

A blue-tinted photograph of a person's hands and feet on a floor covered with vinyl records. The person is wearing a light-colored jacket and dark pants. The floor is covered with several vinyl records, some of which are being stepped on. The overall mood is artistic and musical.

FESTIVAL

ISSUE 1

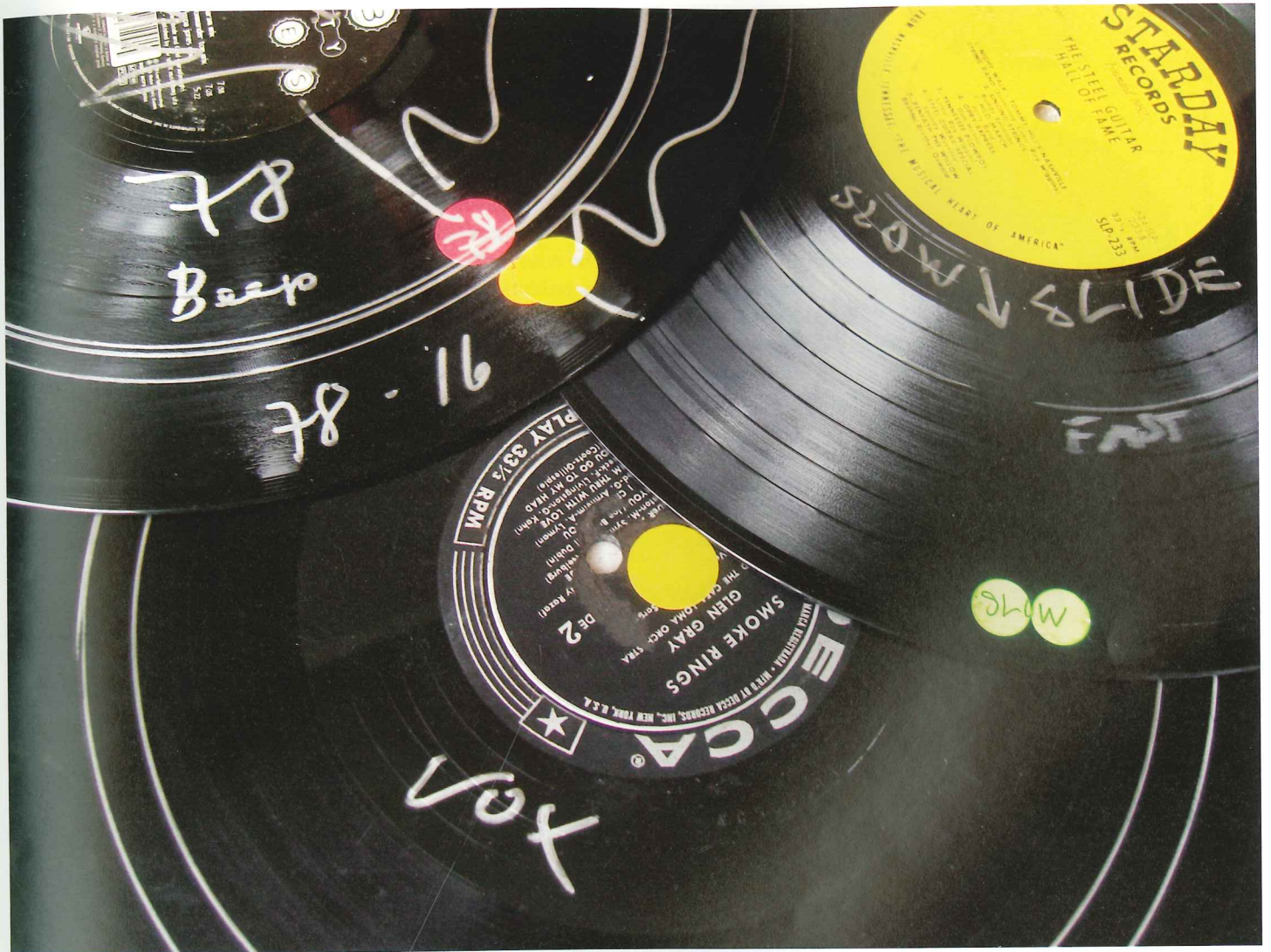
CHRISTIAN MARCLAY: FESTIVAL

Liz Kotz: Marked Records/Program for Activity • Susan Tallman: All the World's a Stave • Rob Young: The Sounds of Christmas • *Shuffle; The Bachelors, even; Berlin Mix; Swiss Mix; Manga Scroll* • Never the Same Twice: Christian Marclay interviewed by Russell Ferguson

10

MARKED RECORDS/ PROGRAM FOR ACTIVITY

Liz Kotz



Performance records, c. 1980s-

Christian Marclay has performed with turntables and records since 1979. To prepare for these largely improvised performances, Marclay often alters and marks the discs he plans to use—sticking tape and stickers on them to show where segments start and stop, indicating tracks with arrows and dots, and so forth. Many records are scrawled with brief annotations in marker—“strings,” “sax,” “slow start,” “last end”—indicating the sound materials and providing quick instructions.

Unlike Marclay’s brightly colored and laboriously collaged *Recycled Records* from the 1980s, these “marked records” are not considered works of art but tools for performance, made to be used. These visually compelling objects reveal an essential aspect of Marclay’s practice: the profound interpenetration of instrument and score, of object and inscription, in which a text can become a score, a notation a drawing, an object a realizable composition. It is a practice in which a form of inscription (a record) can be used as an object, and diverse objects (from scavenged scraps of paper and drawings to printed pastry tins to items of clothing) can be employed as materials to generate performances.

Quite famously, Marclay does not consider himself a composer, and was not trained as a musician; he does not “read music,” in the sense of performing from conventional musical notation. From the outset, the instruments he played were turntables and records. As music critic Philip Sherburne notes, this choice rendered “the history of recorded music as a vast, endlessly remixable archive.”¹ If the record has turned music into an object, for Marclay, records provide a limitless field of readymades. And, as others have proposed, his turntable performances answer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s exhortation to “change the gramophone from a reproductive instrument to a productive one”² by using readily available consumer objects to generate jarring and lyrical new performances structured by accident and interference—slipping the apparently fixed object back into the temporal contingency of interpretation and performance.

But what does it mean to use a vinyl record—a storage device, a means of inscription—as an instrument? And then, when playing these records, to write on them, to annotate and “prepare” them—in effect, using them both as an instrument (a sound source) and as a form of notation? By systematically adapting, misusing, and destroying musical and non-musical materials, in strategies developed over more than thirty years, Marclay explores the permeable boundary between notation and instrument, between music as a set of materials and sound sources and music as a form of writing.

Of course, to describe a marked record as a form of musical notation is to situate it in relation to the widespread mutation and crisis in the function of the musical score in twentieth-century experimental music. From earlier figures like Henry Cowell and Edgard Varèse to the group of post-WWII composers known as the New York School, the intimate relation between unconventional sound sources and reimagined notational forms spurred an array of unorthodox notations, graphic scores, and kit-like scores. Already in the 1940s, John Cage assembled boxes of screws, felt, and other miscellany to be placed between piano strings in his prepared piano pieces, distributing these materials and carefully diagrammed and measured “tables of preparations” among the more conventional-looking musical scores.³ By the late 1950s, Cage’s scores for indeterminate compositions like *Fontana Mix* (1958) consisted of unbound sheets of graphic materials—pages covered with curved lines, and transparent sheets of randomly placed points—that performers could use to generate a playable score, according to the work’s lengthy instructions. In a similar vein, by the early 1960s, La Monte Young was drafting calligraphic swirls and lines on cards, based on an awareness that a line or drawing was “something you could play.”⁴

PHOTOGRAPH BY SETH ERICSON. ALL IMAGES THIS PAGE COURTESY THE ARTIST AND PAULA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK



Recycled Records, 1981–85. Collaged vinyl records, dimensions variable.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ADAM REICH

In this new game of music, notation relinquishes its previous historical function of representing the work and determining its structure. After Cage et al, the score is no longer a representation of the work, but a text that initiates it, that sets it in motion. In quite crucial ways, the work now resides in the realization.⁵ If, in the Western classical tradition, notation was understood as "any graphic means of representing sounds, either by symbolizing them, or by providing instructions for producing them physically,"⁶ Marclay's work explores the sheer perceptual impossibility of symbolizing sound, or representing it in textual or graphic forms.

Historically, we understand this crisis of the score not only as a breakdown of the classical tradition, but also as a mark of how technologies of sound recording, production, and reproduction have challenged and supplanted the score's function to register, preserve, and transmit musical practice. Unlike the precision and relentless repetition of the phonograph recording, the score provides an incomplete schema, one that generates unlimited new realizations. As the philosopher Roman Ingarden argued in 1928, "it was precisely the certain imperfections of this system . . . namely, the incomplete determination of the work by the score, that

has this advantage over preserving the work by recording: that it reveals the essential structure of the work, that is to say, that on the one hand the 'fixed' relatively invariant schema, and on the other hand, the multiplicity of possible various profiles through which a work may manifest itself."⁷ While this notion of an integral "essential structure" no longer holds for much modern music, the productivity of this "incomplete determination" offers a compelling rationale for diverse forms of graphic, written, and event object-based notations.

A visual artist as well as a turntablist, Marclay explores the complex materiality of industrially produced music: "Recording technology has turned music into an object, and a lot of my work is about that object as much as it's about the music."⁸ While every reading is in some sense a writing, an interpretation that rewrites the source, Marclay's diverse projects constantly test the limits of bound static objects and contingent temporal performance, and the limits of what can be made readable as music.

In various interviews, Marclay has recounted his initial shock, upon moving to the U.S., that a record, rather than being "this object to be respected, collected and stored for posterity," was now "just a cheap commodity to be used and abused."⁹



Record Without a Cover, 1985/1999. 12 inch picture-disc reissues 1985 recording. Published by Locus Solus, Japan.

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS
for Brass Quartet

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY
NOV 85

A RATHER SLOW
p
m
cresc
ff

B FASTER
mf
ff

Z FAST
false singing 5x

14

-NOTES-

The Quartet is a collage of musical excerpts in various styles. Each excerpt is lettered. Excerpts are arranged for the instruments in solo/duo/trio or quartet combinations. Alignment of simultaneous excerpts is free after the notated beginning points, each excerpt proceeding at its own indicated tempo. There should be no effect of grand pause. Move right through the changes.

— Score prepared by BOB JAMES
(Thanks to Frank London, Steve Bernstein, Jim Staley, Vincent Chancey)

Through the Looking Glass (detail), 1985. Ten photocopied pages, each 14 x 8 1/2 in.

The very cheapness and ubiquity of the thrift-store record allow it to become material for reuse and rewriting, turning it into another kind of ephemera, a surface, like paper, that could be used for new markings. Of course, it is not only the ubiquity but the fragility of records that lend themselves to this treatment. Embedded in an inherently fragile form of storage and inscription, phonograph grooves are altered with every pass of the stylus. As Thomas Levin notes, "every playing of any gramophone record is also a scratching, a defacement, a particularization of the multiple."¹⁰

This intermingling of object, instrument, and notation is manifested in Marclay's *Record Without a Cover* (1985), as the embossed surface on one side of the record informed buyers "do not store in a protective package." Theodor Adorno described the gramophone record as "the first means of musical presentation that can be possessed as a thing."¹¹ *Record Without a Cover* opens this "thing" to constant change and alteration. Accidental scratches and abrasions accumulate on its surface—rendering it "the perfect record" in Marclay's words: "a living record . . . revealing the musical properties that the record has built into itself."¹² The object is both an instrument and a set of instructions for a performance.

Played on a turntable, the record gradually shifts from static and dust to surface pops and noise to recognizable sound. This collision or layering of real-time and recorded traces leaves us unable to distinguish between original recordings and surface damage. Marclay has described how, when making the edition, "I didn't want to publish a finished composition but rather one open to changes, to accidents."¹³

What links a notational scheme and instrumentation is a shared archive of possible sounds—like the way the piano is tuned to comprise discrete notes that can be rendered in conventional grand-staff notation. Experimental music has a long history of musicians and composers creating their own instruments, from Cage's prepared pianos to Harry Partch's handmade microtonal instruments. Like a notation, an instrument proposes a set of rules, which can then also be altered, with a limited set of sound sources, techniques, and possible combinations that can be used to generate a grammar. In *Wind Up Guitar* (1994), Marclay has attached old-fashioned windup music-box mechanisms to a guitar, adding prerecorded melodies to its possible repertoire of sounds—creating an altered instrument that requires new ways of being played. In Marclay's expanded idea of what a score is, he may

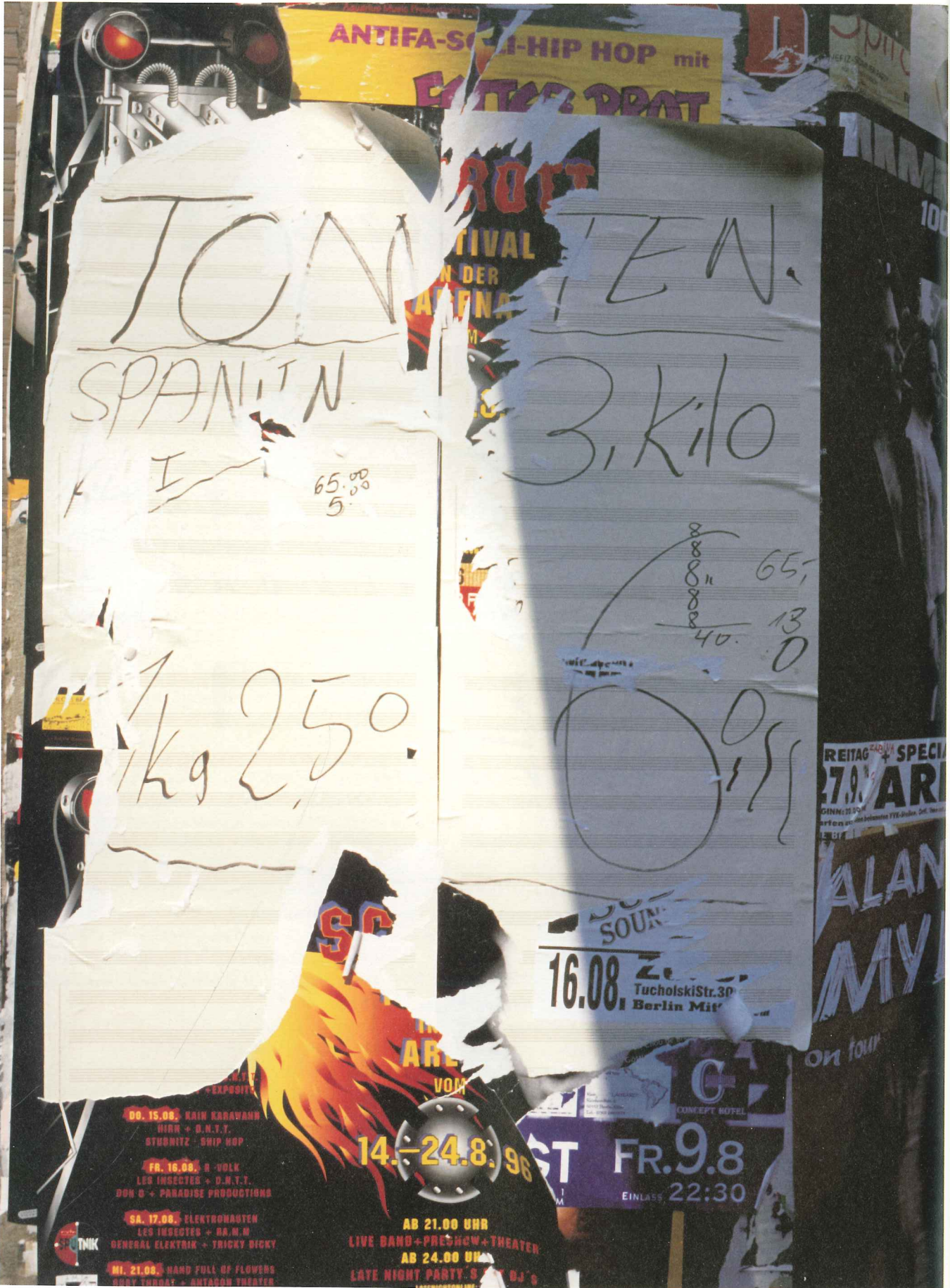
The word "Musigram" is written in a cursive script on a single musical staff. The staff has a treble clef on the left and a double bar line on the right. The letters are black ink on a light-colored background.A musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 2/4 time signature. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Below the staff, the words "THE BACHELORS" are written in a bold, sans-serif font.

THE BACHELORS

A musical staff with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 7/8 time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. Below the staff, the word "EVEN" is written in a bold, sans-serif font.

EVEN

Musigram, Box 821
Orem, Utah 84057

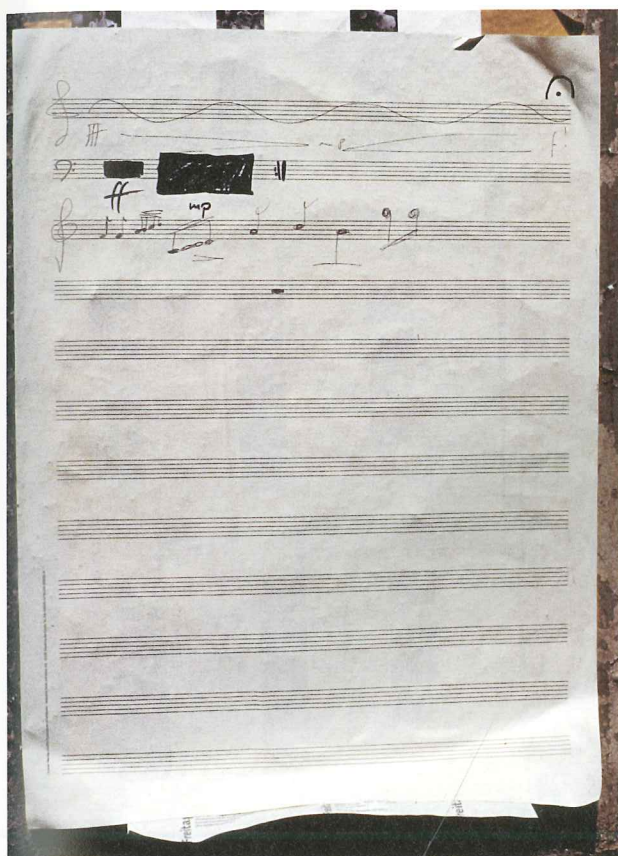


16

Graffiti Composition, 1996-2002. Mixed media, dimensions variable.



Graffiti Composition, 1996–2002.



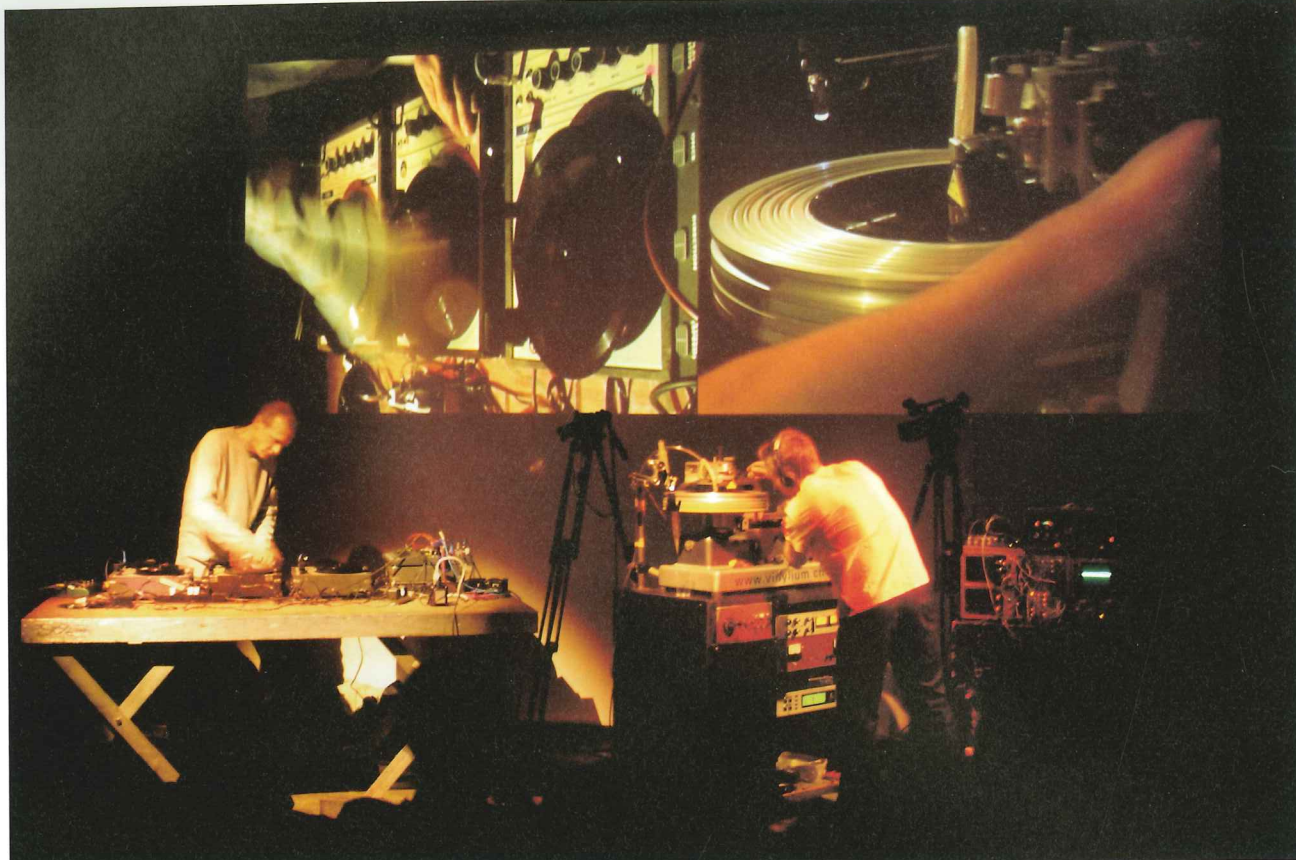
Graffiti Composition, 1996–2002.

provide a sound archive, or set of materials, for musicians to use—typically quite open structures within which anything can happen. Using materials like cards or scraps of paper that can be selected and rearranged, this practice recalls the graphic scores and “open form” scores of the 1950s and 1960s. Marclay’s model is both more social, grounded in concrete models of performance practice, and more visual, focused on these score materials as objects, with a physical and tactile immediacy that need not subordinate them to their use in performance.

Since Marclay does not write music, his first actual “scores” were made through delegated writing. *Musigram* (1979) was made by submitting the band’s name, “Bachelors, even,” to a firm—discovered in an advertisement in the back of a magazine—that would translate words into musical notation; the ornately calligraphed *Musigram* is more a visual and conceptual object than an actual score. And, in *Through the Looking Glass* (1985), Marclay had a complex sonic collage of prerecorded brass music transcribed into grand-staff notation, a gesture that challenges the linear constraints of notation by asking it to translate a sound collage. Understood more as a record or transcription than a plan for live performance, the resulting score was performed only once, at Roulette in New York in 1985.

Paradoxically, it was working with virtuoso musicians, through his involvement with John Zorn’s early 1980s *Game Pieces* for instance, that opened up Marclay’s sense of what types of materials could be played or interpreted to yield a performance. In a 2002 interview, he recalls, “I was able to put my technique, my way of making music in the context of real musicians. That experience was really interesting . . . I learned how to improvise more, because I used to do more structured sets, I used to practice, to number my records and compositions . . . So I learned improvisation and . . . how to collaborate.”¹⁴

Such uncontrolled collaborations became a pervasive thread in Marclay’s work. The project *Graffiti Composition* (1996–2002) initially consisted of thousands of printed posters of staff lines that were pasted up all over Berlin in the summer of 1996. After these blank pages were marked on, torn, defaced, and used for all kinds of messages and signs, including actual musical notes, a selection was photographed and reproduced as an edition that is both a print multiple and a score. Marclay traces the project’s development, noting that the work “was first a street installation for people to leave markings, now it’s a score, and in the future there will be concerts and recordings by other people,” adding, “I like these evolving structures where I eventually lose control.”¹⁵ In *Graffiti Composition*, whatever happens on the staff lines is potentially music, since the lines suggest a time structure and a possible pitch scale. Placed in the hands of performers, even a tear or squiggle or drawing is readable—and playable—albeit in completely unpredictable ways.



Christian Marclay and Florian Kaufmann performing *Tabula Rasa* at the Reithalle Dojo, Bern in 2004.

18



Ephemera (detail), 2009. Twenty-eight folios in slipcase, edition of 100. Published by mfc-Michèle Didier, Brussels.

Even as analogue recording has become supplanted by diverse digital technologies, Marclay has explored the material specificity and relevance of earlier technologies like records in the face of their disappearance. The process of generating playable traces through manipulating objects occurs even in the absence of a previously recorded surface. In *Tabula Rasa* (2003–2009), a series of live performances made with the Swiss artist, sound engineer, and vinyl-cutter Florian Kaufmann, Marclay used empty turntables, tapping the devices, manipulating the tone-arms, and creating feedback in order to generate sounds which were then recorded live onto a lacquer disc; once a platter was made, it was played back on Marclay’s turntables, allowing the looping system to generate real-time layers of live and recorded sound. As Marclay notes, he isn’t actually starting with nothing, since he is using the turntable, a device meant to read traces rather than generate them.¹⁶ The technical set-up allowed both Marclay and Kaufmann to alter and manipulate inputs and add effects, creating a rich vocabulary of sound amid a complex cycle of documentation and transformation.

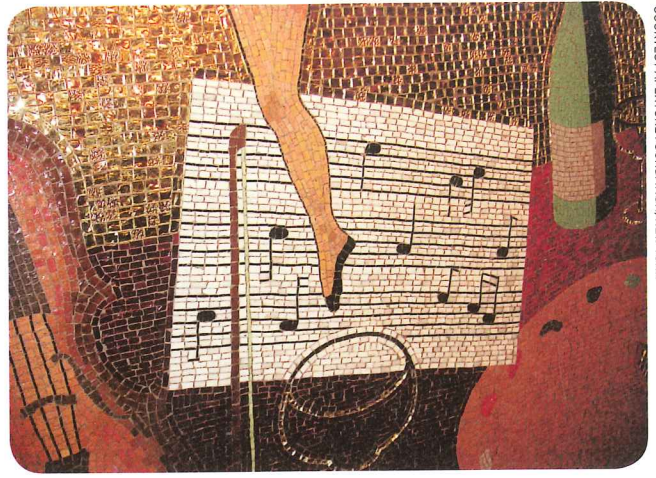
For years, Marclay has been obsessed with efforts to visually represent sound and the complete impossibility of doing so, collecting all kinds of objects and ephemera decorated or

designed with musical notation (or bits of notation meant to simply signify “music”) as well as an endless array of found onomatopoeias culled from comic books and candy wrappers, among other sources. Marclay explores the idea that diverse types of materials (including objects) can be played and used as notation. His video scores, onomatopoeia, and found objects circle around the instability of the musical sign, proposing “readings” of things that were never intended as writing. *Ephemera* (2009) presents scraps of materials collected over years. Re-examining these decorative motifs—found on cards, fliers, ads, and book and record covers—as actual performable music, *Ephemera* implicitly asks, how do you read a red silence versus a yellow field? What is the tonal difference between a dot and a squiggle? What does a city skyline superimposed over staff lines sound like? Accumulating materials never intended as compositions, these graphic works force us to reconsider what marks are musically meaningful.

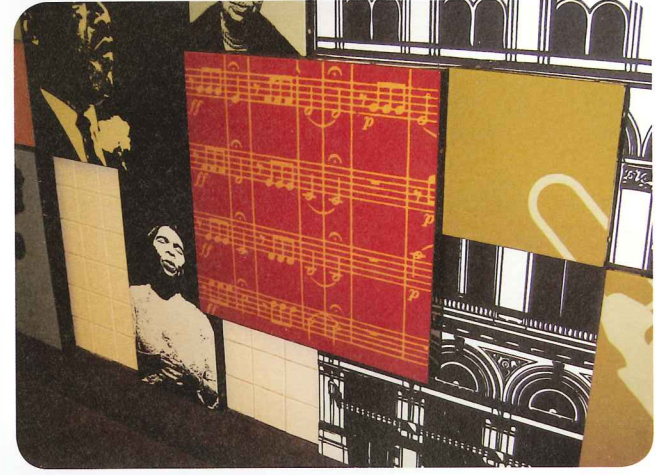
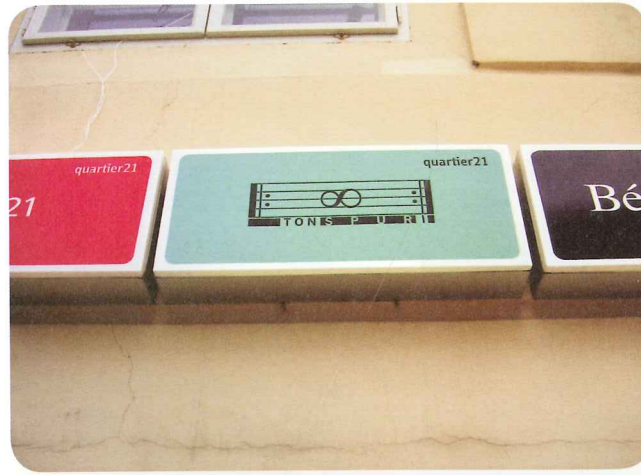
By treating these cast-off pop-cultural materials as scores, Marclay perversely reinvigorates the historical project of graphic notation, a style that has gone out of favor as improvisers instead listen to recordings. As Marclay is well aware, it is precisely the translation required to realize a



Performance record, c. 1990.



20



Shuffle (details), 2007. Deck of seventy-five offset printed cards. Published by Aperture, New York.

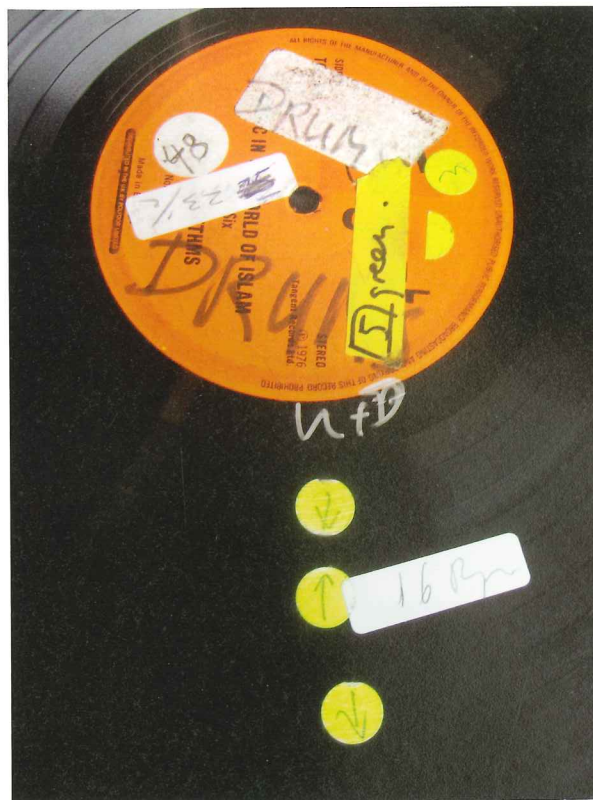
score, the room for interpretation, that generates new and unforeseen possibilities. And perhaps the more absurd the source material, the more interesting the demands it places on a performer. In *Boxed Set* (2008–2010), a collection of nested boxes decorated with musical motifs sets up a found notation. The structure of the containers sets up a time structure and an order, allowing performers to open them and realize it as a score, if a highly indeterminate one.

While many of these materials could seem merely spurs for improvisation, Marclay is clearly interested in efforts to make more literal readings. Yet he abstains from the lengthy supplemental annotation and verbal instruction that frequently accompany graphic and experimental scores. While the published edition of *Graffiti Composition* includes a descriptive text about how the project was made, the large format cards of *Shuffle* (2007), collecting visual depictions of musical signs, are accompanied by only sparse instructions and are designed to be very open, and the published folio *Ephemera* contains no text whatsoever. It is the very liminality of these materials—interchangeable as found object, visual art, and potential musical score—that is in play here.

This project has a complex and vital history. As the musicologist Wiley Hitchcock noted, recalling the experiments of a previous generation: “Radical notations of a diversity that defies generalization arose out of the happenings, mixed-media events, and conceptual and performance art of the 1960s (as did a view of music as process and action as much as sound). Each work seemed to demand its own, unique graphic representation, which, no longer a score in any traditional sense, is simply a catalyst for action or a program for activity.”¹⁷ It is this matrix, where visual art, music, and performance interpenetrate and inform one another, that Marclay’s work retrieves and reactivates in our own very different present. If happenings and early performance and event-based works have been understood largely as phenomenological experiences in the moment, Marclay’s work attends to the curious materiality of all types of potentially musical artifacts, from cast-off records to printed posters, finding in this flotsam and jetsam of mass-produced culture models for a new practice between music and visual art. As David Tudor’s legendary performances of compositions by Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, and Cage attest, anything is potentially playable. Similarly, Fluxus boxes and tactile objects suggest a new kind of score, in which words and objects can be used as notations to generate unanticipated realizations. In this spirit, Marclay explores musical and artistic practice and its potential to be continually crafted and transformed by its materials.

My thanks to Christian Marclay, Claire Barliant, and Mark So for their assistance with this essay.

Liz Kotz is a Los Angeles-based art historian and critic, and author of *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (MIT Press, 2007).



Performance record, c. 1980.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Philip Sherburne, “Christian Marclay,” *Interview* (May 2005) p. 162.
- 2 Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, “Neo Plasticism in Music” (1923), *Broken Music* (Berlin: Berliner Künstlerprogramm des DAAD and gelbe Musik Berline, 1989), p. 54.
- 3 Not surprisingly, it is this second “score,” the graphic, grid-like table of preparations, that is more frequently reproduced as an “illustration” of the work, as the explicatory functions of annotation—historically, the province of quasi-parenthetical linguistic and mathematical instructions on how a score is to be performed—increasingly overtake the representational functions of musical notation proper. In its precise tabulation of measurements, materials, and methods of placement, the “table of preparations” exemplifies the shift toward notation as the specification of actions, objects, and procedures. According to Daniel Charles, a box of preparatory materials (screws, felt, pieces of wood, etc.) was sometimes included with prepared piano scores. In this context, Fluxus boxes collecting everyday objects, gadgets, and materials appear quite Cagean.
- 4 See John Holzapfel, “La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela, New York City, July 25, 1999” (unpublished interview).
- 5 My thinking in this area is informed by the work of the composer Mark So, particularly his essay “text / composition—scores and structure after 4’33”,” unpublished essay, 2010.
- 6 H. Wiley Hitchcock, “Notation,” *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, vol. 3, ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock and Stanley Sadie (London and New York: Macmillan, 1986) p. 385.
- 7 Roman Ingarden, *The Work of Music and the Problem of Its Identity* [1928], trans. Adam Czerniawski, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) p. 158.
- 8 “Interview Cut-up 1991–2004,” *Christian Marclay* (London: Phaidon, 2005), p. 121.
- 9 Adorno, “The Form of the Record” (1934), trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *October* 55 (Winter, 1990), pp. 56–61.
- 10 “Interview Cut-up 1991–2004,” p. 116.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 “Christian Marclay and Yasanao Tone,” *Sounds by Artists*, Dan Lander and Micah Lexier, eds. (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1990) p. 345. See also Douglas Kahn, “Christian Marclay’s Early Years: An Interview,” *Leonardo Music Journal* 13 (2003) pp. 17–21.
- 13 Thomas Y. Levin, “Indexicality Concrète: The Aesthetic Politics of Christian Marclay’s Gramophonía,” *Parlett* 56 (1999) p. 166.
- 14 “Christian Marclay Interview, Vol. 1,” Sanematsu Akira, 28 March 2000, in Ginza, Japan. http://homepage1.nifty.com/A-ito/VOID2/marclay/marclay_eng_00.html (minor spelling errors corrected).
- 15 Jan Estep, “Words and Music: Interview with Christian Marclay,” *New Art Examiner* (September–October 2001) p. 82.
- 16 “The premise for this performance, for *tabula rasa* is that I don’t use prerecorded music. I don’t use records, LPs that are ready-mades, but I am starting with nothing. But nothing isn’t really the word, because I start with the turntable. So I have to create a grammar, a vocabulary using the turntable, and I start the performance by making sounds just using the turntable. Which then are recorded by Florian [Kaufmann] and then put on a disk, which he hands me and then I start, or I continue rather. So it is more about the turntable in a way, but it is hard to dissociate, because once I have a sound that it is recorded, then I use it. But there is this interesting meshing of the two. So the turntable becomes the record, and the record gets manipulated and goes back into this loop system basically. But so if there is a *tabula rasa* it is the turntable, the empty turntable.” Marclay in Björn Gottstein, “Interview with Christian Marclay,” January 2008, Berlin. <http://www.geraeuschen.de/9.html>
- 17 Hitchcock, p. 396.