically quite pleasing. Sound is an unusual medium for the artist, but van Woert sculpted the record the same way he would his other works. Manipulating the material to give a false sense of comfort, the exterior is only really there to camouflage the horror underneath.

The record is a collaboration between van Woert, Know Wave, Wharf Cat Records and an impressive line-up of musicians. The starting point was the schizophrenic soundtrack the FBI inadvertently created during the events of the Waco Siege in 1993, when the raiding and eviction of a compound belonging to the religious group Branch Davidians led to a 51-day standoff. One of the eviction techniques the FBI used was sleep deprivation, which was inflicted via all-night broadcasts of noises and music, including – as van Woert says – "*some of the worst songs that have ever been recorded*".

To give you an idea, we are able to stream a song – a cover of the terribly corny country song Achy Breaky Heart. The track's instrumentals were laid down by Ben Greenberg (Uniform) and ZZ Ramirez (The Ukiah Drag), while Elias Bender Rønnenfelt (Iceage) was kind enough to sigh and wail the words into the microphone. Overall, an amazing collaboration leading to one of the weirdest pieces of art we've ever heard. We are very excited that van Woert took some time to explain how his record came about, and it was great to discover that at the end of the day, everyone – despite age, gender or sexual orientation – has a crush on Bender Rønnenfelt.



What was it like to make a record, to step away from your usual artworks?

It was super fun to do because usually I am in the studio and it's big, I have every tool I could ever need, but what ends up happening is I get stuck in these habits of how I make things. I make a diverse range of things but they're all basically sculptures. I'm always looking for ways to get out of the studio, and this was kind of a perfect opportunity to do it. I want my work to be as diverse as the world around me. If I look around, everything I see is a medium. Whether it's a conversation or sounds or music, everything is up for grabs in a way. Everything has a kind of potential to it, outside of its intended use.

I read about your show in LA, and I think it's really cool that the record itself was also a work in the exhibition. Is this the first time you've done something like this?

Yes, and I wouldn't have done this for any other show. It's very specific to this show, just in terms of the thematic backbone, it made sense. Having the record there was awesome. And we pulled it off in two months, which is unheard of in getting a record produced. Because it was so rushed, at the opening we just gave them away for free.

And we played it as well, but through a megaphone.



At the time, a release through a record label would have changed the context, and instead of it being an art piece in a gallery, it would have become another music record. Did you think about it in these terms?

A common problem in art is that when you walk into a gallery and you're surrounded by this stuff that you've never seen before and its story is completely out of reach, it ends up being confusing. More and more, especially in contemporary art, the story is not immediately accessible. I am kind of tired of that, and in the end I wanted to avoid that with this record. But at the same time, I didn't want it to be an ordinary record in which people try to hear the same quality they hear in other records they love. Because it's not trying to be a musically interesting, listenable thing. It's meant to be an idea. This twist of material, a shift in meaning.

Originally, the gallery wanted to sell it for 500 bucks. But then the people who could afford that are the people I'm not interested in having this record. Part of the reason for doing a proper release in the end was also that I just wanted people to be able to take it home and listen to it by themselves.

But it's still not really meant to be understood as a normal album?

I don't think so. The music is all over the place. But when the context and the story is supplied, every one of the songs — that are otherwise completely banal and ordinary — gets a new meaning. That's the kind of thing I'm interested in with my work. I put an insert in it that describes the whole project, so when someone sees this record 10 years from now they don't think it is trash. I want people to know why these songs are together. If they don't know the story behind it, the whole thing is lost.



What was on the FBI playlist?

The music the FBI blasted was all over the place. And some of it were the worst songs that have ever been recorded, the most annoying things. Not all of it was music either, some of it was sounds, the sounds of dying pigs and rabbits, for example.

Another thing that the FBI would do also was never play anything all the way through; they sped things up, slowed it down. I thought the way they manipulated the

music was kind of akin to an artist manipulating his material, where it's stressed or pressurised, it's never left the way it is. That's what got me interested in the whole project, the way they altered the original meaning of the music to suit their purpose.

The FBI manipulated and played these songs to kind of torture people, or at least annoy them, was that your intention as well?

I didn't know what was going to happen because I put it in the hands of the musicians. We talked about different ways to do it. To do straight covers or just get those exact songs and put a mix tape together. But in the end it seemed more fun to have people cover the songs and have them do whatever they wanted. I didn't really guide them, I basically gave them a list of songs and told them to choose one and said, these are the tools at your disposal, do with it whatever you want. And so a lot of the songs did end up being listenable.



We're streaming one of the songs from the record today, the version of "Achy Breaky Heart" by Ben Greenberg, ZZ Ramirez and Elias Bender Rønnenfelt. Did you know any of the musicians before recording or were you familiar with Iceage or The Ukiah Drag?

No, there are not a lot of people who play on the record who I knew before. A lot of them came through Aaron Bondaroff, who runs Know Wave radio. And then Ben, ZZ and Elias came through Wharf Cat. To be honest, I wasn't that familiar with them at all. But it's crazy, when I first met Elias he was in the studio, and I don't know if he was just up all night but... You know when you meet someone and they look at you... he looked at me longer than most people do... like he was reading me.

I'm really excited about this song and I was told that it was something you really wanted on the record, but no one wanted to do it.

Well, it's one the worst songs to listen to. I mean the original by Billy Ray Cyrus. But on paper, it's a fucking amazing song. The lyrics are actually really good and emotional but you just don't get that feeling when you listen to the original song.

Are you happy with the boys' rendition?

I have tons of respect for that song, it totally drew me in when they were recording it. Elias's voice is just crazy, it sounds incredible. I showed up to the studio after they had already started recording it, and it was like walking into a completely different environment compared to the previous songs we'd done. Just because the mood was different. It was slower, way darker. In the version the guys did on the record, you can almost feel the true intention behind the original song because it's sad and dark...  
*it is the achy breaky heart.*

