

A Mouthful of Imagery: Why Onomatopoeia in the Art of Christian Marclay

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We all secretly venerate the ideal of a language which ... would deliver us from language by delivering us to things.
– Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 1969

Turns out, ‘onomatopoeia’ – most simply defined as ‘a word that sounds like what it means’ – is surprisingly complicated. Its most elementary form is called ‘strict onomatopoeia’: *crackle; clatter; whirr; sizzle* – a sequence of letters mimicking non-verbal sounds, basically sound effects, and includes basic animal noises: *meow, woof, moo, oink*. This nursery-rhyme language turns perplexing, however, when we discover that foreign farmyards ‘speak’ other tongues. In Turkey, ducks go *vak*; in Romania they say *mac*. German frogs go *kwaak*. And onomatopoeia covers human emissions too: *moan, grunt, cough, giggle*.

But what about *wow, oh, and gee*: semi-verbal exclamations of wonder that refer to nothing

other than themselves? Weirder still are *twinkle*, *sparkle* or *glitter*: words which ‘sound like’ glints of light flashing off stars, jewellery, or Christmas décor – despite those shiny things being silent. This is called ‘associative onomatopoeia’, and also applies to adjectives like *smooth*, *rough*, *nimble*, *jagged*: descriptors audibly suggestive of physical properties even though those qualities, too, are noiseless. Onomatopoeia seems simple – like baby-talk – but once fully defined (‘*onomatopoeia is a word-sound that can imitate, echo, reinforce, resemble, correspond to, reflect, stand in for, or have a natural or direct relation to another real or imagined sound*’) turns complex. *Whistle* (English) and *fischio* (Italian), or *whisper* and *sussurro*, are onomatopoeiac equivalents meaning the very same thing in two languages – yet they sound and look almost nothing alike. Somehow, onomatopoeia both overcomes and yet heightens cultural and linguistic divides.

Christian Marclay’s art is often described summarily as ‘the intersection of sound and vision’, but – like onomatopoeia itself – the closer we look, the richer and more complex it becomes. Born 1955 in California; raised in Switzerland; a long-time New Yorker and a London resident since 2007; an artist, DJ, composer, and musician, Marclay himself is a kind of cultural/linguistic/artistic crossover. His chosen media are similarly expansive, involving sculpture, performance, collage, readymade, video, painting, and more. He is noted for his collaborative work with musicians and craftspeople, like the traditional record-presser and screen-printers at his recent White Cube exhibition. Marclay’s inclination to bring together disparate things via art-making is reinforced in the cut-and-paste techniques he favours, such as: collage, witnessed in the many ripped fragments of crashing, growling, snoring, and crunching in four comicbook corners that he assembles in his prints; or splicing, as per the many critical texts in *Mixed Reviews* (1999), a collection of descriptive passages collected from newspaper music journalism, strung together to create a rhythmic composition in the form of a run-on sentence, like a kind of word-medley.

Some of Christian Marclay’s onomatopoeiac works employ this device at its strictest. The *Actions* paintings (2013-14) spell-out the sound of paint aggressively hitting the canvas: *Smak*

Squish Splish! or *Whupp Shlump Sloosh Slutch!* These liquid exclamations eternally return these paintings to their wet origins, when the artist first poured and squirted them into existence.

Surround Sounds (2015) is a virtuoso black-box installation based on high-action comicbook onomatopoeia. The elastic typography forming comicbook exclamations behaves like a living, responsive container: squashed, swollen, compressed, or stretched in the struggle to hold within it a noise. *CRASH!* causes its own letters to shatter; *POW!*'s knock-out punch smashes out of the frame and leaps into the margins. *Surround Sounds* magnifies this treatment of words as materially weighty and dynamically charged things, transforming low-tech 2-D graphics into a dizzying, immersive, 4-D drama.

Alongside Marclay's 'strict' onomatopoeias are those of a more subtle and associative sort. The slideshow *Zoom Zoom* (2007) presents the artist's many photographs of found onomatopoeias, often used to heighten commercial impact. *BOOM!* is emblazoned across a discount store announcing an explosive sale; *POP* bursts across the colourful packaging of a popcorn snack. In the same spirit, his deck of playing-cards titled *Shuffle* (2007) is a collection of images redolent with visual triggers regarding music: gold-threaded notes embellish a red cowboy-shirt; a bar of carols is emitted from a electric-guitar-playing, illustrated Santa; a brief, neon melody glows outside a blues bar, complete with illuminated cocktail. Both of those works result in an impromptu musical score: *Zoom Zoom* forms the basis of improvisational performances featuring Marclay and vocalist Shelley Hirsch, who interprets the visual sound. *Shuffle*'s cards are randomly re-shuffled and re-ordered like flashcards; musicians play the snatches of music notated on each card, producing an unpredictable melody. Similarly, *Manga Scroll* (2010) gathers the English-language attempts to mimic untranslatable Japanese comicbook onomatopoeias, resulting in a long, wordless, *a cappella* score interpreted by vocalists.

In *Surround Sounds*, explosive iterations of mechanical sounds such as *SLAM!*, *BONK!*, and *BOOM!* not only look and sound the part, but move appropriately. A shower of *POP!* dots rise and

float bubble-like over the darkened walls; ghostly waves of *WOOOOO* and *BOOOOO* float supernaturally; *RRRUMBLE* shakes and rocks unevenly along the ground. Brightly coloured stripes of diagonal *SSSSSS*'s, or vertical black-and-white blocks of *SCHEEE*, proliferate until the whole room is pulsing with streams of ticker-tape letter-ribbons. *THUNK* lands heavily and will not budge. Christian Marclay literally animates comicbook sounds, endowing them with biological signs of life such as movement (*RRRRRR* slithers like a stalking tiger); reproduction (*CRACK!* breaks open like an egg, giving birth to mutant generations of *CRAK!*s and *KRACCK!*s); and growth (a towering *KABOOM!* expands so violently that its enormous floor-to-ceiling frame cannot contain it).

This 4-wall/4-channel artwork plays like an elaborately choreographed, honking/hissing/howling cartoon opera, complete with 'movements' that range from ear-splitting crescendos of *WHAM!* to quiet showers of *BEEP!* or humming *MMMMMs*. Only gradually does it dawn on us that this multi-coloured sensory overload of bursting, banging, and crashing is entirely silent. The only actual noise is the gentle buzzing of the projectors, and viewers are supplying the implicit soundtrack to *Surround Sounds* themselves – as if playing sound from memory, as many of Christian Marclay's works require. The overwhelming auditory experience of Marclay's art-about-sound is, paradoxically, one of resolute silence.

In fact, Christian Marclay catalogues not just expressions of sound and music, but those of silence as well. *Soap Bubble Speech* is a video-loop originally included in the multi-part installation *Keller and Caruso* (2000), which documents the momentous 1917 encounter between Helen Keller and Enrico Caruso, and the blind-deaf-mute woman's soundless appreciation of the opera singer's musical voice solely through the touch of his vibrating throat. In *The Sound of Silence* (1988) a photograph of the vintage Simon and Garfunkel 45-RPM single prompts an almost Pavlovian response, as we quietly break into *hello darkness my old friend* to ourselves.

A deathly SILENCE sign looms over early versions of Warhol's *Electric Chair* (1963; fig.

1). A brief, reverential silence is asked of the witnesses to this murder, while eternal silence hovers ominously over the absentee occupant of the expectant, empty chair. If sound is an object that can be physically manipulated, then SILENCE too can be inverted or doubled, as in Marclay's *Rorschach Doors* (2006). (Interestingly, 'Rorschach' names both the psychological test referenced in the late Warhol series [1984], and a protagonist of the legendary graphic novel *The Watchmen* [1986; DC comics], a costumed vigilante who wears a mask of moving and shifting inkblots.) Marclay adds to the already complicated nature of onomatopoeia by inventing his own reverse onomatopoeia: word-images not just suggestive of sound, but producing a kind of special and emphatic silence.

II.

Turns out, onomatopoeia has a long and ambiguous relationship with Modernism and 20th-century art. Great Modernist literature experimented with it, from Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) to James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). 'Seesoo, hrss, rsseiss, oos', thinks Stephen Dedalus as he watches the incoming tide. Stéphane Mallarmé's poem *Un coup de dés* (1887) – considered the earliest example of modern typography – collaged language to produce word-pictures that performed their meaning; *LE HASARD (CHANCE)* crops up randomly on the page, for example. F.T. Marinetti's drumbeat *ZANG TUMB TUUUM* marches across his 'words-in-freedom' collage (c.1915; fig.2). The Futurist leader believed that modernity itself demanded the coinage of these new percussive noise-words to capture the big-city roar; the clanking machine; the whistling missile; the sonic-booming rocket.

Marinetti can also be credited as the first to shift typographic sizes in a single text, with words whose growing letters literally 'gained volume' and appear louder. He dropped boring punctuation (commas; colons) that slowed delivery down, injecting multiple giant exclamation points instead. But Marinetti's graphic revolution thrived better in the comicbook – first created in

the US, in 1934 – than in high-brow Modernist art, which downgraded and grew suspicious of language. ‘All pictures of quality ask to be looked at, rather than read’, Clement Greenberg insisted, and the artists of his day took heed. ‘There are no words needed to understand [my sculpture]’, sculptor David Smith boasted of his abstract art-beyond-language.

In opposition, post-Modernists from the mid-1960s launched what critic Craig Owen described as an ‘eruption’ of language into visual art, waging a printed battle against Greenberg’s anti-linguistic, pure Modernism. For Conceptual art, in fact, language alone was the subject of art – but this newfound language-love had no truck with the cheap thrills of onomatopoeia. Dominating the era was the Saussurean theory which dissociated the word and its referent. Signifier and signified are arbitrarily fixed, Saussure asserted, dismissing onomatopoeia as mindless transference. Even the graphic-heavy works of Ed Ruscha, which plainly traffic in onomatopoeia – his big loud *HONK* (1962), or shattering *SCREAM* (1964) (fig.s 3-4) – were discussed as ‘forms without meaning’. ‘They have nothing at all to say’, assured critic Peter Selz in 1963, despite Ruscha’s declared interest – like Marclay some decades later – in the ‘flip-flop’ between how words *look* and what they *mean*. High Modernists and post-Modernists alike joined forces in their refusal of a word’s visual effects. For staunch conceptualist Joseph Kosuth, ‘language is neuter ... and as a medium, becomes invisible’; well into the late 20th-century, onomatopoeia and word-graphics were artistic no-go areas.

By Greenbergian standards, to project words on Abstract Expression-ish artworks – as Christian Marclay has done in his *Actions* paintings – represents a kind of sacrilege. In fact, Marclay both pays homage to and parodies 1950s Ab Ex heroes: tough-guy painters fighting pre-Modernist kitsch with the mighty blows of flung paint. Jackson Pollock is recast as both Action Painter and Action Figure: ‘Take that, old-fashioned easel painting!’. Marclay often displays this mix of fascination and resistance towards his adopted American culture. The artist has spoken of his shock, when he returned to the US as an art student, to see his peers underline or scribble in the

margins of books that Europeans treat so respectfully. In his comicbook collages, the artist gleefully indulges not just in marking-up but ripping apart his books, transforming himself briefly from mild-mannered Swiss kid, to properly destructive all-American boy.

Throughout Marclay's work we sense a pervasive, if controlled, childishness – coexisting with contrasting feats of advanced technical and conceptual achievement. A thriving juvenile streak is suggested, for example, in the delicate swarm of transparent soap bubbles floating in the Kunsthaus courtyard. Inside the museum, comicbooks have been torn to shreds – as if the result of a childish tantrum, or a scissorless crafts project; and yet the resulting collages are paradoxically exacting in their execution.

Marclay's child/adult mix can inhabit a single body of work, for example the *Actions* paintings, which combine carefully silkscreened text with the messy dripping and tossing of paint. Any art-loving parent of a toddler, forced to wipe the post-mealtime drop cloth beneath their baby's high-chair – a disgusting composition of splattered spinach puree, carrot mush, banana spit-up, tomato sauce – notices its ludicrous Pollockian quality, also recognizable in Marclay's *Actions* paintings. This Ab Ex/daycare association is further enhanced not only through the pre-school soundtrack – *PLOP! SPLAT! FWOO!* – but the squirt-gun that the artist sometimes shoots to produce these paintings, all reinforcing a riotous playground feel. Moreover, art critic Donald Kuspit long ago remarked on the innate infantilism of Expressionism, which provided a license for adult artists to act out regressive acts of psycho-physical abandon and primal body-fluid release.

Similarly, onomatopoeia is considered on one hand an underdeveloped proto-language: the cradle of cognitive speech, akin to how small children call stinging insects *buzzbuzz* before learning 'bee', or call the car *brmmbrmm*. On the other hand, onomatopoeia enacts culturally specific and complex associations fluctuating across sounds and things. In the same way, in Marclay's art we find the technologically daring and spectacularly synchronized *Surround Sounds*, contrasting with the early *Fast Music* (1982), in which the artist appears to chew on vinyl – a digestive feat

accomplished through low-tech stop-animation. Moreover, *Fast Music* recalls a baby's oral fixation, unstoppably putting everything – edible or not – into its mouth.

III.

The artworks gathered at the Kunsthaus Aargauer demonstrate not only the recurring re-invention of onomatopoeiac tropes, but sheds light on a immensely indicative side of this artist's practice: Christian Marclay is an indefatigable collector. As seen here, the artist collects comicbooks; record covers; sound effects; photographs. He collects found onomatopoeias in *Zoom Zoom*; music criticism in *Mixed Reviews*. Elsewhere he collects musical instruments; stereo speakers; glass bells; LPs; CDs, cassette tapes; instrument cases, and more. *Crossfire* (2007) collects film-footage of shooting guns; *Telephones* (1995) and *Video Quartet* (2002) gather ringing phones or musical on-screen moments. *Pub Crawl* (2014) is a filmed collection of leftover Saturday-night beer and wine glasses the artist found along the deserted London streets one quiet Sunday morning (presumably while the rest of the city nursed a hangover). The artist's pen-tapping against the glasses produces a range of tones: an alternative, secular, Sunday-morning bell-toll. Christian Marclay is an irrepressible, imaginative collector of the world around him.

And Marclay bears the telltale hallmark of the true collector: he does not just 'accumulate stuff', but *joins together all the like things that belong together*. The devoted collector, like Christian Marclay, doesn't merely gather a random sampling, but pursues the full set, is driven to return associated yet scattered things to a state of entirety and completion. This impulse – to produce wholeness – runs powerfully throughout Christian Marclay's art. The *Abstract Music* series (1989-90) paints over the text printed on abstract-painting record-covers, returning these canvases – with a dose of irony – to their original complete, uninterrupted state. Marclay's comicbook collages build a completed rectangular frame from ripped pages bearing sounds (*KLUD*; *POOM*; *ZZZZZ*), ignoring the glaring gap at their centre: these collages are – literally – all talk and no action.

Aaaaahh (2006) draws into a coherent undulating stretch many cartoony screams to produce a singular, ecstatic, vocal release.

‘Collect ’em *all*’ is the collector’s motto; at times Marclay pursues this desire for completeness at any cost, following its logic *in extremis*. For this reason *Surround Sounds* is positively encyclopedic in its coverage of comicbook sound-effects. *Body Mix* (1993) pulls together anatomical fragments gracing vintage record-covers, to form absurdly concocted complete bodies. Michael Jackson, for example, is transformed into a bizarre odalisque – an eerily prophetic portrait, given that by the end of his life the pop-star grew uncannily to resemble Marclay’s stitched-together composite of undefinable gender, age, or race. In the same spirit, *The Clock* (2010) collates all the snatches of time seen fleetingly on film, to complete a functioning 24-hour timepiece.

This logic of the committed collector – the quasi-compulsive desire to group related things and create coherency – might point towards the overarching impetus across Marclay’s art: to build, out of the variety of human expression, a singular and harmonious whole. In sum, Marclay’s is an art of reconciliation, first of all reconciling the disciplinary divide between art and music, as many have noticed. But there is more: he reconciles art’s regressive playfulness with technical prowess and intellectual depth. He reconciles European culture with American and Japanese: pulling together coherently in his scrolls the brashness of American or Japanese popular culture; with the garish patterns of cheap English fabric; with the composure of the tea ceremony. In the *Action* paintings he reconciles Pollock’s horizontal dripped canvas, laid flat on the floor; with the 45° tilt of a child reading comicbooks in bed, or an illustrator at the drawing table; with the vertical hang of an easel painting.

Perhaps, more than ‘the overlap of sound and image’, the unifying principle behind Christian Marclay’s art is this spirit of joining together and resolving. He reconciles the bombastic early avant-garde of Marinetti; with the formalized strains of High Modernism; with the artist’s own conceptually-driven practice. In the *Actions* paintings Marclay reconciles gestural painting with the

readymade, once considered antithetical; and Abstract Expressionism with its nemesis, Pop art. He reconciles early Warhol with the late *Rorschach* paintings; and Pop art with its forgotten cousins, the comicbook and Pop music. *The Clock* reconciles the readymade with its opposite: extremes of skill and time-consuming artistic labour. He reconciles the wordlessness of floating soap bubbles with the dense critical language of *Mixed Reviews*.

For me, Marclay's thematic unity and uniqueness – alongside the sheer pleasure of his art – has detracted from an appreciation of his art-historical importance. Christian Marclay's work can be seen as a final, triumphant, reconciling chapter to 20th-century art and beyond. In this spirit, onomatopoeia – itself more far-reaching than we first imagined; capable of pulling together sound, image, language, culture, memory – is more than just an ideal device for this artist bent on joining sound and vision. Onomatopoeia becomes an apt symbol for the spirit of fusion stretching across Marclay's extraordinary lifetime of art.

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