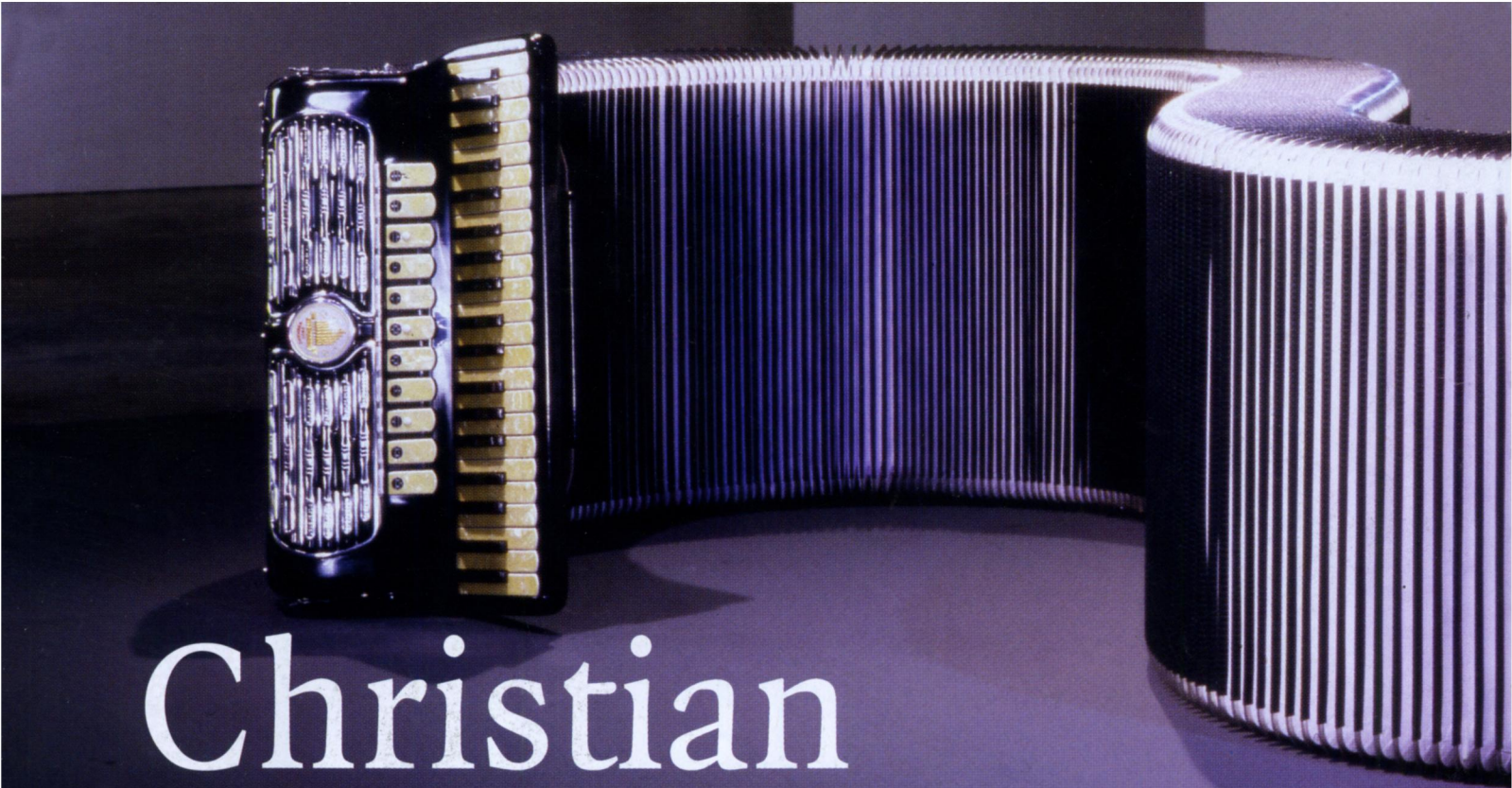




Christian Marclay

BEN NEILL

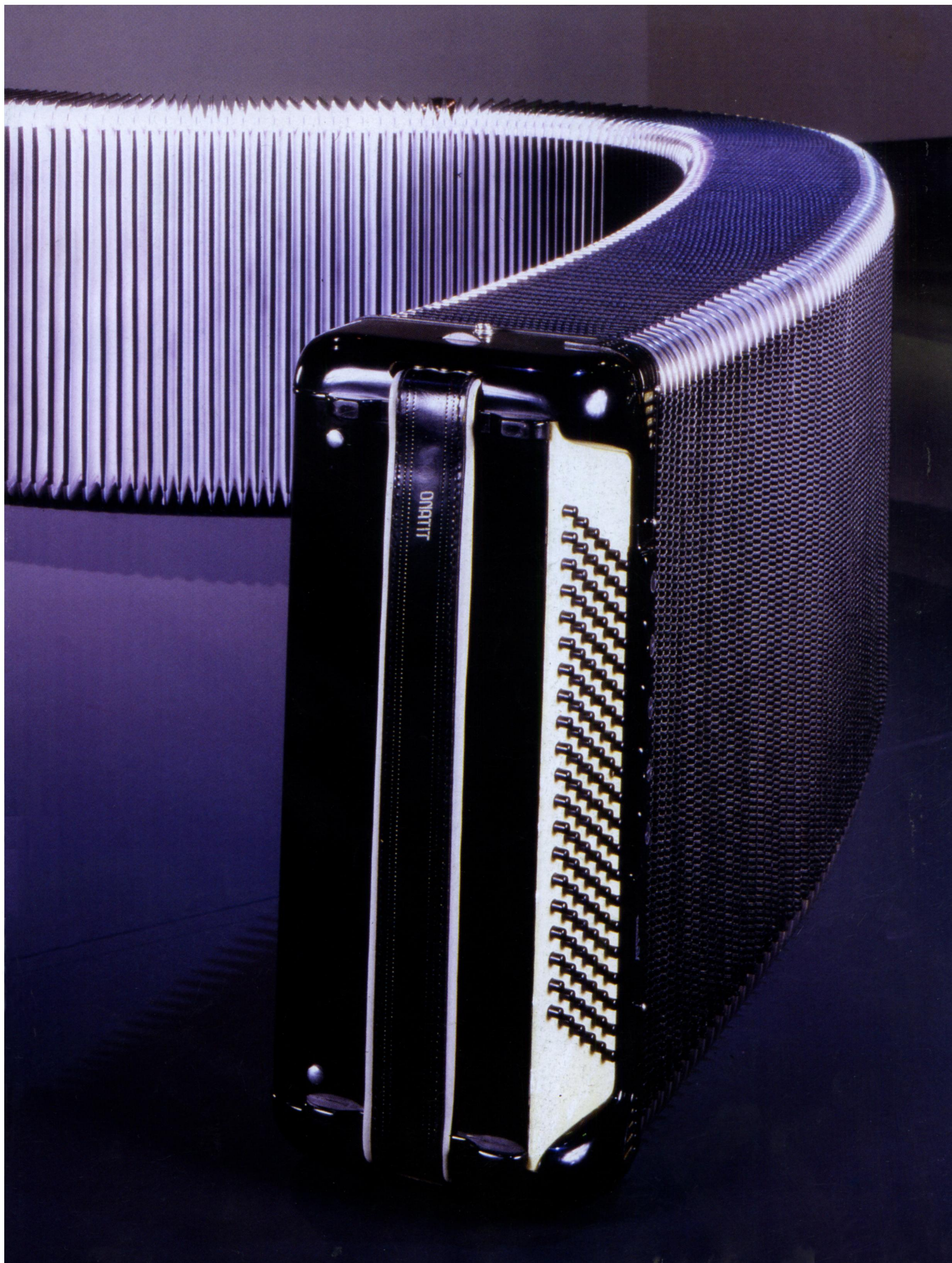
FOR OVER 20 YEARS CHRISTIAN MARCLAY HAS BEEN creating works that explore the intersection of the aural and the visual, reflecting on the nature of how sound and image are related. His work has an immediacy and a sense of connectedness rarely seen in that of purely visual artists. I first saw him perform in the early 1980s with John Zorn at Roulette and was instantly captivated by his bizarre dj technique. He was surrounded by instructional turntables and thrift-store records with objects attached to them. There was an inherent theatricality to his performance, which he brought off with a Zen-like concentration. At that time the dj as performer was still a new phenomenon in early hip-hop; Marclay was transforming the concept of the dj even as it was emerging.

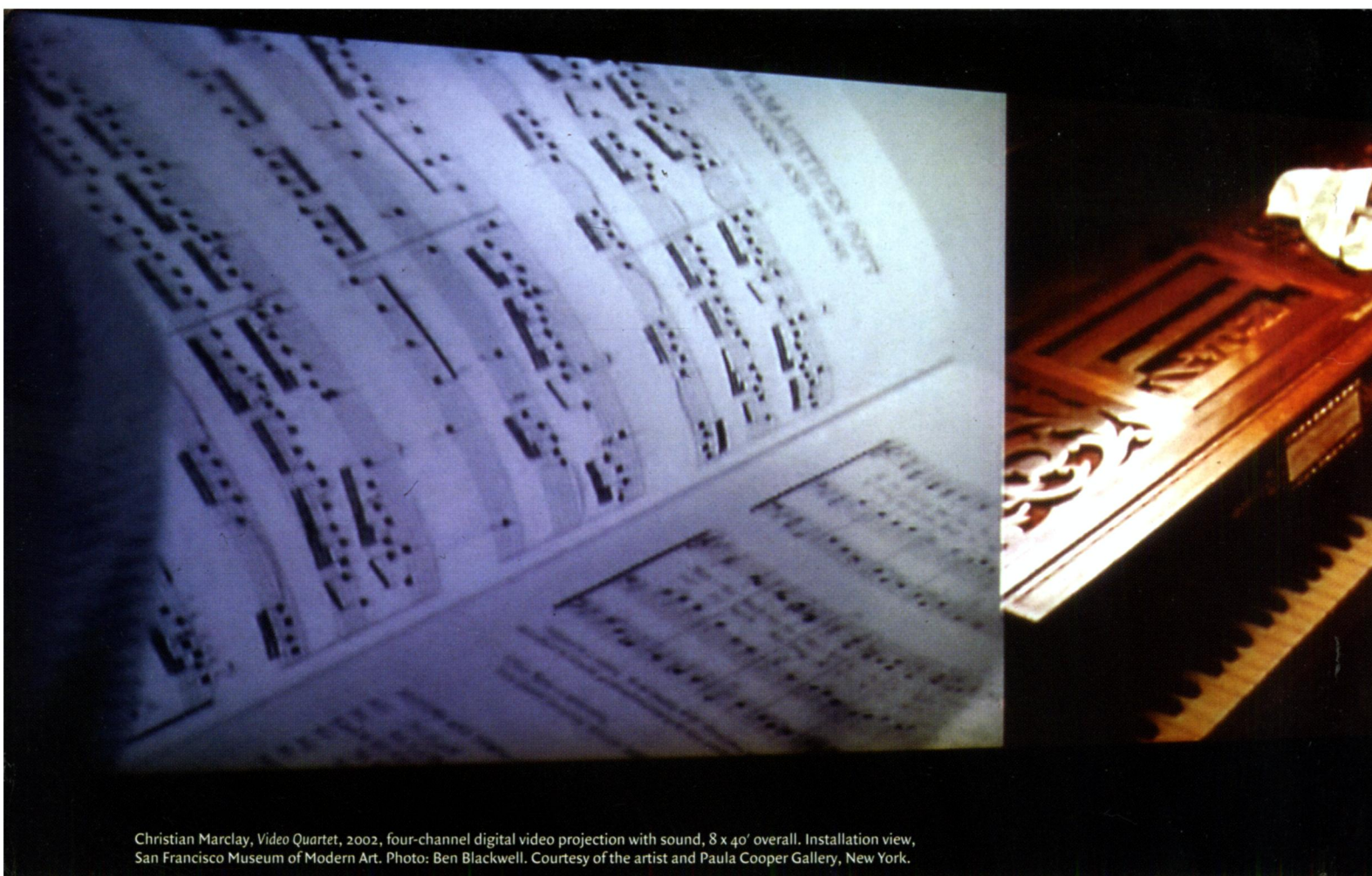
Twenty years later, the turntable has matched the electric guitar in its significance as a means of musical expression. Dj culture has brought sampling and appropriation into prominence, calling into question fundamental concepts of originality, musical performance and intellectual property. Recognized now as a visionary in the dj medium, Marclay has been emulated by many younger djs, some of whom he has subsequently included in his own projects.

Marclay's four-screen installation *Video Quartet*, 2002, is undoubtedly his most accomplished example of audiovisual fusion to date. Facilitated by his forays into desktop video technology but with a clarity of focus that lets us forget the technology of how it was made, *Video Quartet* immerses the audience in a rapid-fire collage of Hollywood film clips that feature actors and musicians playing instruments or making sound. On four contiguous screens are projected distinct montages of film clips that Marclay sampled along with their original sound tracks, making for a richly layered, orchestral experience that recontextualizes iconic images from the history of cinema. The complex narrative blurs the line between musical and visual structure, combining the disparate fragments in a way that resonates deeply with contemporary media-saturated life.

I have followed Marclay's career since that first night at Roulette. In the '90s I presented him at The Kitchen, where I was music curator. A few years ago I gained a better understanding of his ideas and methods when I performed with him in Vienna. Recently I spoke with him at his studio in New York about his background, ideas and recent projects.

Christian Marclay, *Virtuoso*, 2000, altered accordion, approximately 25' long.
Photo: Tom Powel. Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery.





Christian Marclay, *Video Quartet*, 2002, four-channel digital video projection with sound, 8 x 40' overall. Installation view, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Photo: Ben Blackwell. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

ben neill Christian, you are one of the few artists I can think of who have had a very active career in both the visual arts and music. You have these two individual aspects going on in a way that I think is pretty rare. How are you able to sustain both of these facets?

christian marclay Well, it's not always easy to sustain both at the same time. The busier I am in both fields at once, the harder it is. For one thing, I rarely travel for music now, because I'm busy with my visual work. But now and then I'll take the time to do some performing or recording. Music is a nice diversion from being in the studio worrying about my next art show. In my mind, the two activities are very connected; while I'm doing one I'm thinking about the other. My work as a visual artist deals with sound and music, and I've always thought of music as something close to performance art. There is a visual element when performing in front of an audience.

bn That's an interesting point. In his autobiography Stravinsky wrote that he could never understand why people go to concerts and close their eyes. For him, the

French-horn player gearing up for the big solo was almost an athletic event. When I first saw you in New York in the early '80s, your performances had that kind of inherent theatricality to them, even when you were working with other musicians. You seemed to have a kind of determined concentration that was almost Zen-like no matter what kind of sounds you were creating. And the visual component of the instructional turntables, the records with objects attached to them, et cetera, added to the unusual performance style. It was like, What the hell is he doing? That visuality really came across in your work, and it gave your position in the downtown improv scene of the '80s a real uniqueness. You started out in the visual arts, right?

cm Yes, I never studied music. I went to art school, first in Switzerland, where I grew up, and later in Boston and New York.

bn When did you start bringing live performance into it?

cm Well, the music came out of performance art. In the late '70s I was very

interested in what Joseph Beuys and Dan Graham were doing. Punk rock music was also very important to my development. To me there was a strong connection between performance artists such as Vito Acconci and the punk rock movement—not just because a lot of punk came out of art schools, but because of that staged physicality, the raw energy and the interest in the performing body and its relation to an audience. I came to New York in 1977, as a visiting student at Cooper Union, and I spent a lot of time on the club scene. When I went back to finish my B.A. at Massachusetts College of Art, I started performing—not so much with the idea of making music, but to get away from making objects.

bn Were you using turntables?

cm Not right away. At first I just wanted to make a movie, a short experimental musical, to write songs for it and find someone to write the music. I ended up singing the songs myself, while the film never happened. But it was the beginning of a band that was very visual: we used films, slide projections and



props. And so, slowly, out of this kind of activity, I became more and more interested in music. That's when I started using the records onstage, making them skip to form background loops as rhythmic accompaniment. Before that I recorded the loops on cassette tapes to accompany the performances, but then I realized that it was more interesting to bring the turntables onstage and show the abuse to the records. The turntables added a visual dimension that was more real than background slide projections, which felt like an added element.

bn At that point a dj was somebody on the radio playing records. And then came the whole hip-hop explosion.

cm That changed everything. The dj as we know it really came out of hip-hop. Now dj-ing is an all-encompassing term that can mean anything—from mixing records to playing your laptop.

bn You were very active as a collaborator with all kinds of musicians and theater directors.

cm I was recently looking back at some old datebooks and realized that in the early '80s I was performing several times a week. It was amazing—going on tours, doing projects with John Zorn and David Moss and my own projects such as *Tower of Babel* and *Dead Stories*. In the early '90s I decided to give up the whole dj thing. The CD was taking over. People didn't have the same relationship to the vinyl record. So it no longer made sense to work with records. They had taken on a retro quality. But then the whole "turntablist" thing exploded. A new crop of younger djs turned the record into an alternative medium, and record companies started pressing records again, and suddenly I had these younger djs approaching me, asking me to perform with them. That became really interesting, because I'd always played in group situations with all kinds of musicians but not with other djs.

bn And mostly in an improvisational way.

cm Yes. During the '80s I was also involved with a few bands, The Bachelors, Even, and Mon Ton Son, and Dense Band with David

Moss, which were more rehearsed and structured. But improvisation was always a big part of it.

bn And with Zorn, I remember, you did Cobra. But you didn't have the same kind of background as the other players who were involved in that scene. How did you make your way into that?

cm I did a few of my solo performances in New York, and John Zorn heard about what I was doing and invited me to be part of one of his early "game pieces." I think the first piece I played was *Track and Field* in '82. He introduced me to a lot of fantastic players. For me, a naive amateur, it was fascinating to be able to actually perform with talented and knowledgeable musicians.

bn Virtuoso performers.

cm Yes. There were a few who were like me—Arto Lindsay, for instance, and Ikue Mori. They came to music with a do-it-yourself attitude and were very successful. The more trained musicians appreciated this kind of freshness.



Christian Marclay, stills from *Telephones*, 1995, video projection with sound, 7 minutes 30 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

bn It was liberating.

cm Yes, and we all learned from each other. This belief in untrained musicians also came out of the punk aesthetic.

bn What about sampling, which is so key for you? Have you always been interested in that kind of appropriation?

cm In my visual work I had been using found objects from my environment, things that I was confronted with every day. That's where the records came from. And records are already samples—captured sound that we can play back over and over. The record is interesting as an object, because it can be a sculpture and it also contains this potential for sound. There are so many sounds you can create with a record: speed it up, slow it down, mix it with live instruments, play not only what's in the groove but any sound that you can get out of it. I've even used them as acoustic sound objects with no turntables, just scratching them with my nails, or wobbling them or breaking them.

bn Were Cage's ideas about found sound influential to you? Or were you exploring this stuff on your own?

cm I became aware of Cage in the late '70s, from the point of view of art more than music. And Marcel Duchamp. The idea of using chance and found objects came out of these artists. Cage used records early on. There are many antecedents to hip-hop, like '50s *Musique Concrète*, and before that, all

kinds of experiments were made with records. Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus, for instance, experimented with drawing grooves directly on the disc. And sampling has been around for a long time, but digital sampling allows for more flexibility and immediacy.

bn Sampling has become the primary aesthetic idea of our time. It's pervasive in the culture, on all levels. What do you think is so attractive about it?

cm Partly it comes out of the available technology. Visual sampling was already there before sound recording, with photography, and later with film and video. Now, with computers, information can be so easily sampled, downloaded, cut and pasted in infinite ways. In the early '80s, a lot of artists were actually appropriating and sampling visually. Many of the artists showing at Metro Pictures—Louise Lawler, Richard Prince, Jack Goldstein, Robert Longo—were working with found imagery and using early computer tools to manipulate this stuff, enriching prints, rephotographing images. The connection of that sampling aesthetic with hip-hop music has never really been made, although they were happening at the same time.

bn In a lot of cases, and this is certainly clear with your work, the art necessitates the invention of the technology. What drives the whole thing is when artists put out a certain aesthetic and they need a machine to be able to do it better. The minimalist repetitive

music in the '70s predated the sequencer. They were working with tape loops, but that was essentially sequenced music.

cm The idea of repetition really comes out of tape recording. Steve Reich's tape loops were made because the technology was there to do it. And the cutting and splicing was possible because of the tape's materiality. The stuttering, looping, repeating motif is something that is so contemporary now because of these sampling machines.

bn Let's talk a little more about the aesthetics of sampling. Do you think sampling is inherently ironic?

cm Not necessarily. There are so many ways to deal with quotation. A lot of my work is a commentary on the commercial aspect of music and the recording industry. Recording technology has turned music into a commodity. Working with the material of that commodified music, commenting on it and making recordings that do the same thing, is compelling.

bn You haven't made a lot of recordings—

cm The performative aspect of making music to me is unique, not just for the performer but for the audience. There's this amazing connection going on between the performer and the audience that cannot be translated into a recording.

bn Well, whereas musicians are more compelled to record music, because that's their

only object, you're also creating visual work, visual objects.

You have done a lot of pieces in the visual art world that didn't involve sound but were *about* sound. More recently you've been working with video and sound together in your installations. *Up and Out* juxtaposed footage from Antonioni's 1966 film *Blow-Up* with the sound track of Brian de Palma's 1981 homage to that film, *Blow Out*. And *Video Quartet* is a four-screen cinematic experience that uses snippets of music-making scenes from movies to create a seamless audio-visual collage. In these newer pieces, you're bringing the sound and visual elements together in a truly distinct way. What brought that about?

cm Again, it has to do with technology. I've had these ideas for a long time—synchronizing different projections, being able to orchestrate multiple sound projections—but it was not possible until now.

bn Although in *No Salesman Will Call*, the piece you did with Perry Hoberman in the late '80s, you guys did some stuff very close to that. That piece is one of my favorites.

cm But that was live. You know, years ago I was trying to get this project going with the idea of synchronizing my turntables—having myself play with other images of myself, creating my own solo orchestra. I applied for a grant, but it was technically so over the top to synchronize those big video discs, and you couldn't get the frame accuracy. I ended up realizing this idea only a few years ago for a project at Ars Electronica. And it's easier to bring sound into a museum or a gallery now. Today the art world is interested in sound, and video has accustomed people to hearing sound in a museum. It was a lot more difficult then to do a sound piece in a regular gallery show, because sound is so hard to contain.

bn It takes over—you can't escape it.

cm I'm in a better position now that I can control more the kind of environment I'm showing in. It's still not easy; most institutions that show art know how to light a painting or sculpture perfectly, but won't know how to install a sound system. The idea of spending money on sound equipment,

hiring sound technicians, tweaking the sound and making sure it's right, is something they don't understand.

bn Obviously *Video Quartet* uses a different level of technology from what you've worked with before. It's a huge project. It must have been very labor intensive to collect and arrange all of the material, in addition to the usual multifaceted nature of producing film and video. Did you work with a team of people, or was it something that you did yourself?

cm That's the amazing thing, that you can actually do this stuff at home on your computer. I edited it here using Final Cut Pro. It took an enormous amount of time. I had an assistant to help with research and pick up tapes from video rental stores. I also had some technical advisers. I'm not very high tech. Most of my work has been very low tech. I was never interested in all that hi-fi sound quality. I wanted to exploit the drawbacks of the technology.

bn I think what happened in digital audio 10 years ago is happening in video now. The desktop video enables us to truly compose with sound and visual material simultaneously. People have been interested in doing this for a long time. Think back to the nineteenth century, to Wagner, to Scriabin.

The dialogue that you set up between the sonic and the visual elements in *Video Quartet* is amazing. It opens up so many ideas that you've been working with. All kinds of new ways of thinking about that convergence of sound and image are emerging.

cm The technology is still not ideal. Final Cut Pro allows you to hear four tracks of sound together, but you can't see the four images at once. So you constantly have to change tracks to see, or create mini renderings of the project.

bn Are you interested in the idea of the vj, mixing this kind of visual material, these types of technologies, in a live setting, in real time?

cm The idea of doing live pieces is interesting. What you can do now is limited: the video samples are slow, and most often the

live musicians play along with the video rather than the other way around. But I'm sure that will evolve.

bn Did you set any conceptual limits while making *Video Quartet*? Obviously you had the musical theme. How did you decide where you were going to get the material? Did you have parameters that you decided to stay within?

cm I made a point to use the sounds that were attached to these images originally. So it had to be a good image *and* a good sound. Sometimes I'd find a great image, but the sound didn't make sense in the context, or the other way around. That was a huge limitation. But I wanted to really consider these clips as readymade units of sound and image. A few years ago I did a single-channel piece called *Telephones*, for which I edited film clips of people on the telephone. Telephone scenes are ubiquitous in films. It's a simple shot, cheap, based on a jump-cut edit, with which we are familiar and which we accept. For the viewer it seems normal to jump cut from one actor in one space to another in a completely different space, or from one film to another. In retrospect, *Telephones* was almost a sketch for *Video Quartet*. We've seen most of the films in *Quartet*. Even though we may not remember exactly where a clip came from, we saw it originally with the same sound attached to it. The fact that they are together in our unconscious is an added thing. They are like memory clips. You can take any image and add any sound on it—that's what MTV does when they cut images to a song. But my video clips are the image-sound from films that your brain remembers. The connection that we make now, between the visual source and the sound source, interests me. With video they are becoming more and more of an indivisible unit, unlike cinema, which is all about postproduction and folley sounds.

bn *Quartet* has so many different layers. You've implemented these musical structures within the four screens with imitation, doubling and delays. Music has such an intimate connection with technology. You hear



Christian Marclay performing with The Bachelors, Even, at Inroads, New York, 1980. Courtesy of the artist.

that a lot of computer programmers are musicians. The time-based aspect of sound is a vocabulary that is similar to programming. When you put the clips together, were you thinking about both things simultaneously?

cm *Quartet* reveals the way in which music is made out of a collection of fragments. The samples are visible. If you watch *Quartet* without the sound, the images are suggestive, but they don't add up to much in a narrative sense, although we try to make meaning out of it. Jump cuts don't work as well without the sound. We always hear sound as one, even though most contemporary music is created in the studio out of hundreds of fragments. So one could argue that the music is the glue to *Video Quartet*. There's a musical structure, and it makes sense musically. It also brings out the constructedness of sound, which, as you said, is so dependent on machines now. Even classical musicians go to the studio to improve their performance.

bn Well, every musician has to be a producer now, on some level. You have to know something about how to put your sound down on the recording and what distinguishes that sound, even if you're an instrumentalist.

Did you have any legal problems about all the clips you use in *Video Quartet*? In

general, do you ever have to deal with any legal issues about appropriation?

cm I've never had a problem. In legal terms it falls into the "fair use" category. I'm okay as long as I do something that's creative, that's different, that doesn't say, This is mine. By including the image with the sound, I make the source even more recognizable. Legally it's a little delicate, because I'm dealing with such iconic movies. But we live in an urban environment where we get so bombarded with sound and images that we don't ask to see or hear—we can't escape that stimulation. So to me *Video Quartet* reflects my environment, the culture I live in. This is the city I walk in every day, where I see and hear so many things at once. They are as much a part of life as anything else. We breathe in this stuff; why shouldn't it come out transformed?

bn The transformation is key in terms of your approach to this material. You're always appropriating pop-culture, entertainment-based images, but you haven't ever emulated that way of working. You used the word *commentary* before.

cm If the reference weren't visible or audible, it wouldn't be commentary.

bn Going back to the dj thing, maybe that's the role of the artist in this world that you're talking about—picking out the samples. The whole phenomenon of a dj mix record,

which is basically saying, "Here are 10 tracks that I think are cool, this is my record," has become a completely acceptable form of expression. You don't necessarily have to produce anything "original." *Video Quartet* embodies that sensibility.

cm As a dj I've always constructed my music with fragments mixed on multiple turntables, and the video came out of this practice. And also from editing music with computer programs, as much as performing live.

bn The problem with the editing software is that it gives you *too many* possibilities; you can do anything with it. The challenge is to come up with some effective means of weeding things out and to discover new ways of integrating these things. You have been one of the few people who consistently bring that together. What are you working on now? Are you planning to do more works like *Quartet*?

cm Well, I don't like to repeat myself. I've always done so many different things. But this was a crowd-pleaser.

bn It was very successful. It was a commissioned piece, right?

cm It was commissioned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Fondation Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, in Luxembourg.

bn How long did you work on it?

cm A whole year. It took me a while, getting all the machines, learning how to use Final Cut Pro. Now I'm relearning it all—I haven't edited for almost a year.

bn It's like playing an instrument—you have to practice. What are you editing now?

cm I'm doing this fun project for the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a commission from the Relâche Ensemble, from Philadelphia, who asked me to create a piece of music for them. They have this great new director, who is pushing the ensemble to try different things, less notated music. They knew they would get something strange from me. Originally I wanted to sample the Liberty Bell.

bn Oh wow! (laughter)

cm But I didn't realize it was in such bad shape—

bn Nobody can touch it, right?

cm You're not exactly encouraged to touch it. Some guy attacked it a couple of years ago.

bn I remember that.

cm When I started thinking about the project, in 2000, the Liberty Bell seemed like a kitschy Philadelphia symbol. September 11 changed the project somewhat. Anyway, I thought of the bell, and then I remembered Duchamp's *Large Glass*, which I always went to see when in Philly, and it's broken as well. I thought I should find a connection between these two broken objects. And I found lots of connections. The project evolved from being a commission for a music piece to being a show at the museum that will include an installation with video and a book. The video will function as a score and as a sound track for the musicians to play along with, almost like a teleprompter, a visual score with cues. The video will play as part of the exhibition, which also includes some Duchamp artifacts from the Philadelphia Museum's collection and an assortment of glass Liberty Bells, souvenirs that I've found in collections in Philadelphia and bought on eBay. I was intrigued by the use of glass, such a fragile material, to re-create this fragile, already cracked object. I'm now editing the video. It's actually going to be two videos, projected one on top of the other, mimicking the structure of the *Large Glass*, with the two domains of the Bride and the Bachelors. I'm having a lot of fun with this project. At the moment I'm also working on a survey exhibition of my work at the UCLA Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, which opens June 1. Unfortunately those two huge projects are happening simultaneously.

bn I've been going back and rereading some of Duchamp's interviews, in which he talks about his interest in gaming and gambling. I think art is a gamble, in a way. When you choose your samples, it's like saying, Okay, this is where I'm placing my bet.

cm Duchamp's invention of the readymade,

taking something and signing it and saying, It's mine—that's what the dj does today, takes someone's music and remixes it. There's more involvement, of course. For me, the ultimate gesture of music appropriation is a piece that Ben Vautier did in the '60s. Do you know him? He's a French Fluxus artist. He made a self-stick record label with his name on it, stuck it on all kinds of records and called it his music.

bn (laughter)

cm That gesture is even more extreme than that of the hip-hop dj who samples, because there's a lot of work involved in remixing, and there are a million different ways to do it, but it still requires that you do *something* to it. And that has opened up the debate about copyright and intellectual property. I think the debate is good, because the sampling technology obviously will change the laws.

bn One of the reasons that record companies are in so much trouble—and film studios might start running into the same trouble—is that they didn't think about these things seriously enough. They didn't really look at what was happening. They waited too long, and now they're paying the price.

cm There is so much money involved—that's why Disney is not ready to understand that Mickey Mouse belongs to everybody.

bn The visual arts system exists independently of the marketplace, of pop culture. The notion of traditional value, of commodities, is still being undermined or subverted in the art world. That's one of the big differences between working in that realm and mixing records, for instance. Ultimately the economics of it are the crux.

cm Certainly, it all comes down to money. It's rarely for ethical reasons that people sue each other. If you have a big pop hit that uses a sample, people will come after you even if it's not their song that was sampled, but something sounding like it. I'm now confronted with selling video works. For instance, I sold *Video Quartet* as a very limited edition. Video is not really an object. Some big-name artists are now selling their videos to groups of institutions:

two or three institutions will buy one video and share it. They put their money together and can afford to buy an expensive work of art. The idea of the uniqueness of the object belonging to one person is being challenged, and I find that really great—more people will end up seeing the work. It can even be shown in two places at the same time; it's not an issue, because you can make an exhibition copy. All this media technology is changing our way of relating to property, to ownership, which challenges not only music copyright but ideas about sharing and acquiring these things that are not really objects.

bn That goes back to the record: the sound recording was originally not something that was thought of as the work of art, it was a documentation of the work of art. And then you turned that object into your performance medium. There is the evolution of technologies, and then there is the evolution of the aesthetics that go along with technologies. They're intertwined. Really interesting art leads the way, points technology in the direction it needs to go, or should go. Sometimes technologies will come out but not stay around because there's not enough of an appeal for them, so they tend to fall away.

cm This is something I've thought a lot about: What happens to this video piece in 10 years when the DVD technology is outdated? Is it okay to use one projector instead of four, connected to one hard drive? Will a computer chip contain all the work? The piece will change slightly, but there are certain parameters that have to be respected, like the scale, the sound balance and separation. But the actual, physical objects are just storage for data.

bn So the fact that a piece like that ultimately just exists as information doesn't bother you? It's not scary or threatening at all?

cm On the contrary, I think it's liberating not having to deal with objects. The physical display is important in order to appreciate the work, because you need that perceptual space between the four sources of sound and image. That's the physical involvement. But the source is just digital information. o