

Christian Marclay

Barbican Art Gallery, London

from 17th February to 2nd May 2005

Now playing: Marclay

It was a misunderstanding. I had been meant to interview Christian Marclay over the telephone. I would call him from Liverpool at 3pm, and he would pick up in New York at 10am. I was excited and had my first question prepared; it was about his obsession with telephones. But when at 3pm, he picked up the phone, he didn't want to be interviewed. He had informed the press person at the Barbican in London about this, only she hadn't told me. So we spoke briefly and hung up. But I forgot to ask him about his obsession with the telephone. At the Barbican where a major retrospective of his work is currently on display, 750 plaster casts of telephone receivers are strewn out on the floor in what is reminiscent of a mass grave. The cordless white receivers are stripped of their connections and now lie in silent tribute to numerous past conversations. *Boneyard* (1990) is only one of the works in the exhibition where telephones appear as a recurrent theme.

Marclay works with a wide variety of supports including video, vinyl records, magnetic tape, photography and musical instruments. He builds his work around the physicality of sound and the visual language attached to the music industry. He is a performer and turntablist who actively encourage his viewers and listeners to break with the otherwise perceived boundary between one practice and the other. His work explores the dynamic space between the visible and the audible.

The exhibition includes the well-known *Body Mix* series (1991-92) where an eclectic range of record sleeves are stitched together, connecting one visual element to the next. For example, Jim Morrison on one cover along with a yo-yo on another, along with a female lower torso wearing a pair of knickers. What at first seems to be a rather innocent and somewhat effortless play with images reveals some of the questionable values operating within the music industry.

The Dictators and Incognita (1990) are both large-scale assemblages of record sleeves exploring stereotypical depictions of women and men. And, as for the product itself, the actual vinyl, well, for *The Recycled Records* series (1980-1986) they've been smashed up and reassembled into still playable records. *With Mosaic* (1987) however, the playability feature has been irreversibly lost in the collage process. Marclay's fascination with the imprints generated in the physical handling of vinyl records manifests itself in his instructions NOT to handle with care as in for example, *Record Without a Cover* (1985). The idea of records being something of a self-portrait can also be observed in *My Weight in Records* (1995) where four boxes are neatly lined up along the wall.

Staying with the idea of a portrait, in *Guitar Drag* (2000) an amplified Fender guitar takes on the impersonating role. A pick-up truck drags the guitar along dirt roads in Texas, while a roaring sound comes from speakers mounted on the flatbed. The video documents the dramatic deterioration of the guitar's body and sound. This work makes reference to the rock 'n roll practice of, for example Pete Townsend who, enraged, smashed up his guitar on stage when it played out of tune, and also to the more recent racist lynching of James Byrd Jr who was dragged to his death behind a pick-up truck in Texas 1998.

A central piece in the exhibition is the four-screen installation *Video Quartet* (2002). Here Marclay's compulsions to collect, juxtapose, collage, integrate and ultimately, like an instrument, 'play' both sight and sound, is masterly manifested. Having selected close to 700 film clips from, for example *Psycho*, *Barbarella*, *Back to the Future* and *Poltergeist*, *Video Quartet* overthrows our senses of hearing and sight. Orchestrating sound from the clips into a

musical piece, the moving imagery accompanies this soundtrack and sets a tremendous associative visual journey in motion. The sheer scale of the installation makes it impossible for the viewer to follow the action on all four screens simultaneously. It is the sound that keeps it together. The 14-minute oeuvre brings Marclay's practice of sampling and collage to a mind-blowing climax.

With a taxonomic approach towards all things referencing sound, Marclay constructs new vocabularies and his work makes his associative processes visible. The exhibition shows works from the early 1980s until today and traces of Fluxus, John Cage, the Surrealists and Marcel Duchamp can be clearly detected. Viewing the exhibition, it becomes apparent how Marclay's unique approach to contemporary art practices has influenced a younger generation of artists such as Matthias Müller, Douglas Blau and the whole practice of turntablism.

Cecilia Andersson