

Spark #1.20 -Making Keraunograph, part Two

Henry Warwick

- 7/31/2001

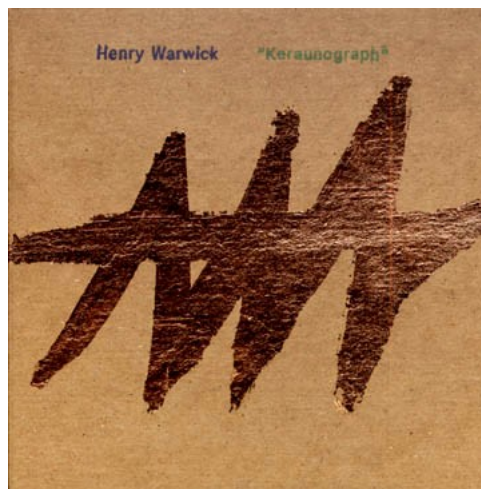
Last time, in SPARK, I left with a conclusion that I couldn't make thousands of CDs, because I had nowhere to store them, and felt a need to produce handmade objects, after some inspiration from my vast collection of recordings by :zoviet*france:. If you didn't read that article, click [HERE](#) and read it for some useful background on this week's ramblings.

Once I concluded I was not going to churn out a jillion, or even a few thousand of these things pre-printed and pre-packaged, I had to consider exactly how I was going to make them. I had to examine my abilities and skills, and balance them against the needs that presently obtained with my CD, Keraunograph.

My interests and skills:

1. my paintings, which are frequently covered in precious metals (copper leaf, palladium leaf, silver leaf, 23kt gold leaf, etc.)
2. calligraphy (I had a part time calligraphy business in the 1980s, and still find lettering arts and typography fascinating)
3. electronic music (obviously)
4. rubber stamp art (I actually won some recognition from a rubberstamp art contest in 1992 for illustrating the lyrics to "Dreams Are Like Water" by This Mortal Coil)

With a careful consideration of the above, the design of the CD cover came into focus:



A cardboard CD cover, covered with rubberstamp art and precious metals.

Now, how to do that.... I knew that my "style" is always a drive to simplicity and beauty, but to avoid "precious-ness". How could I make a small object like a CD cover stand on its own as an object of design with as reduced a set of elements as possible.

The first thing I felt necessary was to first develop a list of elements required for the CD. I considered, as a listener, what do I want to know about a work?

1. Who made it?
2. What is it called?
3. What are the song titles, if any?
4. Who produced the work?
5. Can I contact them?

As the composer/facilitator, I had to consider what rhetorical ideas I needed to convey to the listener, whom did I need to thank for helping me, and other such issues. I also had material exigencies and limitations to contend with: limited funds, limited storage space, extremely limited time, and all the logistical problems of who will press the CDs and for how much? Who will provide the materials for constructing the CD covers? Who will distribute such a small number of CDs? All this over and above the fundamental necessity of **making the music** in the first place.

This being my first CD release, I felt it was important to be as honest and direct as possible, and let the listener get acquainted with my ideas and me. I'm in my art for the long haul, and I want to be fair to others, especially you, my reader and listener. Integrity is important, and having chosen a path of artistic self-reliance and individual vision as I have, issues of sincerity and integrity tend to rise to the surface. My aesthetic is one largely devoid of cynicism and irony, but also devoid of any willful naiveté or false innocence. This instantly puts me outside of most of what passes for contemporary culture, where, sadly, most culture is presented in "quotation marks", and sincerity is seen as just another pose on the one hand, and on the other, splendor is seen as the property of the ruling classes, and the powers of co-option are built directly into the process of distribution and dissemination.

I had to look into the creative process of my work, and I realized that what I do is not the product of my own "ego", but is more a process of discovery and realization, where I make immanent forces manifest as material objects. These immanent forces, largely spiritual or exo-psychological in nature, determine the design and presentation of these objects in their process of manifestation. Being quite abstract and abstruse, the manifest results are equally abstract, and often distilled, sometimes to the point of astringency.

So, too, should be the CD cover.

Rather than gripe about the limitations I faced, I turned them against themselves for a positive result.

I resolved that I would print 500 CDs and each would be a handcrafted and individually signed and numbered edition, drawing on the tradition of illumination, stamping, and printmaking.

This reduced number would permit easy storage and the individual attention each CD required. It would also be less expensive, thusly resolving the time, money, and storage problems in one beautiful stroke. Each CD cover would be its own work of art. Once I understood the scope of the needs of the project, I could then break down the creative process that would be needed to make the CDs into manageable parts that would respond to the list of needs by the listener, and set about producing them.

The first thing I needed to do was to assemble the materials.

I knew I wanted them to be cardboard, but I had to consider what kind of board, and what color of metal I would use, and how would the information be supplied. I considered calligraphing the song list and title on each cover.

I pulled out my pen set, some paper, and then timed myself for a few iterations. From this test, I figured out just calligraphing that alone on 500 CDs would take at least 400 hours, or the better part of a few months of full time labor. We don't think so. Then I considered Rubber stamps...

First, I had to figure out where I would get the CD covers themselves. A friend of mine pointed me to Calumet Carton in Illinois (<http://www.calumetcarton.com>) They had two CD cases I found interesting, both "gate fold". One was in white, the other brown chipboard. I contacted Calumet and asked them to send me a few samples of each, which they cheerfully supplied. I then had to consider how it should appear. My squiggly signature repeats the design elements of the logo for Kether Records. I did some careful applications of copper leaf and 23kt gold leaf, each on white and brown covers.

Gold leaf is, quite frankly, a royal pain in the ass to work with. The fake stuff isn't quite so difficult, but it has a slightly "greenish" tinge to it, as it is basically brass, not gold. But gold leaf, REAL gold leaf, is a pain. You can't touch it, because it will stick to your finger. It's really expensive. And each sheet is only 3.5in x 3.5in. I tried some gold on a white cover, and it looked pretty weak. I tried some on the brown "kraft" chipboard cover, and the gold disappeared- it was too close in value to the brown. That was strike three - gold had struck out due to the expense, the difficulty of application, and the fact that it just didn't look very good.

Then I tried some copper leaf, and it was instantly clear that this was the stuff to use for this project. Gold may be a better conductor of electricity, but copper is what we all think of for electrical wiring. Copper has that kind of hypertypic association going for it. On white board, it looked too orange-y, but on the chipboard, it was perfect. It was even closer to the chipboard in value, but its reddish-brown color resonated with the chipboard, unlike the gold, which fought the chipboard.

And so, it was settled- copperleaf on chipboard. I ordered 625 covers from Calumet Carton. I ordered more because I got a price break for ordering more than 500, and because I needed to account for errors in production.

Then I had to consider the printing issues, and that was going to be in the province of rubberstamps and my favorite local rubber stamp art shop, Stamp Francisco, on Ninth Ave. I talked with Bob, the owner, and he said he couldn't help me with custom rubberstamps, but knew that I could get them done at

Hippo Heart in San Mateo, California. I contacted Hippo Heart, described my needs, and found that it would all be very reasonable in price! I could get them all done for less than \$50. With a few good stamp pads, my expense would go up to about \$65, total. All I had to do was provide her the original artwork. Given it was just text, this was easily accomplished by way of a 600 dpi laser printer at Kinko's, which cost me all of a few dollars. Within a few days, I had my rubberstamps and stamp pads. Unfortunately, since then, Hippo Heart has gone out of business, so if I ever need more custom rubberstamps I will have to find some other source...

In my haste to complete this project, I erroneously figured the only thing left was to get the CDs printed, and the liner notes written and printed. A close friend of mine came through. Through his small label, he said he got a discount price from his CD pressing source, and agreed to send mine in on his account. I'd have to pay him for the pressing costs and shipping, of course, but I was able to get my 500 CDs pressed and printed for about \$600 including shipping. Not bad!

Then, the liner notes. I knew I wasn't going to print them on the CD cover itself, so my plan was to print them on a piece of paper that would fold around the CD itself, as a kind of sleeve, protecting the CD from the rougher surface of the chipboard cover.

Oddly, I found writing the liner notes very difficult for me. I wanted to thank so many people, and I left so many people out when I did, I felt very ambivalent about the results. I wanted also to provide a theoretical background so people might have an understanding of some of the formal issues at play in the music. Overall, this was the most dissatisfying aspect of the entire endeavor, and Kinko's didn't help.

First, they cut them wrong. Then they folded them wrong. Then they did it on the wrong paper. Several hours were blown dealing with their glaring incompetence. I went to a particular Kinko's because they normally do good work for me. Of course, in the normal run of things, where there's no time pressure or accuracy pressure, they do everything correctly, and as soon as I need it to be spot on, they screw up — Murphy's Law plaguing me as usual.

After several days of wrangling with them, I finally received my CD liner notes. A few days after that, my CD sleeves arrived, and my CDs a week after that. Everything was ready... Except for the copper and the size.

To make the copper leaf stick to the CD cover, I needed a special kind of "glue" called "Gold Size." It's basically a type of varnish. Most varnishes dry to a hard surface. Gold Size dries to a tacky surface, and when it's at its prime the size feels much like the sticky side of strong adhesive tape. Size comes in two varieties, oil based and water based. On my paintings, I use oil based- I have more time at my disposal when painting, and the oil based size has several hundred years of tradition, as well as a 2 hour wait for it to achieve proper "tack." Obviously, if I'm mass-producing CD covers, I'm not going to wait 2 hours for each round to get proper tack. So, on Keraunograph, I used acrylic/water-based size, which has several advantages over oil based varnishes and sizes.

1. It gets tack in 15 minutes, and keeps tack for about 3 hours (instead of taking 2 hours to get tack and keeping it for 5 hours).
2. It doesn't smell quite as foul (although, it doesn't smell GOOD by any stretch, and they both require serious ventilation during application.)
3. It costs about of what oil costs.
4. Cleaning up a wet spill or ones hands is done with warm soapy water, not turpentine or benzene or some other nasty chemical.

Now, the long-term viability of water based size is unknown- it's a product of the XX century, not the XIII. So while the jury's out on the long-term strength of the water based varnish, I figure the copper will oxidize long before the size dies.

I procured the copper leaf and the Size from my favorite art supply shop, Sinopia Art Supply. If one is ever in San Francisco, I urge a visit. It's like going back in time to some alchemist's lair. Jars of colored powders and strange oils on every shelf — it's like a weird apothecary for artists as alchemists.

After collecting the copperleaf, I decided to take stroll and wandered over to my favorite little record shop, Aquarius Records. There I noticed something on all the CDs that was missing from my own CD, something I had completely forgotten- Shrink Wrap. In fact, I had no idea how to protect the CD once I had made it, and the copperleaf surface was going to be quite delicate. This was the "erroneous" part of my consideration... I had forgotten a basic part of the packaging.

I starting calling people and wandering the Internet. After much research, I wasn't satisfied with what I had found. A few days later, I talked to a friend who told me about a very nice older gentleman, Marshall "Marsh" Weeks, in LA whose sole occupation is selling weird little plastic bags. He doesn't have a website, he doesn't even have computer- he does everything with an adding machine, carbon paper and ledger books. If you need plastic bags, contact this guy- he's pleasant, friendly, and has lots of plastic bags - Marsh Weeks - 626.335.5544. I called him up and he quoted me a great price for several hundred polyethylene bags from Japan that have a fold over top and a tacky strip to keep it in place. I promptly placed and order, and a week later my bags arrived - I was ready for assembly.

The first thing I needed to do to start production was to get a sense of the workflow. The CDs came on 5 poles of 100 CDs each. The CD covers came in boxes of 125. The copper came in books of 25 sheets each. The Size was in a large plastic jar. The bags were in one pile in a box. I decided to "phase" the production by CD cover boxes and produce them in "fits" of 125 at a go.

I had arranged to take a two-week vacation from work to do the production. I should have taken 3, but live and learn...

I opened up the first box of covers on the dining table, and laid out my rubber stamps and rubber stamp pads. "Henry Warwick — Keraunograph" on the front. "Kether Records and the contact info on the back with the Kether Logo. I taped the logo stamp to the Address Stamp, and set up the two stamp pads (copper for the logo, black for the address) next to each other, so I could ink and stamp them both at

once. I commenced pounding. I pounded for a Very Long Time. Then I laid out the stamps for the song list, and removed the logo from the address stamp, and pounded the inside area of the CD cover. I pounded for a Very Long Time. My wrists hurt. After the first 125, I knew what I was in for, and knew exactly which hand movements were the most efficient and easiest to perform, while not sacrificing coverage or evenness of pressure.

I loaded the CD changer with 5 CDs at a time- music that was good for long tasks, entrancing music. I listened to a lot of Terry Riley, Jeff Greinke, :zoviet*france:, and Robert Fripp, Oval, Rapoon, Philip Glass, Hermann Nitsch, Fripp and Eno, French Baroque (Marais, Couperin, et al), Arvo Part, all my favorites. The work flew by, and in a few days, I was done stamping. Then the hard part... The Copper Leaf.

I had made a few "test" copies weeks earlier, so I knew how I was going to do it- it was just a matter of sitting down and DOING IT. Each CD was to (and does) have my HW monogram on the front cover, and a vertical band of copper on the inside edge.

I cleared off the dining table, and laid out as many covers as the table would fit — twenty four. I prepared my Japanese calligraphy brush, and gave it a good soaking of acrylic size. I opened a nearby window, sat down, and when finally feeling a still point, I looked at the covers, and breathed deeply. In sync with my breathing, I began painting the HW monogram on each cover in acrylic size. Within minutes, I was finished with the 24 covers, and took a break to let the size dry and gain tack.

Standing, I brushed my application brush on my shirt to give it some static and then pulled a sheet of copper out of the copper leaf booklet with the brush. The leaf lofted and hung in the air from my brush, and floated — twisting gently to the subtlest air, moisture, and electrical currents in the air. I gently brought it down to the cover, and then even more gently brushed and blew it down onto the tacky size. The size was super sticky- like duct tape- and the copper adhered instantly. No room for error, no space for mistakes. It had to be right the first time. Every time.

It went like that for each and every cover. Then I turned them over and painted a strip on the edge of each, waited for it to dry, and gently, carefully applied more copper leaf. I did this for a solid week.

It was very interesting going through this massive continuous labor effort. It was much like factory work, but more fulfilling — I wasn't cranking out consumer crap — I was making small artworks. And after a while, once the movements had become automatic, it became quite the meditative exercise. I didn't have to "think" about my work, and so my mind would wander in and out of focus of the moment, like any other meditation exercise. I was even able to assemble the work into hour stints — applying leaf for 40 minutes, then cleaning it up and setting up the next batch for the next 20. A physical rhythm began to develop, and I began to tell time by the length of the shadows on the wall. A hard but happy time.

Once all the CDs were leafed, I took a CD and a folder sleeve, and stuffed the two into the CD pocket. Secondly, I signed each with its number, my monogram, and date. Then I took the completed CD, and stuffed it into one of the plastic bags and marked the bag with the CD's number for tracking purposes.

Eventually I finished them all. The living room, dining room, and kitchen were covered with a layer of tiny little bits of copper leaf. The place stank of acrylic size. But I was done, and had several boxes of completed CDs. I felt an enormous sense of relief and accomplishment.

Next week — how I made the music.