

Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Christian Marclay" exhibition

In this podcast, Jean-Pierre Criqui, curator of the exhibition "Christian Marclay" (16 November, 2022 – 27 February, 2023), talks about several works of the tour. Along with some sound excerpts from Marclay's works, his comments introduce us to the artist's universe, at the frontier between visual arts and music.

Colour code:

In black, curator Jean-Pierre Criqui

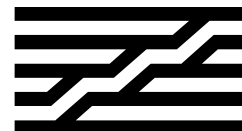
In blue, the narrating voice

In green, quotes from Christian Marclay

In purple, the musical excerpts

In red, all the other sound indications





Podcast transcription

Reading time : 10 minutes

[podcast jingle] Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears.
You'll be taken for a visit at the Centre Pompidou.

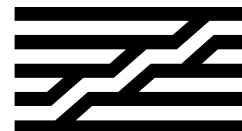
1 – Introduction

[excerpt from *Pandora's Box* by Christian Marclay] Hello, my name is Jean-Pierre Criqui and I am the curator of the Christian Marclay exhibition being held in Gallery 1 of the Centre Pompidou from 16 November 2022 until 27 February 2023.

Christian Marclay is a Swiss-American artist who was born in California in 1955. After studying art, he founded an experimental duo with musician Kurt Henry in 1979, which they called The Bachelors, Even, a name derived from the developed title of Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* [*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915-1923].

The two musicians combined sounds and images in live concerts that were equally performance art. Shortly after that, in the early 1980s, Christian Marclay began a solo career as a more visual artist, but based on elements taken from the world of sound, recording and pop culture.

He used 33 rpm and 45 rpm vinyl records as well as their sleeves. The "re" in "redo" and "repeat" is a sort of emblem of all Christian Marclay's work. In French we had a verb until the 17th century, "recorder" which meant to remember, and alluded to memory and remembrance. As Christian Marclay himself says, "memory is our oldest recording system". [transitional sound]



2 – *Recycled Records*

All of Christian Marclay's work is based on the principle of collage, montage and assemblage. Among his very first works, *Recycled Records* are collages of vinyl records, mostly 30 rpm, fragments and broken pieces which he assembled to create new configurations, sometimes abstract (coloured discs, circles of colours assembled from various pieces) and sometimes figurative, by using what were once called “picture discs”, comprising images that enabled him to combine Elvis Presley with the anonymous gaze of other stars, flower motifs and various coloured sections.

In addition, these sections were also sound sequences that he used by playing some of these reconstructed records on a turntable, producing a sort of sound montage consisting of different pieces from the different records used in the montage. [excerpt from *Recycled Records* by Christian Marclay]

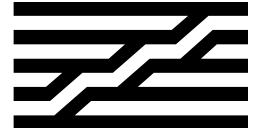
3 – Moving images

Moving images and film play a leading role in Christian Marclay's work. This is clearly visible as early as 1995, with *Telephones*, his first work which draws on the back catalogue of film.

Telephones shows various film sequences on a single monitor, in which people, actors, pick up the telephone, answer the telephone or dial a call. The montage is such that from one film to another, an actor in one film speaks to an actor in another film.

The result is quite comical and burlesque, presenting a sort of absurd dialogue consisting essentially of "Hello? Can you hear me?", "Hello? Hello? I can't hear you", and so on. [excerpt from *Telephones* by Christian Marclay]

After *Telephones*, Christian Marclay would make increasing use of film as a source from which to draw excerpts and compose his works.



Sometimes he also made films showing himself in action. *Gestures*, in 1999, is a sort of a user's guide to the turntable.

In the early 1980s, Christian Marclay was one of the first players to invent scratching, which enabled him, a non-musician who had never learned to play an instrument, to make music with just a record player and vinyl records by manhandling them to a greater or lesser degree as he played them on the turntable. [scratching by Christian Marclay]

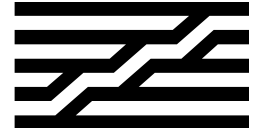
His invention, the phonoguitar, a record player slung around his neck like a guitar, made him famous on the New York music scene in the mid-1980s. [phonoguitar played by Christian Marclay]

In 1999, *Gestures*, a work composed of four simultaneous screens, shows how to use the turntable. The work is made up of four synchronized monitors or screens, with a turntable filmed in close-up corresponding to each one.

For nine minutes the artist, who remains invisible except for his hands, performs a veritable repertoire of gestures in this restricted space. Records, whether prepared or not, pass before our eyes at high speed. For the ear, the result is a joyous cacophony.

Video Quartet, a large video work dating from 2002, is also divided into four simultaneous projections, as was *Gestures*, but each of these four gigantic screens borrows from the catalogue of film, preferably Hollywood film. [excerpt from *Video Quartet* by Christian Marclay]

The guiding principle of *Telephones* was very simple and hilariously effective. That of *Video Quartet* is much more variegated. It consists essentially of music played in films, without necessarily excluding different sorts of noise and even some silent sequences appearing here and there. [transitional sound]



4 – *Graphic scores*

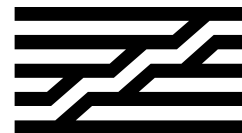
For Christian Marclay, the world is a sort of score that we can perform. These *Graphic Scores* illustrate this idea.

Sometimes they appear in the form of a game: a deck of cards, as in the case of *Shuffle*, cards showing photographs the artist took of his environment in the course of his travels or his daily life, identifying in his everyday environment, musical motifs or motifs likely to be played by musicians. [excerpt from *Shuffle* by Christian Marclay, performed by Sylvie Courvoisier and Mark Feldman]

Ephemera, in 2009, extends this principle, bringing together collections of packaging items, bags, newspaper cuttings, posters, fragments picked up here and there, which are offered to musicians who play them together in their own way, either by trying to reproduce the notes when some are indicated on these fragments or by imagining the soundtrack suggested by these samples taken from the world. [excerpt from *Ephemera* by Christian Marclay, performed by the Musiques Nouvelles ensemble]

Manga Scroll, dating from 2010, is a graphic score by Christian Marclay that measures 41 cm high by 20 metres long. It is a lithograph on rice paper that brings together examples of onomatopoeia taken from mangas, Japanese comics full of action, noise, sound and fury.

Unfolded in a showcase, the piece is presented in its entirety. During concerts, it is enacted by singers, as singer Joan La Barbara did at the Whitney Museum in New York in 2010 for instance. On these occasions, the singers follow this sound tape as it is presented to them by the artist. [excerpt from *Manga Scroll* by Christian Marclay, performed by Joan La Barbara]



5 – Modified instruments

There is sometimes a dream element in Christian Marclay's work, that brings it closer, in some sense, to Surrealism.

Prosthesis, dating from 2000, is a soft guitar that may be reminiscent of Salvador Dali's soft watches. It is a candy-pink guitar, with its neck leaning backward and slowly collapsing into a programmed detumescence.

Modified instruments dating from around the year 2000 and the 1990s are quite numerous in Christian Marclay's work. Another guitar is entitled *Vertebrate*, and its neck, curving toward the back of the guitar, is reminiscent of an animal with a shell, a sort of armadillo.

A flute, *Breathless*, is pierced by thousands of holes that render it totally impossible to play. Certain instruments, brass instruments like tuba and trumpet, are connected to each other, forming an image of impossible sound.

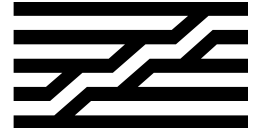
Sometimes they are also combined with a stool, as in 1992, perhaps in a homage to the Pétomane, the famous French music hall artist of the Belle Époque.

At other times, they are enlarged disproportionately, as in a drum kit rising several metres into the air – which supposes either some kind of giant landing on earth to play the drums or, radical yet again, an impossibility – or in *Virtuoso*, from the year 2000, a disproportionately enlarged accordion, with its bellows measuring four metres long.

[transitional sound]

6 – Silence

Silence is the counterpart of sound. It is the pre-existent condition for sound, and Christian Marclay constantly draws upon it. A little music box shows that the anagram of the word “listen” is the word “silent”.



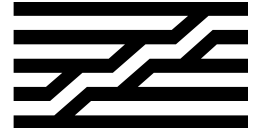
The two are permanently interconnected. Christian Marclay borrows the presence of silence from the experiments that John Cage conducted in the 1950s. John Cage was a composer who introduced random elements into composed music and conducted experiments in an anechoic chamber, a chamber devoid of all echo, all ambient sounds, at Harvard University in the 1950s.

Following on from these experiments in the anechoic chamber, John Cage created one of his most famous compositions, which might be called a found composition, *4'33"* [1952], a silent composition during which the only sounds to be heard are the sounds produced by the spectators themselves, the audience, the environment in the concert hall or the place where the piece is being given.

Christian Marclay dealt with the theme of silence on numerous occasions, notably in a series of paintings inspired by the American electric chair, which Warhol had already covered in the 1960s and in which we see the word "silence" displayed over the door, as it is sometimes displayed in theatres when the show begins, and in recording studios when recording sessions begin.

On the subject of silence and the relationship between sound and silence, between recording and the absence of sounds, Christian Marclay said this:

“The silent record, or more commonly a silent section on a record, reveals the medium more than recorded sound can. A silent record is no longer a simulacrum but an empty bearer of sound; stripped of music it reveals its imperfection and vulnerability. Only the surface noise and incidental blemishes are audible, clicking and crackling. Silence on a record demonstrates the uselessness of distinguishing noise and silence from music, just as did John Cage’s *4'33"*”. [transitional sound]



7 – *Guitar Drag*

Guitars are one of the emblems of popular music, and Christian Marclay has used them on several occasions.

In 2000, he created a very impressive video work called *Guitar Drag*. The film, shot in Texas, was made at the scene of a tragedy that took place some years earlier in which an African American man named James Byrd was lynched by white men who dragged him behind a truck.

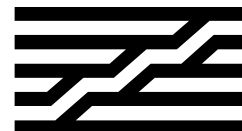
For *Guitar Drag*, Christian Marclay sort of reactivated this racist murder by replacing James Byrd with an electric guitar, a type of Fender Statocaster, which was dragged behind a truck with an amplifier, transmitting the sounds of the guitar at very high volume. [excerpt from *Guitar Drag* by Christian Marclay]

There is also a destructive element in this work: first, destruction in the murder of a man, then the destruction of the guitar itself, which is reminiscent of Jimi Hendrix burning his guitar or Pete Townshend, the Who's guitarist, smashing his own guitar at the end of concerts.

Destruction is one of the driving forces of modern and contemporary art. Picasso said: "A picture is a sum of destruction" and Mondrian called his art an "art of destruction". With *Guitar Drag*, Christian Marclay reactivates this theme of destruction in art in a funereal manner, like a monument commemorating the memory of a man who was murdered and disappeared. [transitional sound]

8 – Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia is a verbal transcription of real or imaginary sounds. Christian Marclay look for them notably in Japanese mangas. He cuts them out, assembles them, combines them and composes pictures that can evoke American expressionist painting, or collages of the type made by Kurt Schwitters in the 1920s and 1930s.



In 2015, still using onomatopoeia from mangas or comic strips, Christian Marclay composed a mute video installation, *Surround Sounds*. The work is completely immersive. We enter into a constantly moving space where, on the four walls, multicoloured examples of onomatopoeia twist and turn and unfold.

A little later, for his series of xylographs or engravings entitled *Screams*, still playing with the dialectic of sound and silence, Marclay used faces taken from mangas, with characters screaming, which he enlarged massively and presented in complete silence. [transitional sound]

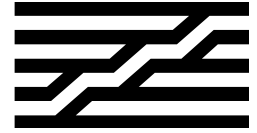
9 – Magnetic tapes

Magnetic tape, tape recorder and cassette tape, are one of Christian Marclay's favourite materials. It is also a way for him to allude to one of his childhood loves, The Beatles. [The Beatles, *Revolution 9*]

Christian Marclay recounts that one weekend, a friend had played him the Beatles' *White Album* on his parents' hi-fi system, particularly the last track, *Revolution 9*, a Stockhausen-style sound collage. "It was a real shock", says Marclay. "I must have been fourteen and it immediately attracted me to unusual genres of music".

The Beatles and their music reappear in Christian Marclay's work, with one of his 1989 works specifically entitled *The Beatles*. The work is a pillow made up of all the Liverpool group's sung work on a crocheted magnetic tape. [The Beatles, *Carry That Weight*]

This is a nod to a song entitled *Carry That Weight*, on The Beatles' LP *Abbey Road*, in which Paul McCartney notably sings "I never give you my pillow, I only send you my invitations". It may invoke reveries relating to vanishing childhood or to the frustrations that art occasionally generates.



Marclay used magnetic tapes on several occasions after *The Beatles*. Notably he used them to make a suspended net made of magnetic tapes, floating like a sort of hammock over our head.

He also used it for his cyanotype photographs, made by placing tapes on a sensitive surface, without a camera, generating great tangles of large two-dimensional blue and white nets on large-sized backgrounds. [transitional sound]

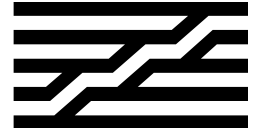
10 – *Doors*

Still based on the principle of assembling film excerpts, *Doors* is Christian Marclay's most recent work to date, presented for the first time in his exhibition at the Centre Pompidou.

The work assembles various scenes taken from multiple films. In it we see characters behaving in accordance with a highly regulated procedure, that of entering or leaving a room through a door. Doors have previously appeared on numerous occasions in Christian Marclay's earlier work.

Like *Video Quartet* in 2002, *Doors* is a montage of excerpts, as was in 2010 what is perhaps his most famous video work, *The Clock*, a 24-hour film, a montage of excerpts enabling us to track time in real time, given that each scene shows the time it is as we watch it.

Doors, which is projected on a single screen, is a work of formidable effectiveness, with a much simpler principle than *Video Quartet* or *The Clock*. It resorts to a device used in popular theatre: entrances and exits. A door opens, “god, my husband!” ... lover disappears, and another scene unfolds.



What is striking about Christian Marclay's piece is that the soundtracks also correspond to each other, not only the visual scenes, which are assembled one after the other.

These soundtracks create a sort of imaginary soundtrack in which, again through film, a sort of conjunctive tissue is created, enabling us to associate the whole history of film in one uninterrupted tape. [excerpt from *Doors* by Christian Marclay]

[outro jingle] It was a Centre Pompidou podcast. You can find all our podcasts on the Centre Pompidou website, its listening platforms and social networks. See you soon with the next podcast!

Credits

Production: Célia Cretien

Recording: Ivan Gariel

Sound editing and mixing: Maxime Champesme

Sound Design: Sixième Son

With the participation of Jean-Pierre Criqui

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