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Tales

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Christmas in Switzerland

AS MUCH AS IT IS VISUALLY OVERLOADED BY, among others, snowmen, shooting stars and angel-like lights, Christmas time, in its aural dimension is also one of excess. This excess is the result of sonic entities that come to inhabit our daily environment for a very short period. But unlike its material counterpart, the acoustic landscape has no finiteness and, for better or for worse, Christmas music is at the end of each year, almost ubiquitous. In this aural-visual context, Swiss-American artist and musician Christian Marclay has been presenting for a couple of years an exhibition called *The Sounds of Christmas*. Among a body of work that has been exploring the relationships between sound, music and the visual arts for about three decades, Marclay's December treat consists of an exhibition of about 1200 found Christmas music records along with series of performances by DJ's and turntablists (including Marclay himself) playing them / with them. At the end of the recently slipped by year, *The Sounds of Christmas* was in Geneva where Marclay has been raised.¹

¹ The present discussion is based on a performance by Marclay at *Villa Magica's Xmas party*.

Geneva, Switzerland. This is not a mere detail. First, because December 2007 version of *the Sounds of Christmas* was accompanied and somehow crowned with another Christmas event, *Villa Magica Records' X-Mas Party*, which, is held each year in the *Bâtiment d'art contemporain* of this Swiss city.² *Villa Magica Records* is a music label founded by two prominent Swiss artists, John Armleder (half American like Marclay), Sylvie Fleury and Stéphane Armleder, the son of the former and is entirely dedicated to musicians' and artists' revisiting of Christmas music repertoire.³ Second, since Marclay lived in Switzerland until he went to pursue his studies and work in Boston and then New York, his relation to objects of commodity was different to that of his American fellows. His education in Switzerland is even at the core of his fascination on which is based his work. As Douglas Kahn writes:

*His early artistic responses to American culture embody the different attitudes to be found between the United States and Switzerland toward material culture and the culture of recording. What seemed to be not so unusual to people in Boston, e.g. a record in the street being run over repeatedly by cars, struck Marclay as strange.*⁴

Hence, Geneva as the cradle of a work embedded in Swiss-American culture and heritage and as an ephemeral site of aural-visual experience conflating the social, economical and mythological situation of Christmas with an aesthetic one.⁵

² *The Bâtiment d'art contemporain* hosts both the *Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO)* and the *Centre d'art contemporain (CAC)*, which jointly co-organised the party on the 21st of December 2007 with the music label *Villa Magica*. See www.villamagica.com

³ They include, among others, Gerwald Rockenschaub and Genesis P-Orridge. Last Christmas' releases include a compilation by Olivier Mosset and a record by Marclay.

⁴ KAHN, 2003a: 17.

⁵ Since I am a national of Switzerland, coming from the area of the Geneva Lake, Christmas' social and familial obligations led me there. Hence, one could see a sort of structural consonance between my position and the "subject" of this text the latter being, without a doubt, the result of my presence in this precise time and place.

“I hated Christmas music”⁶

EXPERIENCING LONDON’S PUBLIC SPHERE in December, commercial areas in particular, is punctuated by much more “Jingle Bells” and “We wish you a merry Christmas” than in Switzerland, this latter being the epitome of sobriety in terms of Christmas’ public decorations and of visible and audible Christmas’ “spirit” artefacts. Marclay’s work stems in part from his interest in “rejected and non-trendy music”, which Christmas songs, one will easily acknowledge, are a part of.⁷ Moreover, Marclay humorously justifies *the Sounds of Christmas* as a “reaction to that, a vengeance”.⁸ A reaction? A vengeance? To what? As he was growing up, Christmas’ musical and sonic saturation entered Marclay’s familial sphere. To a question concerning his childhood’s record-listening habits, Marclay answered: “[...] I grew up in a vacuum. My parents rarely listened to music. Around Christmas, my mother in all her nostalgia would bring out her Bing Crosby records and other Christmas music. I hated Christmas music,

6 Marclay’s remark. In Kahn, 2003a: 17.

7 Interview on Radio Suisse Romande, 14/12/2007. Except indications, all translations are mine.

8 Interview on Radio Suisse Romande, 14/12/2007.

and I really couldn't stand listening to the same five records over and over again".⁹

As Adorno, or more recently Jacques Attali, have showed, phonographic recording technology has allowed music, through its transformation into a reproducible good, to be incorporated into capitalist economy. Attali writes that: "For with the appearance of the phonograph record, the relation between music and money starts to be flaunted, it ceases to be ambiguous and shameful [...] it becomes a material object of exchange and profit, without having to go through the long and complex detour of the score and performance anymore".¹⁰ This mutation of Christmas music from a performed and religious to a commercial, reproducible and widely broadcastable one has probably also been a factor in the absorption of Christmas by capitalism, making it the consumerist feast it is today. Moreover, like many things characteristic of this period of the year, Christmas music is produced and available in overabundance. Already omnipresent enough to saturate public spaces, it even penetrated

⁹ KAHN, 2003a: 17. The nostalgia felt by Marclay's American mother stresses Swiss and American cultures' different appreciations towards Christmas.

¹⁰ ATTALI, [1977] 1985: 88. Also see ADORNO [1934] 1990.

Marclays household's sonorous "vacuum". Christmas songs might be these non-trendy yet strictly seasonal tunes, how come Christmas records are so massively produced to the point that everyone owns at least one? This overabundance through excessive production and the massive leftovers generated (summer sales always offer unbeatable bargains on Christmas music) perfectly illustrates the relation to material culture that fascinated Marclay when he first arrived to the US. Moreover, it seems that the sonic excess and saturation of Christmas are a sort of aural symptom to a phenomenon of loss and non-profit that goes against all rational economic logics of optimised profit. Such aural symptoms recall what Bataille has called "the accursed share". Bataille's provocative hypothesis is the following: "*it is not necessity but its contrary, "luxury," that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problems*".¹¹ Excesses, for Bataille, must be understood in the frame of a "general economy" able to encompass any kind of surplus energy, from any system. Thus, he writes that:

¹¹ BATAILLE, [1967] 1989: 12. Original italics.

When one considers the totality of productive wealth on the surface of the globe, it is evident that the products of this wealth can be employed for productive ends only insofar as the living organism that is eco-nomic mankind can increase its equipment. This is not entirely — neither always nor indefinitely — possible. A surplus must be dissipated through deficit operations: The final dissipation cannot fail to carry out the movement that animates terrestrial energy.¹²

Christmas records, as the accursed share's material artefacts — lost without profit — always end up on the dustiest of our shelves; but also in thrift stores, where Marclay buys them: "I like the recycling idea — using the stuff that people don't want anymore, and make new music out of it. There was an element of looking back and listening to your parents' records and doing something with that stuff. Sort of acknowledging the past while rejecting it at the same time".¹³ Acknowledging and rejecting the past: isn't it what the celebration of Christmas is all about? Isn't Christmas, in its ritual aspect, a way to mark time, a moment

¹² BATAILLE, [1967] 1989: 22.

¹³ GROSS, 1998.

signalling the fact that this arbitrary segment of time called a "year" is about to elapse? Waiting for the day when time would cease to be a linear, successive accumulation of "events", I went to see Marclay's performance at *Villa Magica Records X-Mas Party*. After all, it was Christmas.



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The time of Performance and the Performing of Time

WHAT IS THE POTENTIAL of a Christmas performance to distort Christmas time as a time of consumption, as a time to celebrate the end of a year and the coming of a new one which, leads to this feeling of acceleration and of being compressed by/in time, or, as Adrian Heathfield puts it, “how might the temporality of performance be connected to the contemporary experience of time?”¹⁴ Marclay’s Christmas performance took place in quite a particular context. *Villa Magica X-Mas Party* features traditional components of this feast, but which, have been translated into/by John Armleder’s Fluxus-like aesthetic strategies. The result is a museum / party space scattered by extravagant, snazzy Christmas trees along with fake, screened fireplaces, the whole inflated by series of plastic Hawaiian totem sculptures and a streak of mirror-balls.¹⁵ Armleder’s intervention in space blends Christmas as a social situation — which in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss is a “tender, almost nostalgic example of an unrealistic

Previous spread: Christian Marclay and Santa Claus back to back at *Villa Magica X-Mas Party* 2007.

¹⁴ HEATHFIELD, 2000: 106.

¹⁵ The party was precisely called *Aloha X-Mas Party* which explains the Hawaiian sculptures.

mode of social life”— with some of Fluxus’ ideas and paradigms such as “the Unity of Art and Life”, “Playfulness” or “Presence in Time” and thus leads such a social-aesthetic moment towards (Fluxus’) eventhood.¹⁶ Eventhood is precisely, for Heathfield, what, through the “varied deployments of altered time” an artwork can be brought to.¹⁷

Before Marclay performed, people were dancing on more conventional DJ sets. That night, Marclay’s position was similar to the one he found himself when, in the 80’s, he performed with hip-hop DJ’s. Evoking this period, he says that: “they were doing dance music — that’s the major difference. I’ve never tried to do dance music. The similarity is that we used records as instruments to create new music out of old music”.¹⁸ Along with this feature, Marclay’s signature probably relies in his ability to make the relation between sound and its visual (such as record covers) or material (such as records or

16 On Lévi-Strauss’ comments on Christmas see KUSSEL, 1971. On Fluxus see FRIEDMAN, 1998: 237–253. Moreover, Armleder’s work is considered a branch or a continuation of Fluxus. He says that he “was always interested in the translation of existence or the use of a system from one context to another”. See KONTOVA and POLITI, 1992: 66.

17 HEATHFIELD, 2000: 107.

18 GROSS, 1998.

instruments themselves) counterparts manifest. The very beginning of Marclay’s performance provoked in itself a rupture of temporality for he “interrupted” the electronic dance music previously played, thus signalling the necessity for a different corporeal and affective attention towards the coming sonic situation. Indeed, Marclay’s sounds were less prone to clubbing-like dance. His performance consisted in improvised interventions over randomly selected records. In the context of Christmas’ sonic excess, Marclay’s use of Christmas sonic material is well described by the notion of “phonoclasm”, which Steven Connor has used to refer to *Guitar Drag* (2000) and *Video Quartet* (2002), two works by Marclay. For Connor:

Phonoclasm, the violence against sound, or against what carries or harbours it, seems more damaging than iconoclasm, prompting an event of sound that is at once sound-wound and its own howl of protest.¹⁹

Such phonoclasm is the result of Marclay’s multiple, but always improvised and random strategies. Usually using *Califone* turntables, Marclay nevertheless managed to get through the restricting

19 CONNOR, 2005.

two speeds of *Technics MKII* by piling up records over each other while on the turntables, thus provoking randomness that disrupted 33/45 standard speeds.²⁰ These oscillating speeds obviously produced distorted sounds. Moreover, as in a dance music DJ set, Marclay played some hits. The result was not so much a yelling by the crowd but, surely, the uncanny in its aural dimension. Indeed, an instrumental version of Christmas' all times favourite, *Jingle Bells*, was played.²¹ The dissonant instrumental soundtrack was accompanied by the voice of a man telling a Christmas tale. Told in French but with a Guadelupian accent, this moment, without a doubt, made western world French speakers dumbstruck and created an interference with a Dickensian conception of Christmas. Another interesting aspect of the performance was the production of noise. While Marclay was looking for the next records to play (with), noise was emitted from the contact between the needle and the grooveless parts. This is less the result of Marclay's "inattention"

20 Califones are turntables used in American schools for teaching purposes. Unlike *Technics MKII* they have four speeds. Marclay has started with these and still uses them in his performances. See GROSS, 1998 and KAHN, 2003a.

21 It is noteworthy that the French title is "Vive le vent", which literally means "Long live the wind".

to the "end" of the record than an appeal to reconsider the idea of a beginning and an end of a record. Hence, for Marclay, musicality doesn't only stem from grooves and exist without any referential signifier. Moreover, scratches and cuts by Marclay punctuated the time of the performance (itself a performing of time) and as all the records are found or bought in second hand shops, the needle revealed all scratches and other "imperfections" on their surface. Marclay explains these aspects as follows:

*I want to disrupt our listening habits. When a record skips or pops or we hear the surface noise, we try very hard to make an abstraction of it so it doesn't disrupt the musical flow. I try to make people aware of these imperfections, and accept them as music; the recording is a sort of illusion while the scratch on the record is more real.*²²

This emphasis on surface noises leads Connor to write that Marclay is still a sculptor (his initial education), "because sound is never for him disembodied, but always morphological, always the shape of things becoming, with volume,

22 FERGUSON, 2003: 41.

texture, surface”.²³ The idea of an always embodied sound allows to distinguish two major moments in Marclay’s performances. The first is the potential of Marclay’s work to provoke a shift from listening to a form of attention that questions what listening and sounds (thus music and music-ality) are. As Douglas Kahn judiciously writes:

Marclay’s sense of the expanse of sound hearkens back to discourses of the nineteenth century, before sound began to be filtered through the reductive tropes of Western art music in the early twentieth century. The development of scientific instruments for visualizing sound, and of audio-phonics media and communication technologies exemplified by the telephone and phonograph encouraged ideas of bringing sounds into visual and textual registers, into inscriptions (the jagged lines of phonography) and objects (cylinders, discs, amplifying horns, telephones), bringing sounds from far off distances and different times and equalizing them as phenomena in the very idea of “sound”. More and more sounds were brought into daily existence, into visual, material, and commodity culture, in unprecedented

23 CONNOR, 2005.

ways, subsequently transforming the listening to, making of, and understanding of sounds”.²⁴

One can discern the second moment within the situation of an extended understanding of sounds. During this moment, Marclay plays with representational and non-representational or non-signifying units of sound. This is the case when, on the basis of Christmas sonic material, Marclay disrupts sound and speed so that the idea of Christmas vanishes. This is also the case when noise is produced through the contact of the needle with grooveless parts. Here, the recording is denied and, as Ferguson puts it, “Marclay’s live performance [...] conflates the recording with the performance”.²⁵

In the context of a time marking “event” such as Christmas, Marclay’s performance gains even more relevancy. Revealing the social and economic context of Christmas through the use of its aural “accursed share”, Christmas commodified time is disrupted. Indeed, under Marclay’s performing, representational as well as non-signifying sound units are rendered dissonant,

24 KAHN, 2003b: 61.

25 FERGUSON, 2003: 30.

are blended and oscillate between each other. Hence, for what remains of the recognisable signifying units, the temporalities are disrupted. For Adrian Heathfield, “performance by opening it to improvisation and chance”, allows the following operations: “extending or shrinking of duration beyond existing conventions; presenting the experience of duration through the body; deploying aesthetics of repetition which undo flow and progression [...] These varied deployments of altered time invariably bring the art work towards the condition of eventhood, and shift the spectator’s physical experience of temporality in order to de-naturalize our sense of official, public, clock time”.²⁶ Finally, Christmas’ Marclaysian moment, following Heathfield, surely leads to eventhood. The wittiness of this way of marking time is that it implies a rema(r)king of time itself. And as Kahn rightly writes, “the way Marclay operates as a general discoverer of sounds wherever they might occur and however they might operate makes us all better listeners as a result”.

26 HEATHFIELD, 2000: 107.

The how of now

CHRISTMAS AND EVEN NEW YEAR have passed. It’s 2008 and (again) I am still waiting for the day when time would cease to be a linear, successive accumulation of “events”. I am now reading this passage by Adrian Heathfield, which says:

*Why else would you have picked up this book, if you didn’t think it had something to do with the trouble between what you know and how you experience time; your ambivalence inside this historical moment; your sense of life as a strange mix of stasis, progression and regression; your need for art to address this feeling; your hunch, like mine, that performance has something to do so with this trouble, something to say about it.*²⁷

Well, this is certainly true, and I do share Heathfield’s feelings and ideas regarding time and performance. But I would like to offer an alternative explanation: Since I am a national of Switzerland, coming from the area of the Geneva Lake, Christmas’ social and familial obligations led me there. Hence, one could see a sort of structural

27 HEATHFIELD, 2000: 105.

consonance between my position and the “subject” of this text the latter being, without a doubt, the result of my presence in this precise time and place.²⁸

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Exhibitions and performances

“The Sounds of Christmas”,
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11-23 December 2007.

“Villa Magica Aloha X-Mas
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Geneva, 23 December 2007.

Websites

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www.mamco.ch
www.villamagica.com

Colophon

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MA Aural and Visual Cultures,
Goldsmiths College, University
of London, 10/01/2008

Printed by Ditto Press, London,
on a Riso MZ770

Design by Régis Tosetti, London
with Grégory Ambos

Photographic credit: Adeena Mey



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