

# Christian Marclay

interviewed by Gilda Williams

## On The Right Track

GILDA WILLIAMS *The first thing I would like to reflect on is the fact that because you are so specifically associated with the crossover between music and art, the variety of your art-making – which goes well beyond the overlap between these two media – is often overlooked. By variations on your art-making I don't just mean the distinction between the performance work and the gallery work, but the many strategies you use, which include using readymades (whether in records or in music or in film); collage; video; installation; seriality and repetition; grids; and themes that include gender; race; language; politics – I think, to some degree – and archives. And you borrow from so many different sources of sound, from taped sound, to telephones, film sound, musical instruments, improvised music, white noise – particularly the sounds that music-making machines make themselves – and silence. Do you sometimes feel pigeonholed?*

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY No, I don't feel pigeonholed. The sound aspect is very much central to my work and people see me as the artist who deals with sound in visual ways as well as using the actual sound. I just use whatever form and media that I need and that I find is appropriate for what I'm trying to do and, in that sense, I don't feel stuck in something because I'm not going to the studio and thinking, 'How am I going to paint that canvas today?' I'll invest in different technologies because they best express what I'm trying to do – be it video, be it just a sound recording, a performance, or a sculpture, or even a painting – that's fine.

But it is an important question – especially now that I've just moved to London and I have to kind of find new ways of working because I don't have my New York infrastructure – my studio. Not

that I am very much of a studio artist per se, but one finds ways to create work within an environment and access to certain people, to technology or to certain media is easier for me in New York.

cw *You allow for a lot of improvisation in your work. Are there any examples of works that you attempted but which you felt didn't work out, and that you had to abandon?*

cw Not really. It's more that I don't want to be pigeonholed as a video artist, for instance. I have a touring show which originated in Paris at the Cité de la Musique and focuses on my work in video, and even though the medium of choice there is video, I don't think of it as a video show but more as a kind of music show where I'm using video to create musical compositions. It just happened that video allows me to have an image at the same time as the sound. The show went to Melbourne in Australia and everybody there thinks that I am a video artist because that's all they see. So now, if I've been doing something for too long, I try to do something different.

cw *The number of times image and audio unexpectedly overlap in Up and Out, which combines images of Antonioni's Blow Up with the soundtrack to Brian de Palma's Blow Out, is quite extraordinary. I feel that you really understand the ebb and flow of film – you know when it's time for a love scene and when it's time for action. Is your work always planned in advance, or are you sometimes surprised by what results from the combination of sound and image?*

cw Well, this project, in particular, is a simple edit. It's the simplest video I've made. I just took the whole visual track of *Blow Up* and added the sound track of *Blow Out* just randomly – just starting the two films at the same time so you see *Blow Up* and you hear *Blow Out*. So, it's a perfect combination because *Blow Up* is a very visual film. It's about a photographer trying to resolve a crime and trying to find clues in images while in *Blow Out* John Travolta is a sound engineer who is trying to do the same thing – resolve a crime using sound and trying to find clues in a sound recording. So, those two seemed to be a perfect kind of marriage of sound and image and this interesting juxtaposition, which is purely chance, is now fixed in this video, so it's always the same relationship.

That interest in the chance element is something that, of course, has been exploited by people like John Cage and this relationship is something I've experienced first-hand watching Merce Cunningham's company dance with the sounds of scores by Cage. The idea was



that you could start the dance and the music at the same time and they would happen at the same time, but they looked to be totally unrelated. Our brains are so used to trying to put sound and image together that we do it automatically, and we find connections between things that are unrelated, and that kind of surprised me the first time I experienced that kind of juxtaposition, I think I was inspired by that. I eventually did get to work with Cunningham and experienced that really by making music with the dancers, not expecting anything. At the end of the show audiences would come and say, 'That must have taken a lot of rehearsals to get those synchronisations just perfect', but it was pure chance.

So, yes, I definitely believe very much in how chance can happen in a very positive way and, being a musician and an improviser musically, I've also experienced that a lot when playing with other musicians. You're trying hard to be in sync with them, but sometimes accidents happen and you find yourself doing something that you weren't quite happy with, but the combination ends up being very good. The tension exists between what you're trying to achieve and the circumstances – the medium, in some cases. It's just like if you make a sound with a record and it skips a certain way – those are interesting moments where you kind of lose control while you're trying to accomplish something.

I think that's just life. We try hard to follow a track, but things happen and one has to be alert to take advantage of those little incidents.

cw *Which verge on the miraculous at times. At the end of Up and Out, the soundtrack finishes with a long gap of silence while we watch the last scene of Blow Up, which is, of course, players miming a game of tennis – which is, obviously, silent.*

cm Yes, perfect – I couldn't believe it. When the imaginary ball goes above the court and falls on the ground and the music stops... I knew, when I saw that, it was just like I knew this was the right thing. There are these moments when you know you're on the right track when it just happens. You start with an idea and you don't know if the end result will be as attractive as the idea.

cw *I have this fantasy about the 'Body Mix' series, which is that you'd throw all your record covers on the floor and somehow noticed, 'Oh, my God! Cat Stevens's hand is Sheena Easton's leg' or something. Were those combinations accidental, somehow – hybrid bodies that somehow*

*emerged from your record collection – or did you seek those collages out?*

cm I don't remember what the spark for that was, but I used to buy records every day and my studio was filled with records, and a lot of times the records would come out of the covers and never go back in because of what I do with the records – either in performance or in using them for recordings or for art – but I never threw away the covers because they're such interesting artefacts, so much thought went into the design – not always, but most of the time. If you think of how many records were published, there's so much creativity there – so I held onto them for a long time. I think it came out of constantly going through bins of records and seeing patterns in the way the body is used to sell music and to see how that 12-inch square was used to create either an identification with the buyer – so, just the face of the artist which is almost life-sized – or this kind of cropping which ended up in chopping up the whole body.

cw *Lots of decapitated women in particular.*

cm Yes, and it was interesting to see this kind of cut-up that already exists, and that limitation of the square and how the body kept re-appearing. At some point I was shopping for body parts. I would go through the record bins and look for an arm, for a leg, for something that would match what I already had. I did that for two years. I had to stop after a while because it became too obsessive. I had this giant sewing machine in my studio and I was just kind of sewing these body parts like ...

cw *... Frankenstein.*

cm Frankenstein – yes. It was also an interesting process where I wanted these to remain record covers as opposed to just being collages, like two-dimensional collages. It wasn't only about the image, it was really about the cover and that it was originally a sleeve that contained the record, so that sewing them – that kind of rough stitching – allowed me to keep these in the realm of objects, not just collages in two dimensions but almost like a three-dimensional collage.

cw *There is also their recognisability in the new context that you're creating for them. In fact, a lot of times you ask your audience to do two things at once – not just in Up and Out where the audience listens to one thing and watches another. You are also asking your audience to remember the place where they originally saw the film or heard the music, to isolate that memory and then reconnect with it. Is that something you're interested in: having people pay attention to their senses and keep*



*in mind two things at once?*

*In Video Quartet, for instance, part of the pleasure of seeing this collage of four screens of films – showing splices of films that we recognise – is that moment of recognition.*

cm Yes, I think so. I mean, with the record covers there is this idea that, once you recognise something, you get more involved with it and then, if you change the context, you're right away more involved because of that recognition. It kind of forces you into the work.

When I started using records – mixing records on multiple turntables – I would often quote things, so people had that sense, 'Oh, I know what that is. I can recognise that', and then I would kind of make something with it: play it at the wrong speed or play it backwards or overlap it with other things that would transform it and make it unrecognisable. There's this kind of weird tension between what you recognise or think that you recognise and what's really happening. Sometimes the fact that it is recognisable is more of a distraction, I think. With the *Video Quartet*, on the first viewing, most people play that game of recognition and say, 'Oh yes, I know. What was that? What was this?'; it takes a few viewings for them to allow themselves to just kind of let go and enjoy it for what it is instead of for what it triggers in your memory. But I think the triggering of memory is definitely an important aspect of my work.

In general I like to work with things that people are familiar with – so, in that sense it's not something completely abstract, but comes from everyday life. It comes from our lives, from our experience. It is the fact that it is very grounded in our daily life that, I think, allows the audience to get into it and then reach other layers of meaning.

cm *Having seen Video Quartet a number of times, I now watch the overall form more than the specifics of each film – until I get to the duelling banjos bit from Deliverance. Suddenly I can't forget the emotion of that, and I'm back to just remembering and watching the movie.*

cm They trigger these emotions that are based on memory, but also, I think, in that short fragment, that sample, there is also a kind of emotion that we understand. Of course, the music tints the mood of the image, but also we recognise an image that is dramatic over an image that is sentimental or humorous. We're quite used to how cinema is constructed so we recognise those emotions with very little information. There is a kind of musical composition going on that has these different emotions and different momentums, but there's

also the visual narrative – so it is as much a sound composition as it is a visual composition.

cm *I think that is what is unique about your work. Other artists are associated with music, like Jackson Pollock with jazz and Andy Warhol with pop and so forth – but you're interested in the overlap between art and music. The images in Video Quartet actually produce the music. It's not an overlay of the soundtrack. The work is really about the image producing music.*

cm That is, for me, really important – that this composition is edited the way sound is edited. Video allows me to edit the image and the sound at the same time. It is not so much like film where the tradition is to overlap the soundtrack over images and rework the sound. I just grab that visual soundtrack and use it as one so the image and the sound become one in video. The challenge of making a piece like *Video Quartet* was to create a composition that would hold together visually – how the four screens would relate from one to another – and how, musically, it made sense as well. So, sometimes I would find a perfect image, but it had the wrong sound or vice versa.

cm *One thing also characteristic of your work is that it is so enjoyable. Works like Video Quartet or Telephones are perfect to show someone who is unfamiliar with contemporary art or who is resistant to contemporary art. The work is meaningful to specialists but it is also enjoyable for those who are not necessarily versed in art. Is that important to you?*

cm Yes. I think the work is accessible because a lot of it is grounded in very common things and comes out of pop culture.

cm *You seem to have more faith in your music, or you seem more daring in your music performances than in your visual art. Do you, in a way, have more faith in music specialists than in your art audience?*

cm No, I don't think so. I think what I'm doing with records now is not so cutting edge as it was 10, 20 years ago. But it's less accessible – yes. The music is more difficult – but that's questionable too. I think if someone comes into a concert and experiences the music first-hand and understands how it's fabricated from old records, they usually get into it. But sometimes listening to a recording and not understanding the process might drive people crazy – keep them away. So, in that sense, yes, it is maybe less accessible and more specialised. But, you know, that's very subjective.

I don't want to distinguish these two things as two different activities. I can take a record and make something visual as well as



something audible. A record is this interesting object that is very physical but can magically produce this immaterial music.

cw *Kim Gordon, in the interview in the Phaidon monograph, asked a great question. She divides your work not so much between music and art as between the laboured works like Video Quartet, where there is a lot of synchronising, and the works that are ephemeral like Record without a Cover, which is exactly that: a record without a cover. It has been subjected to all the scratching and all the destruction that an unprotected record can endure, or the Sounds of Silence, which is the Simon and Garfunkel single in a frame.*

cw It is a photograph.

cw *It is a photograph – yes – and so it instantly evokes a memory of the song. Is that a more accurate way of looking at the different ways in which you work – between works that are extremely labour-intensive, and those that are basically readymades?*

cw Well, every type of work requires a different process and some is more labour-intensive than others. I don't think it is the labour that makes the work good or bad – it is the result. I think it is better if you are not conscious of the labour when you look at some work.

cw *But a work like Tape Fall, which is a reel-to-reel just pouring down onto the floor, creates a waterfall sculptural form and its simplicity is its beauty. You can immediately tell how it was made. It is a different way of looking than in Video Quartet, where you enjoy it because of how well or unpredictably things go together. Is it more, perhaps, in the reception of the work that this difference becomes apparent?*

cw You try to think of what makes a work successful or not, and how much the process becomes integrated into the end result, and how that influences your perception of it. I mean, of course I love work that is simple like a haiku where there's no need to add a word or anything – it's right there. But I can enjoy a poem that is 50 pages long, that's laboured, and I don't think one is superior to the other.

I think there are times when one has that kind of drive and energy as a creator to get started on a project like *Video Quartet*, which took me a year. After it was done I thought, 'I'm never going to touch a video again.' It's too much effort and too much work. It is unhealthy to sit there at the computer day in and out – I mean, it's just insane. But in the end you forget about all that and then, a few years later, you find that strength in yourself to go back and get started on a similarly humongous project. The simple work that only requires a little

sketch, on the other hand, may appear simple, but it might take many years for it to kind of click.

In the same way I enjoy playing music because it is very much about the instant – improvisation is great because you don't know where the hell you're going to go, but you just move forward. You play with other people and it just develops. That kind of instant discovery is very satisfying. Sometimes I need that, and at other times I like to be more reflective and spend time thinking about a project, and it might just be that technically it requires skills that I have to learn, or I have to get help from other people. In music I have that choice, which is great, to do something very direct and simple – simple is maybe the wrong word, but very direct – and then works that require more time and reflection.

cw *But, for example, the kind of collaborations that you do in music – do you ever work the same way in visual art? You seem mostly to remain the sole author behind your artworks – could that be a difference between them?*

cw Yes, it's different. Most people today don't necessarily work in a studio by themselves. My work is so varied that often I need the expertise of other people. The demand is quite different than in the past where artists tended to work more by themselves. I think making art today is a very collaborative effort.

In music it is more direct. You play with other people, but you also have the technical aspect which requires engineers and a certain know-how. I'm not always interested in the technology. I mean, I edit video, but I know nothing about computers. I hate computers. I wake up and I turn on my computer. I can't get away from it.

cw *You might resist this, but I find a fair amount of nostalgia in your work, for instance in the Christmas music – the kind of music we heard as children – and all the Hollywood films. Also the kinds of instruments you choose – for instance accordions, which always scream '1950s' to me. There is nostalgia not only in the images and the graphics, but also in the art-historical precedents – Fluxus and Duchamp – and a certain approach to making art which is experimental, like the early Avant Gardes. Do you look backwards that way?*

cw When you're dealing with readymades – with found objects – yes, things become objects of the past very quickly. I mean, the record is an obsolete medium now. When I made these things it was the medium of the time and most recordings were on vinyl – so people had a different relationship to those objects. Now they look more



nostalgic than they did then and maybe some people have absolutely no connection to these objects. Give it another generation and nobody will know what these things are.

Nostalgia is a little bit on the other end of what's contemporary and fashionable. It has that same kind of lightness and uncertainty about itself. There are a lot of artists who deal with things of the moment – very fashionable, very in, very cool – and you don't know what's going to happen with that. When you deal with pop material – pop culture – you don't know what the use-value of the object will be in five months, five years, ten years down the line. But nostalgia is not a bad thing. Everybody thinks that it is a slightly negative-sounding word – 'nostalgia' – but we're all suckers for nostalgia. It is reassuring and that maybe is why I use these things – like the accordion. Now it is kind of more hip.

cw *There is a gradual dematerialisation in your work – from big gramophones and big horns to albums and CDs. Your work chronicles that process, whereby the reproduction of music has lost its material presence. I still miss looking through big 12-inch cover images of music to inspire me. Is the iPod workable for you? Can digital media function in your work?*

cm I think so, but it's maybe too new for me to have enough distance to be critical of it. I'm still trying to figure out what it is. DJing came about at a time when it was just on the cusp of records becoming obsolete. Looking back DJing kept that medium alive longer than was necessary.

If you look at art history, there are these moments when something has been around long enough that you can actually get at it critically because there's enough distance from it and you're not just sucked into it because of the novelty of it.

cw *But it is also looking at the rituals of listening to music and how that changes.*

cm Yes, it's really interesting. It is a cultural revolution – computers and the fact that music is being consumed differently through these objects – records, tapes, cassettes – and now you're just plugging your iPod into the computer and downloading data. It has again become this immaterial thing that it was before. It is a interesting moment where suddenly the music industry has lost grasp of this thing that they could sell through recordings – how music became an object that can be traded. I think that is happening more and more for all media – not just for sound but for images as well – and maybe we'll feel more

comfortable with having fewer things.

cw *Do you ever work with an iPod?*

cm I don't have an iPod.

cw *You don't have an iPod?*

cm Yes, it's confession time. I'm not a huge consumer of music – strangely. People think that I just have this incredible knowledge of music and film, but I know nothing. Like everybody else I just turn the radio on. It is just that this stuff is around and you can't escape it, of course. A lot of my musician friends constantly listen to music. I moved to London and still don't have an iPod. I have a radio.

cw *I just assumed that you were super-specialised, and seriously up to date with music...*

cm No, no – I'm not. I think that also, maybe, allows me more freedom.

cw *I find in your work that there's a certain romantic longing for a particular America: the open road, as with Guitar Drag; or a certain old Hollywood film; and certain vintage rock 'n' roll record images. You seem to me more influenced by New York punk than British punk, for instance. I know that you are not completely American but not completely European either.*

cm It is hard to escape the media barrage from the US and the kind of romantic image that you described is everybody's kind of idea of America.

cw *Does American image and music-making work better for you?*

cm Well, you know, I don't feel necessarily very American. Like you said, I grew up in Switzerland, I lived in Europe and in the US, and now I'm back in Europe. I go back and forth. I'm confused. I don't really speak French any more, or English very well. It is this weird thing which I resisted for many years because I felt a grounding was very important but, in fact, the older I get, the more I realise that it is so unimportant and that motion – movement – and having that incredible chance as an artist to constantly be moving and confronting a lot of different cultural environments is really positive. Yes, *Guitar Drag* has a very American quality to it, but you could argue that the electric guitar is an American invention and that this kind of road movie aesthetic is also very much an American thing, but it's such a cliché. It is also universal – who doesn't know about rock musicians destroying their instruments? It's become another kind of cliché and I think the piece works more on those kind of clichés than traditions.



I think it is interesting to be in this kind of in-between position culturally. I think it is a huge advantage. It's partly to do with distance – if you're too close to something, you can't be critical of it. I try to think of it as something positive.

So now I have to reinvent myself here in London and, like I was saying, I spent all this time in New York trying to pass for an American and now I'm here and I open my mouth and I'm a foreigner. It is an interesting position to be in. I think more people should be in this position than we'd be living in a better world.

cw *One subject that you look at that interests me is easy-listening music. You use the covers of easy-listening records in a interesting way. For instance in The Road to Romance, which is a series of record covers – all of girls holding sometimes palm trees, sometimes guitar necks, that together create this long, long collaged road. Adam Scribner of the London-based artist group Inventory has written about easy-listening music as the 'bad conscience' of the music industry – which opportunistically put together everything that the audience was meant to like, and came up with something that nobody liked. What is it about these kinds of covers – that particular kind of kitsch – that you are looking at?*

cw Well, I think, as bad as it can be, there are a few gems. I like it as a contrast. Musically I will sometimes throw in a little bit of that kind of music or a kind of relief. It's always been interesting, this kind of idea of easy-listening because it's there – almost everywhere. Now music has changed. Now easy-listening can include a beat and it doesn't disturb people the way it did 20 years ago. This kind of background music – elevator music, or Satie's *musique d'ameublement* – you're not supposed to be too conscious of it. It is background music and bringing it to the foreground is interesting – but also, just because it's so much part of this kind of ambient noise. We don't even pay attention to it at all. In that sense it's kind of interesting.

cw *One thing that easy-listening does, often, is to dispense with the lyrics, and lyrics seem to me one part of music that is relatively little explored in your work. There is language in your work, and there are sometimes plays on words in titles, but do you look at lyrics? Are lyrics less interesting to you?*

cw I thought you were going to remark that I use very few lyrics in my music work.

cw *Yes, but also in the visual artwork.*

cw I think lyrics are a little bit like image. If you sample a tiny bit of a lyric it is usually easy to identify where it came from – maybe because

of the words or the recognisable timbre of the voice – the kind of grain and quality of the voice, or something.

cw *Do you ever play the guess-the-lyric game, where you say one line of a song and everyone has to remember the song? It's a good game for a long drive.*

cw I would be terrible at that game. Whereas if you take one frame of a film, you know exactly what film it is if you've seen it once. It's a lot more recognisable – harder to disguise in a way. Being between two languages and two cultures, I don't rely on words as much as other people do, maybe. Growing up in Switzerland and speaking French I never paid much attention to lyrics in British or American pop music. I always misunderstood the words. So then I built up this kind of reflex of just listening without understanding the words, which I can't do in French because I can understand the lyrics better – and still to this day it is very much like that. I don't pay as much attention to the lyrics in English as I do in French. Maybe it is just a reflex – an old habit – I don't know.

cw *But there is language in your work, for example in titles like White Noise or Screenplay.*

cw I like words and I like language. It is the way we communicate – so I do use it. It's interesting, this idea of translation and how language is difficult. There are certain things you can express with language, but not everything. Music is a good example of something that is hard to translate into words. I've done pieces that deal with that – in particular *Mixed Reviews*.

I think there is one where somebody is reading a line of text on a wall. It is a composite text that I made based on descriptions of sounds found in music reviews from newspapers and magazines when the reviewer would attempt to describe the sound. Most musical reviews don't talk about the sounds in a very specific way. They kind of make reference to other sounds or use metaphors.

cw *When talking about music, Americans tend to tell you an anecdote about what happened during the recording, or where and how the song was written or something, whereas the Brits tend actually to talk about the music itself. Americans tend to tell more stories in their lyrics too – maybe because American rock 'n' roll came straight out of the blues. That's my theory, anyway.*

cw I'll have to read the British reviews.

cw *I prefer how the Brits talk about music.*



cw Well, they're more literary, maybe. But that kind of impossibility, translating something from one medium to another, is something I'm interested in. The text for *Mixed Reviews* doesn't exist as a published text. It gets installed in various exhibition spaces but, depending on which country it's exhibited in, it is translated into the local language – but it gets translated from the last installation, so it always changes. So the original text, which was that original attempt by someone or many people to describe sound, gets lost somewhere.

The only fixed version that exists is a video called *Mixed Reviews* where I had a deaf person sign it in sign language. There's a person who's born deaf describing these sounds.

cw *But is that failure a big issue in your work – the failure of music to translate into the visual, and how we use memory and other triggers to compensate for the impossibility of translating the sensations of music into visual experience?*

cw Yes, I think 'failure' is one of those bad words, but it is a good thing. Failure is like a step backwards and hopefully will help you take a couple of steps forwards. I think there is something interesting in the failure – something potentially positive.

cw *This goes back to language. So much language in music has to do with the body, like the 'jacket' of a record, and 'licks'. The body comes up over and over in your work. The guitar in Guitar Drag seems a kind of prosthetic body, but there's also Prosthesis and there's Body Mix and Your Weight in Records.*

cw I think the reason it is impossible to really define or translate music into something else other than music is because it is so much to do with the body, with the senses.

cw *You said somewhere that one kind of music you don't work with is dance music, which perhaps most literally involves the body. Is it perhaps about a different way of looking at the relationship between music and bodily experience, one that isn't dance?*

cw As I said, I don't make dance music in that sense. I don't have the skills, maybe, for it. I would, if I could, but I haven't tried. But I've worked with dancers throughout my career. I worked with dancers in the early 1980s and have done scores for dancers, for contemporary dance. It is not dance with a beat because that's the traditional kind of way of making music for dancing. I mean, that's the main kind of pop music that drives the sale of records – and I'm not interested in that. My work is more critical of records and of the music industry.

cw *But you can do it with a lot of humour, which is quite wonderful. You can get your point across without sounding preachy in terms of gender, for example.*

cw Humour is good because you can be pointed and still be light about it. Stand-up comedians do that all the time. It appears funny and light. It is often sharp.

This is an edited version of an interview which took place at the Starr Auditorium, Tate Modern on 24 November 2007.