

Indexicality Concrète

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Consider for a moment the theoretical ramifications of that trenchant reworking of the technologies and products of the late capitalist music industry popularized by black pop culture as “mix and scratch.” Transforming corporate commodities into occasions for a new, real-time artisanal performance practice, “scratching” literally and figuratively reads these artifacts against the grain, making them “say” things they never did before. Appropriating the—appropriately named—gramophone stylus as a creative and expressive writing instrument, the scratch DJ simultaneously foregrounds the inscriptional status of the recordings s/he employs/plays through strategic sampling and violations of their teleological structure, refusing the linearity of the record’s acoustic spiral in favor of a percussive, rhythmic writing/rewriting that obeys the dictates of a higher “groove” in a performative act that could be read as staging (in a rather splendid allegorical move) the refusal of that—literally—straight and narrow spiral path. Something very remarkable is going on here: an aesthetic redemption of that very sound—the familiar abrasiveness of the gramphonic scratch—that for so

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long was synonymous with technological failure, an acoustic event that only recently was still disturbing enough to require one to interrupt a recording before it had run its course.

This shift is historically overdetermined, taking place as it does beginning in the early eighties at the very moment that the technological era of the scratch—the era of the analogic recording—had effectively become an anachronism. In the current CD era, the gramophone record has been displaced by a digital recording medium that, while hardly without its own conditions of failure (now called tracking or sampling errors), certainly eliminates the scratch as a signifier of breakdown. One can do all sorts of strange and violent things to CDs,¹⁾ but thanks to oversampling, a scratch simply is not what it used to be: In the age of digital recording and playback, the sound of error has changed significantly. This has had various consequences: The moment the scratch is no longer the signal of malfunction but is instead the almost nostalgic trace of a bygone era of mechanical reproducibility, one can say that it has become auratic, and as such it suddenly becomes available for aesthetic practices of all sorts. Indeed, the practice of scratch, in its celebration of the physicality of the interface, points to the defining characteristic of this now largely historical episteme of

The Aesthetic Politics of Christian Marclay's Gramophonia

acoustic inscription—tactility, the analogic or indexical trace that has been effectively eliminated by the material conditions of digital recording.

If scratch culture—with its insistence on the physicality of the interface—can be understood as both a playful mourning for the era of indexical inscription and a celebration of the wide range of possibilities that this anachronism has opened up, the same is true of the proliferation of work on gramophoniana well beyond the borders of the pop world and into the domain of so-called high culture. During the eighties, in the wake of the extensive centennial celebrations of the “invention” of the phonograph in 1977,²⁾ there was a striking increase of work by visual artists on issues of acoustic (and specifically gramphonic) inscription, much of which was chronicled in a groundbreaking exhibition entitled “Broken Music” at the DAAD Galerie in Berlin in 1989. What this show compellingly demonstrated—not least by means of the extensive artist biblio-discography in its superb and largely unprecedented catalogue³⁾—was that, far from being a mere centennial fad, the exploration of the gramphonic medium as a site for alternative acoustic and visual practices has had a long, distinguished, and generally overlooked history. The deliciously heterodox character of this creative exploration of the techno-logics of mechanically repro-

duced sound by means of artistic practices of all sorts—often involving (and at times combining) visual and sonic performance, sculpture, and graphic elements—may well have contributed to its invisibility, due, at least in part, to its incompatibility with the segregationist tendencies of the reigning classificatory imperatives of both the art world and a certain history of art. Yet despite its comparative critical neglect, the practice of creative gramphonia (for lack of a better term) remains a remarkably vital—and increasingly acknowledged—domain of contemporary artistic activity. And while one could discuss a wide range of contemporary work in this context—such as the installations and “imaginary records” of the Canadian artist Raymond Gervais⁴⁾ or Paul De Marinis’s striking and highly suggestive retro-futurist sound installation entitled *THE EDISON EFFECT*, featuring gramphonic cylinders and other early media “read” by lasers⁵⁾—there is probably no body of work more consistently, indeed obsessively, engaged in working through the theoretical and expressive dimensions of sonic mechanical reproducibility than the prolific, rigorous, playful, and endlessly inventive oeuvre—ranging from performances, installations, and sculptures to CDs, videos, and curatorial activities—of the New York based artist and turntablist Christian Marclay.⁶⁾



P./S. 165: CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, ARRANGED AND CONDUCTED, 1997, guards uniforms /
ARRANGIERT UND DIRIGIERT, Uniformen der Museumswächter; WALL OF SOUND, 1997,
installation view, works from the collection of the Kunsthaus Zürich, upholstered chairs /
KLANGWAND, Werke aus der Sammlung, mit diversen Stoffen bezogene Stühle,
Kunsthaus Zürich, 1997.

In the last few years, Marclay has put together shows based on acoustic themes at the Whitney Museum at Phillip Morris in NYC ("Pictures at an Exhibition," 1997) and the Kunsthaus Zurich ("Arranged and Conducted," Summer 1997).⁷⁾ He has also shown his work at the Venice Biennale (AMPLIFICATION, a set of six diaphanous scrims of found snapshots of people playing music that was hung in the Chiesa di San-Stae in 1995); performed with various other DJs (including DJ Olive, the Audio Janitor, and Otomo Yoshihide); and has released a CD entitled *Records 1981–1989* (Atavistic Records, Chicago: ALP62CD) that collects some of his more obscure recordings and rare performances. On the assumption that most readers here are more likely to be familiar with Marclay's work as a visual artist, and given my conviction that the issues Marclay's work

explores remain quite consistent across the wide ranging modalities of his interventions, I will focus more on the literally and figuratively gramphonic dimensions of his wide-ranging creative output.

Nowhere is the engagement with mechanically reproduced sound more efficiently catalogued than in Marclay's 1984 video entitled (appropriately) RECORD PLAYERS,⁸⁾ which was included in a recent evening of performance and video that he curated at Manhattan's Knitting Factory (and which also featured his improvisations with the singer Shelley Hirsch and the Chinese pipa player Min Xiao-Fen, as well as videos and performances by Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth). The first thing one sees—and hears—in RECORD PLAYERS—whose very title names in its polysemy the re- or dis-placement of audio technology (the record player or gramophone) by ludic per-

formance practices—are a field of long-playing records, those charming acoustic anachronisms, being gently scratched by the fingers of numerous hands, the materiality of the barely visible spiral grooves of the gramophonic surfaces rendered audible by a literally digital rubbing against the grain. But the harmlessness of this opening is deceptive. Soon the mild topical performance of vinylity—the signature gesture of turntablism (be it the avant-gardist recasting of the moves of the club DJ or Marclay's more radicalized variants which include beating the record against the tone-arm or against the record player itself)—gives way to another, more dramatically percussive movement: After having been scratched and then rubbed against each other, the records are now subjected to a set of increasingly aggressive operations. The gentle high-pitched rustle extracted from the physicality of the LP's topographic structure is quickly replaced by the characteristic warbling that results from waving the semi-flexible discs in the air like fans, teasing out sound from that very distorted condition—the warp—which was the guarantee of disfunctionality in a bygone gramophonic era.

But this is only a prolegomenon to the even more brash acoustics of these same sound carriers being bashed against each other until finally—pushing the LP's warp capacity beyond its limit—there erupts the violent staccato which is the sonic signature of the

discs being shattered into pieces. Here—in a gesture that is the exact inversion of Marclay's UNTITLED (1987) that foregrounded the fetishism of the vinyl disc as such by means of a limited and signed edition of grooveless, 12 in. records with blank gold labels individually presented in elegant, ultrasuede drawstring pouches⁹⁾—the materiality of the gramophone record as thing—in this case the brittleness of the disk itself—is again harvested for its sonic yield. For those who have ever wondered what it sounds like when you break a record in half would be fascinated by the vast aural array of rhythmically—almost fugally—edited instances of this transgressive gesture that marks the dramatic highpoint of the performance. What is not immediately evident is that this very gesture—albeit under more controlled conditions—is



also the mode of production for Marclay's corpus of *Recycled Records* from the early 1980s, gramophonic montages constructed out of pieces of other (broken) LPs that are then carefully cut to size and glued together to form a composite whole. In a manner reminiscent of Milan Knizak's Fluxus practice of abusing records by burning, scratching, painting, cutting, and then re-assembling them, Marclay creates gramophonic hybrids which—thanks to the liberal use of colored vinyl—work not only as compelling visual artifacts which materialize the DJ's practice of gramophonic mixing, but also as functional sound carriers which, when played, render their own material heterogeneity readable in the form of regular and clearly audible pops and skips.

In the final section of Marclay's video, the dropping of the acoustic shards onto the floor signals the transition to the comparatively calmer, but semiotically dense performative coda which involves systematically stepping and walking on the vinyl detritus, literally impressing upon the grooves another chance inscription whose aleatory singularity (no two records are marked by the same footsteps) stands in marked contrast with the LP's status as a mechanically reproduced multiple (every record is an example of a set of identical iterations). Here again the video invokes a strategy that informs a number of Marclay's other works, best exemplified, perhaps, in *RECORD WITHOUT A COVER* (1985)—a record of Marclay's works which was sold without sleeve or dustjacket and with an explicit admonition not to provide it with either—and in *FOOTSTEPS* (1989) in which Marclay "tiled" a gallery floor with 3500 identical LPs of recorded sounds of footsteps which visitors walked over during the six weeks of the installation; the one-sided records were then boxed and sold as a limited edition of "unique" artifacts.¹⁰ Each LP combines recorded footsteps (present as indexical gramophonic traces) and the acoustic consequences of the random surface abrasions caused by—equally indexical—traces of the actual gallery visitor's footsteps. The resulting—sonically compelling—*mis-en-abîme* of indexicality not only translates into material terms the theoretical stakes of Marclay's turntablist activities—the encounter of prerecorded and "real-time" indexicalities—but also simultaneously reveals both



CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, *FOOTSTEPS*, 1989, 3500 vinyl records, installation, Shedhalle Zurich / *SCHRITTE*, 3500 Vinylschallplatten.

his "live" and his artefactual practices as performative presentations of the central semiotic signature of gramophonic inscription—that is the index.

On the surface, as it were, it might look as if Marclay is simply replacing the delicate decryption technology which is the gramophonic stylus with a more crude interface, one that attempts to "read" the gramophone record in different—and seemingly more violent—ways. And yet as any audio technician will confirm, the violence of the latter—scratching, etc.—differs only in degree and not in kind from the former, seemingly "proper" scansion of the acoustic grooves. For each time a gramophone needle traces its path through the hills and valleys of the LP's pre-recorded acoustic spiral, what is actually—albeit largely imperceptibly—happening is that the grooves are not only being degraded (they wear out, as everybody knows from the sad fate of their favorite all-too-often-played LP) but they are also inscribing the present moment of the playback, the acoustics of the playback environment, into the vinyl palimpsest. In other words, every playing of any gramophone record is also already a scratching, a defacement, a particularization of the multiple. The foregrounding of that gesture of particularization—wresting singu-

larity out of, or imposing it onto the order of iterability, making a unique object out of the mechanically reproduced multiple, be it by means of performance, installation, or any other sort of strategic violence—is, I would argue, at the core of all of Marclay's work. And it is here that one discovers nothing less than a staging of the central (indexical) logic of the gramophonic order, the condition of the LP as trace of both whatever is recorded on it and of the vagaries of its subsequent performance history. Marclay's oeuvre thus also turns out to be a systematic exploration of the very economy of technologized memory—the involuntary mnemonic specificity of the acoustic patina—which is forever lost in the age of digital acoustic inscription.

1) The new possibilities of CD sampling errors—which have been explored recently by avant-electronic groups such as Oval—have long been the focus of the Japanese Fluxus artist Yasunao Tone, as systematically demonstrated in his 1997 CD *Solo for Wounded CD* (Tzadik/New Japan). For some interesting

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, *RECYCLED RECORDS*, 1984, collage /
REZYKLIERTE SCHALLPLATTEN, Collage.



reflections on the techno-pragmatics of gramophonic vs. CD error production, see the discussion between Marclay and Tone in *Music* (NYC) No. 1 (1997), pp. 39–46.

2) See, for example, *Le Magasin du Phonographe* (Brussels, 1977), *Le Phonographe a Cent Ans 1877–1977* (Paris, 1977), as well as special issues of audio magazines such as *Studio Sound* 9:6 (June 1977), *Son* (July–August 1977), and others.

3) Ursula Block and Michael Glasmeier, eds., *Broken Music. Artists' Recordworks* (Berlin: DAAD and Gelbe Musik, 1989). The illustrated "Artists' Recordworks: A Compendium" takes up almost 200 pages of the now out-of-print volume. A year earlier Block also co-curated an exhibit with Marclay at the Emily Harvey Gallery in NYC entitled "Extended Play" in which the catalogue came in the form of a 45 rpm disk-sized box containing loose pages, each devoted to one artist. For a more text-based compendium from almost the same time, see Dan Lander and Micah Lexier, eds., *Sounds by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole & the Walter Phillips Gallery, 1990), a collection of writings on and by sound artists including a "Sound Page" by Marclay which consists of a bound (and consequently unplayable) flexidisk without a hole. The neo-gramophonic fascination evident here is also manifest in a renewed focus on phonographic issues in the work of a wide range of contemporary cultural theorists including, to name just a few, Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford University Press, 1999); Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York/London: Routledge, 1993); Douglas Kahn and Gregory Whitehead, eds., *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA/London: MIT Press, 1992), and *Essays in Sound*, vols. 1 & 2 (Darlinghurst, NSW: Contemporary Sound Arts, 1992/1995).

4) Raymond Gervais' series of impossible records entitled *Disques de l'Imaginaire* are conceptual sound pieces in which he imagines the acoustic encounter of deceased musical figures from radically different historical epochs.

5) Shown at the San Francisco Art Institute and numerous other venues, De Marinis's exhibition, "The Edison Effect" was accompanied by a CD *Listener's Companion* (Het Apollohuis, Eindhoven: ACD 039514).

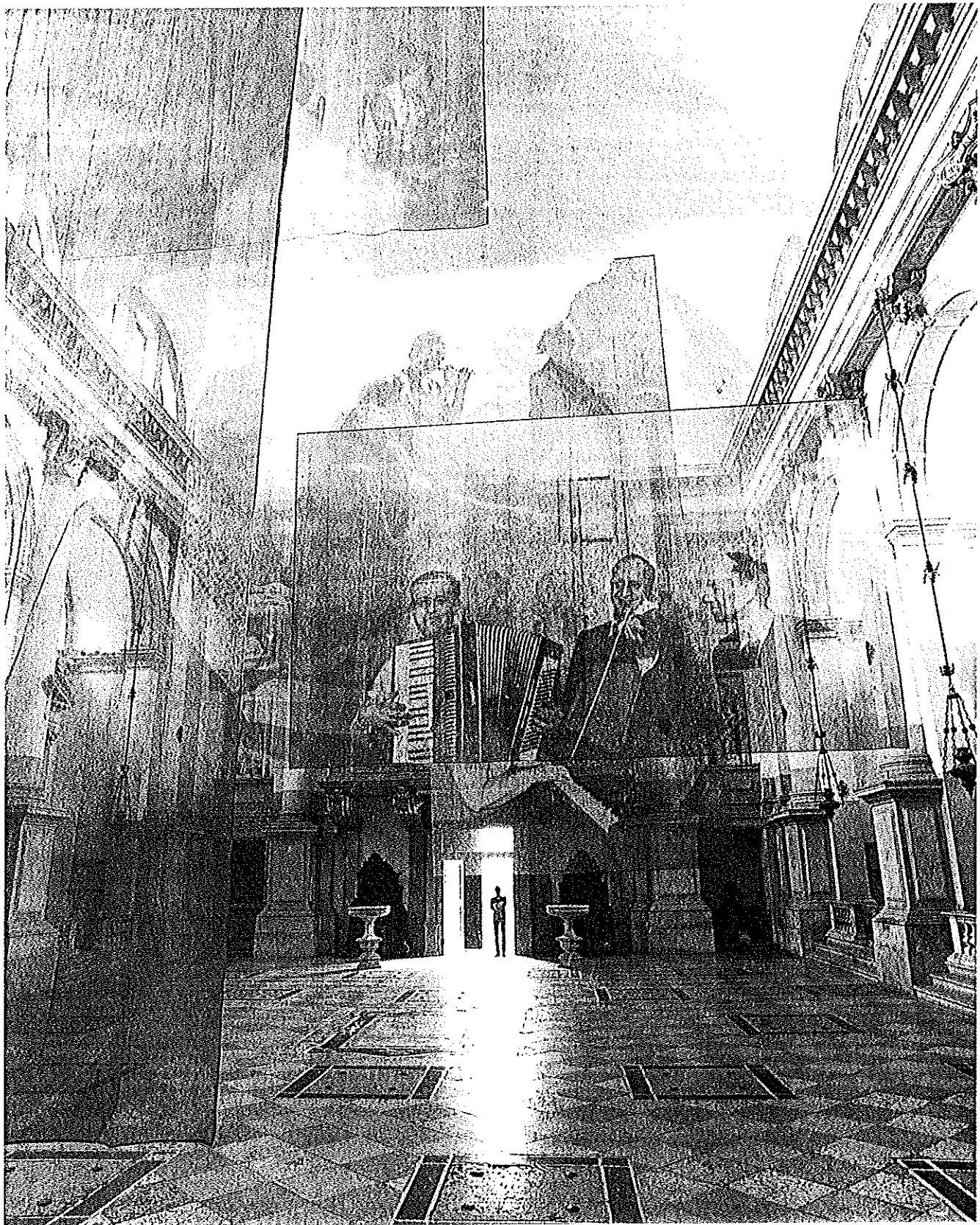
6) For an extensive chronology of Marclay's solo and group exhibitions, a bibliography of reviews and catalogues, as well as a discography and listing of his collaborations and group projects, see the catalogue entitled *Christian Marclay* published by the DAAD Galerie in Berlin in collaboration with the Fri-Art Centre d'Art Contemporain in Fribourg (Switzerland), 1994.

7) See especially the playful and generously illustrated burlesque edition of *züritip* which accompanied the Zurich exhibit.

8) Based on a performance that took place at The Kitchen in 1982.

9) UNTITLED (RECORD WITHOUT A GROOVE), (Geneva/NY: Ecart Editions, 1987).

10) The acoustic content of the LPs—which had been recorded for the event in the deserted halls of The Clocktower in New York City but were then glued to the floor of the Shedhalle Zurich—could not be heard in the installation and was simply suggested by the title.



CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, AMPLIFICATION, 1995, mixed media installation with 6 found photographs and 6 photographic enlargements on scrim. San Staä, Venice Biennale 1995 /
VERSTÄRKUNG. 6 gefundene Photos und 6 Vergrößerungen auf Baumwollgaze. (PHOTO: PIERRE-ANTOINE GRISONI, MORGES)