

**CHRISTIAN MARCLAY**

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# CHRISTIAN MARCLAY'S

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Taking the musical world as his primary material, Christian Marclay fuses the documentary with the imaginary, merging the public and private worlds of listening. Many sound artists have traversed the limits of silence—beyond John Cage, of course, see Francisco López, or Reynolds, or Richard Chartier—but Marclay's work is different. It either emits sound or it does not. His inaudible works may be said, metaphorically, to hum with cultural resonances, but this is ultimately only a metaphor. A great deal of Marclay's output, possibly the majority of it, is visual or plastic in nature. And yet even this is as much about sound—about the cultural universe of sound—as any recording; perhaps more so, because it concerns the ubiquity of sound in culture. Marclay's work is about the socially inscribed “flip side” of sound; it is about the very fact that I could use the phrase “flip side” as unthinkingly as I just did, realizing only as I typed it that the term derives from records, and is thus infinitely apropos for use here.

Before we consider Christian Marclay in more detail, two recent incidents serve as coincidental introductions to his work. Widely reported in the North American media, they hone in on Marclay's practice as surely as the turntable stylus winds concentrically toward the center of the disc.

Several weeks ago, I received an email—a forward of a forward of a forward, in the curiously passive manner of Internet activism—alerting me that unscrupulous businessmen were planning an act of wanton destruction, and enlisting my assistance in opposing them. A company called Master Tape Collection had come into possession of the original studio master of Elvis Presley's “That's All Right,” recorded during the 1954/55 Sun Sessions, and was planning to cut the tape into two-inch segments, mount the strips on commemorative plaques, and sell them to collectors for \$ 495 a pop.

The uproar, reported the following week in *The New York Times*, was not surprising, and the *Times* article quoted both horrified archivists and defensive Master Tape representatives, who alleged that the tape's deterioration had rendered it unplayable.<sup>1</sup> (The archivists, though,

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CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, *CHRISTIAN MARCLAY AT THE ST. REGIS*  
(IMAGINARY RECORDS), 1981, paint,  
Letraset on record cover / Farbe und Letraset auf Plattenhülle.



# COCHLEAR IMPLANTS

seemed to have the stronger argument: as fragile as the tape might be, that was no excuse for shredding and selling it, denying future attempts at preservation or reconstruction.)

Less than a week later, an unrelated story in *The New York Times* reported another curious incident in the annals of sound recording. Digging for rare funk LPs in a thrift store, two record collectors had stumbled upon a trove of handmade records credited to an unknown artist named Minging Mike. The sleeves were painstakingly faked, complete with hand-lettered liner notes, spine titles, nonexistent catalogue numbers, and occasionally even shrink wrap and price stickers; the records themselves were but cardboard discs with hand-drawn grooves and labels. Minging Mike, it turned out, was a real person, if not the accomplished recording artist his imaginary records made him out to be; a dreamer with fantasies of fame, he had produced his archive of covers, he said, so that “if it all came together one day, I’d be ready.”<sup>2)</sup>

Anyone familiar with Marclay’s work will immediately be reminded of certain examples from his “Imaginary Records” series as well as the poster project FALSE ADVERTISING (1994). In “Imaginary Records” like *CHRISTIAN MARCLAY AT THE ST. REGIS* (1981), the artist doctored mass-produced record sleeves by blotting out the performers’ names with his own; for FALSE ADVERTISING, he designed fake concert posters billing himself in any number of contexts—jazz saxophonist, heavy metal guitarist—and wheat-pasted the handbills all over town. Both projects offered a pastiche of the graphic styles associated with various musical genres, and perhaps played with common teenage dreams of fame. (As an adolescent, I fashioned intricate logos for many an imaginary band that I was sure would one day propel me into the spotlight.) Minging Mike had taken the Art Brut approach to the same idea, using his creations to insert himself in the pop-culture spectrum—even if his only audience, until two crate-diggers came along, was in his own imagination.

The Elvis incident, while hardly such a feel-good tale, resonates just as surely with Marclay’s approach to the recorded object. The story struck me for the way it highlighted a number of issues—the fragility of the recorded object, the status of the original within a system of mechanical reproduction, the desire to own the aura by means of a relic—which

have remained unresolved since Walter Benjamin articulated them in his critical touchstone, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. For the duration of his career, Marclay has worked deep within this nexus of issues, exploring the space where music, mechanical reproduction, popular culture, commodified desire, and the imaginary collide.

Marclay's projects may never have aroused quite the anxiety that the Master Tape incident did—quite to his credit, I might add—but he has often alluded to this kind of object-oriented anxiety in his work. FOOTSTEPS (1989), for example, covered a gallery floor with 3,500 records, requiring museumgoers to walk upon them. For anyone who came of age in a pre-digital era, such an action is tantamount to asking a patriot to tread upon the flag. RECORD WITHOUT A COVER (1985) was simply a vinyl record containing one of Marclay's recordings, distributed and sold as indicated. Designed to be damaged in its commercial journey from the pressing plant to the consumer's home, it thumbed its nose at the fetishization of the vinyl object even as it reveled in its very material being, soaking up traces of its experience on the market in the form of scuffs and clicks, and becoming perhaps the most literal example of "pop music" ever. Perhaps even more pertinent to the Master Tape incident is Marclay's SECRET (1988)—an update of Duchamp's A BRUIT SECRET (With Hidden Noise, 1916)—a 7-inch metal master disc with an affixed padlock, short-circuiting the system of mechanical reproduction and forever sealing the sounds within, which nonetheless remain tantalizingly visible in the grooves on the record.

While both "real life" stories' correspondence to certain of Marclay's works may be accidental, the way they harmonize with his practice underscores an important point. Marclay, who has often referenced Duchamp, is frequently noted for his sculptural use of readymade objects, from collaged record covers to cut and glued vinyl discs to actual musical instruments like the conjoined tuba and pocket trumpet in LIP LOCK (2000). But reading outward from his work to Mingering Mike and then to the Master Tape Collection—or perhaps it would be better to say, cross-cutting between the three—it becomes apparent that Marclay's entire career consists of readymade interventions that put the subtlest spin on everyday activities. By framing them, putting them on a pedestal, as it were, Marclay highlights our own participation in a never-ending system of cultural circulation. This is profoundly fitting, of course, for an artist tutored as much in the DIY trenches of late seventies punk rock as in the traditions of Duchamp and Fluxus. Despite the theoretical complexity and art historical allusions of much of Marclay's work—even his first band, The Bachelors, Even, was named after a Duchamp sculpture—it resonates as powerfully as it does because it retraces the aesthetic choices and emotional investments of its audience.

Marclay is routinely described as a "sound artist." This is due in part to the fact that his work, which spans sculpture, DJing, performance, painting, installation, video, and more, takes as its primary subject matter the world of recorded music and its accompanying imagery—even though he often works silently, through allusion alone. Marclay's reputation as a sound artist is also no doubt due to the fact that sound art is enjoying unprecedented institutional acceptance. But Marclay is not a traditional sound artist. Instead of constructing sonic installations or recording CDs of abstract tone investigations, he typically divides his



CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, RECORD WITHOUT A COVER, 1985,  
re-issue of 1985 LP by the artist / SCHALLPLATTE OHNE HÜLLE,  
Neupressung einer 1985 entstandenen LP des Künstlers.

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, FOOTSTEPS, 1989, 3500 vinyl records, installation, Shedhalle Zürich / FUSSTAPFEN, 3500 Schallplatten. (PHOTO: WERNER GRAF)





CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, FALSE ADVERTISING, 1994, poster series /  
FALSCH E WERBUNG, Plakatserie.

work between live DJ performances and visual and plastic artworks with no audible content at all. There are exceptions: among his video and installation pieces, VIDEO QUARTET (2002), UP AND OUT (1998), TAPE FALL (1989), and GUITAR DRAG (2002) all contain audio elements. But, crucially, even his sound-inclusive works are not about sound per se. If most “sound art” is about sound’s relationship to space, Marclay’s work is always about music as a locus of mediated information, cultural capital, and overdetermined signs.

Seldom—almost never—does Marclay work with sound that does not signify musically. The only piece that comes to mind is TAPE FALL, in which a reel-to-reel recorder perched on a ladder and missing its take-up reel slowly spills its tape in a growing pile below; as it runs, it plays back the sound of running water, an unusually mimetic sound within Marclay’s oeuvre. But even here, this naïve soundtrack is overdetermined, and what flows is not a flow (*pace*, Gertrude Stein) but rather a pool of allusions intermingling references to the water music of Cage, Satie, Takemitsu, and others.

There is a substrain within Marclay’s work that concerns itself with telephones—either in sculptural configurations like BONEYARD (1990) or in video work like TELEPHONES (1995), in which Marclay has spliced together numerous cinematic fragments of people speaking on telephones. Even here, though, sound fills a communicative (or miscommunicative) role. Likewise, UP AND OUT, which marries the soundtrack from Brian De Palma’s *Blow Out* (1981) to the visuals of Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966), plays out like a triple detective flick in which the audience’s role is to fill in the gaps between sound and vision.

Even when considering Marclay as a DJ—and Marclay, a formidable performer, is the godfather of an entire movement of experimental turntablists working today—few commentators actually discuss the sound of his work, preferring to concentrate on his technique (multiple turntables, frenetic jump-cuts) and material (such as the thousands of Christmas records utilized since 1999 in his ongoing performance project THE SOUNDS OF CHRISTMAS). In part this is because Marclay’s recordings, by intention, are incomplete—their real-



CHRISTIAN MARCLAY, *THE SOUNDS OF CHRISTMAS* (1999– ),  
ongoing performance project / *WEIHNACHTSKLÄNGE*, andauerndes Performanceprojekt.



ization happens only in a live context. While he rehearses certain transitions and prepares his records by affixing tape and stickers to create anticipated loops, most of his performance is unplanned. Notably, his discography features few studio recordings; most of his recorded output is in the form of collaborative improvisations with other instrumentalists.

While sound artists like Stephen Vitiello, Richard Chartier, or Francisco López concentrate on sound's spatial, textural, and immersive properties, Marclay's work as a DJ has tended to be primarily allusive in nature, whether remixing artists from Jimi Hendrix to Louis Armstrong on his *More Encores* (1988) record or zigzagging from genre to genre within the ensembles like John Zorn's. Marclay's allusive effects outstrip even his intentions. As he once explained to me, discussing his performances, "People recognize things that I'd never played. Because they were expecting recognition, I would create this dense mix and they would recognize a recording, and they would come up after the gig and say, 'Oh, you played this...' Well, no."<sup>3</sup>) Even the ghosts in Marclay's music come singing of the known world. In his silences resonate the strains of a version of an Elvis song nevermore to be reproduced; in his dizzying collisions of familiar songs, even Mingering Mike might hear his own voice rumbling deep in the mix.

1) Robin Pogrebin, "All Shook Up Over Cutting and Selling of Elvis Tape," *The New York Times*, January 28, 2004.

2) Neil Strauss, "A Well-Imagined Star," *The New York Times*, February 2, 2004.

3) Conversation with the author, November 5, 2003.