

Record, CD, Analog, Digital

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY & YASUNAO TONE

In the late 1970s, concurrent with the birth of HipHop, Christian Marclay (1955–) pioneered the use of turntables and found recordings to make experimental music in the context of art. John Cage, Paul Hindemith, and Ernst Toch had begun such experiments forty years earlier. Yet it was Marclay who most fully explored this musical territory. Inspired by punk rock and by avant-garde art movements such as Dada and Fluxus, Marclay used skipping thrift-store records to produce percussive effects. He cut up and reassembled them into new composites and employed multiple turntables to produce inventive and often humorous collages. Using found records, album covers, audio tapes, and snapshots, Marclay has also produced a body of photographs, sculptures, videos, and installations that have been widely exhibited in galleries and museums.

Yasunao Tone (1935–) has been producing happenings, experimental music, and digital art for more than four decades. In 1960, with Takehisa Kosugi, Tone formed Group Ongaku, the first collective improvisation ensemble in Japan; and, in 1962, he became an active member of the Japanese wing of Fluxus. Always interested in the manipulation of technology to aesthetic ends, Tone began experimenting with CDs and CD players in the early 1980s. In 1985, he produced his first "wounded CD" by attaching pin-hole-punctured transparent tape to commercial CDs in order to override the CD player's error-correction system and produce sporadic bursts of white noise.

In this discussion with the editors of *Music* magazine, Marclay and Tone discuss their work and compare strategies for manipulating analog and digital recordings.

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY: You make CDs skip?

YASUNAO TONE: It's not really skipping. It's distorting information. A CD consists of a series of samples. You know bytes and bits, right? One byte contains sixteen bits of information. So, if I block one or two bits, information still

exists—one byte of information—but the numbers are altered so it becomes totally different information. That's the idea. It's not skipping sound.

MARCLAY: So, how do you do it?

TONE: I use Scotch tape. I make many pinholes on bits of Scotch tape which I attach to the CDs.

MARCLAY: I tried doing different things with CDs—scratching the surface or putting a little spray paint on it, different patterns—but just the slightest thing makes . . .

TONE: . . . a big difference.

MARCLAY: Yeah, the machine stops.

TONE: Because error-correcting software is built in.

MARCLAY: Is there a way to take that software out?

TONE: I don't know how to do that, but if you could it would be great [. . .]

MARCLAY: I like the Scotch tape.

TONE: The Scotch tape enables me to make burst errors without significantly affecting the system and stopping the machine. The error-correcting software constantly interpolates between individual bits of misread information, but if adjacent bits are misread, a burst occurs and the software mutes the output. If a significant number of bursts occur in one frame, the error increases until it eventually overrides the system.

MARCLAY: That's why I like the old-fashioned turntable: because it's so dumb. You can hit it, you can do all these things, and it will never stop playing. The CD players are too smart . . . smart machines.

TONE: But to fight with smart machines you have to be very primitive. The machine's behavior is very peculiar, it cannot decide what to do. Sometimes it proceeds backwards, or it hesitates and searches for the next signal. When the CD player stops or hesitates to advance, I tap it or slightly shake it. This very tiny movement affects the machine's behavior—maybe changing the focal distance of the laser beam—and it recovers from malfunctioning.

MARCLAY: It sounds like a rattlesnake when it's skipping. It has that quality. It is the distinctive CD malfunctioning sound—the sound of a rattlesnake. I was just listening to this CD by DJ Shadow. On the first cut you hear this skipping CD. I think it's the first time I heard that rattlesnake sound in a pop context. Otherwise, I only heard it with you, and Nic Collins, and David Weinstein's band of CD Players, Impossible Music.

TONE: I began to work with CDs in 1985, when the CD player first came out. I think then the machines were more primitive than now. I can still do it, but. . .

MUSIC: You use a standard machine? You don't alter it at all?

TONE: It's standard. I have two machines. In 1984, I bought the first one to experiment with—I think it's Sharp or something—and then half a year later I bought a different machine. It has better functions for ordinary use, but it's less useful than the first one for me. Within a half year the machines already improved, so I don't think I could use a brand new machine for my performance. I would have to look for old, used ones.

MUSIC: Just like Christian, the turntables you use. . .

MARCLAY: It's true. The Technics MK2 and MK3, which every DJ swears by, are annoying machines to me. They're too delicate, too limiting for me. The simpler the better.

MUSIC: What kind of turntable do you normally use?

MARCLAY: They're called Califone. They're kind of institutional turntables used by every school in the U.S. They were used for audio-visual presentations, for dance classes and whatever. Built to last, built to be abused by students. They have four different speeds, and I added on and off switches, sometimes an extra tone arm. Otherwise, they're standard.

MUSIC: Christian, in an art context you are situated within a trajectory of Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, Appropriation. How would you position yourself in a music context, vis-à-vis Experimental, Pop, HipHop, DJ?

MARCLAY: I get my influences from many different places. I'm not very picky about where they come from, whether it's high art or pop culture. That difference has never been important to me. What HipHop DJs were doing had some influence, though I became aware of that work later. My first influences were Cage and some of the Fluxus experiments with sound. Then, *musique concrète* and its experimentation with found sounds. When I became aware of HipHop I could see a natural connection between those two traditions. But, HipHop didn't grow out of that kind of white, nerdy, high art culture. It came out of the streets. It was a simple, direct way to make music. And also a cheap way. Rather than expensive musical instruments, it was just some cheap records and a couple of turntables. There's an economic reason for this happening. And in some strange way these two movements—the Experimental music and the HipHop culture—have kind of grown separately and there are very little interactions between the two, until now. I would like to think that I am in between—neither, nor. I don't try to make pop music and I usually stay away from commercial beats, but my work is informed by the pop music I hear everywhere. It's just a different way of using that material. It's also interesting that my work with records came about just before analog records were replaced by digital technology and sampling. It felt like the industry came out with sampling machines because DJs were sampling. I think the technology was ready to follow in the footsteps of the musical ideas already present.

TONE: Well, you know, it takes a long time to develop digital technology. I don't think they are aware of HipHop or whatever when they are developing something.

MARCLAY: But when they started making their sampling keyboards and stuff, I think maybe there was already that understanding that it was useful to sample because HipHop DJs were doing it.

TONE: Well, the clientele was expected to be not just musicians, but the general public.

MARCLAY: Anybody could become a musician.

TONE: Yeah. Anybody can become a musician. That's something in common between you and me: we use a kind of technique that can be used by any lay people. It doesn't require any special training. That is essentially a Fluxus philosophy.

MARCLAY: And also the Punk philosophy.

TONE: Well, you know, Fluxus came before.

MARCLAY: But, Fluxus was an art movement, and punk was a pop culture phenomenon.

TONE: That's true, but. . . . In the 60s we were transversing many categories [. . . .We] didn't recognize any dichotomy between high and low at that time. These were transversal acts.

MUSIC: We live in a particular, historical moment, with its environment, including the strategy of the avant garde and certain technology which becomes available, not only for the artist, but for others as well.

MARCLAY: When the industry comes up with a machine to record something, it has a very specific use, but the artist has always tried to go beyond what the machine was designed for—like Tone's use of CDs. It's the same with photography. Moholy-Nagy put the camera aside, and started using the *medium* of photography to make photograms. The moment records were invented, people started messing around with them. Again, Moholy-Nagy experimented by modifying the grooves of records, and imagined drawing sounds directly onto the record.

TONE: Even Paul Hindemith. When the record was cylindrical, he played Mozart backwards—actually I don't know if he did it or just proposed it, but it's always like that. A new technology, a new medium appears, and the artist usually enlarges the use of the technology. . . . Deviates.

MARCLAY: Abuse of technology.

TONE: I think deviation of technology. You have to deviate. I call that kind of art *paramedia*. The manufacturers always force us to use a product their way. A medium always has some *telos*; however, people occasionally find a way to deviate from the original purpose of the medium and develop a totally new field. Photographic technology had *telos* to make the image solid, to make shadow and light solid, so the photograph was invented and it's constantly being refined in order to be as accurate as possible. But, artists do not want to just imitate nature. When Man Ray invented solarization, it was a failure in the view of photographic technology, but of course artistically it's much more interesting. Or, *musique concrète*. As soon as the tape recorder was invented, people like Pierre Schaeffer found that by splicing tape and changing its order he could get a different sound than what was originally recorded. So, it's natural for artists to deviate.

MUSIC: I'm interested in how this deviation by the artist affects the chain of manufacturers, marketers, and consumers. For instance, there's a whole new revival of producing turntables. They even make a turntable that plays backwards and has other details that weren't available before. This is partly because the DJ scene is popular, and . . .

MARCLAY: . . . Yeah, now you can buy samples of "record" sounds—HipHop scratches—for your keyboard. You can hear these sounds in advertisements for Coca-Cola or whatever, and so now this dysfunctioning machine sound is being recycled for commercial purposes.

TONE: It's recycled. Reappropriation of artists' appropriations.

MARCLAY: Again an example of the absurdity of wanting to disassociate high and low culture. Another good example is how experimental films from the 70s—Stan Brakhage's fast editing and stuff which had no commercial value—are now being used in every MTV video and every TV ad. And really, who invented this stuff but crazy artists! Somehow the media has reappropriated it and turned it into a commercial. It goes back and forth.

STONE: It's a delusion. It's a deluded form. The manufacturers don't care about the concept.

MARCLAY: It has lost its original meaning. It has become something else.

STONE: Actually, it's totally different. It just looks the same.

MUSIC: You said before that anybody can become a musician and that you both use simple techniques. I hear that in Japan there's this DJ primer for kids to learn how to spin. Any kid can do it. It becomes a sort of commodified popular art form. So how can you radicalize, say, the idea of manipulating records or CDs?

MARCLAY: That's one of the reasons why I don't perform so often anymore. I'm not a very active DJ these days because for me it doesn't have the same meaning as when I did it fifteen years ago when records were the common medium that everybody used at home. Records were considered differently. They were meant to be played from beginning to end, and a DJ just played cuts—one after another—and just worried about transitions. Now the record has become obsolete and CDs have really taken over, even though there is this underground culture of DJs, young kids who are rediscovering vinyl because their first stereo equipment was not a turntable, but a CD player. In Japan they are selling all these black-and-white, throw-away cameras and advertising them with black-and-white images of movie stars from the 40s. It's like the big craze for teenagers to take black-and-white pictures because they don't know black-and-white.

STONE: They thought color pictures were natural.

MARCLAY: They grew up with Fuji colors. It's like re-discovering a poor medium that has a certain fascination. It's a novelty again.

STONE: When a new technology appears which makes old technology obsolete, two typical reactions occur: some artists discover an abnormal use for the new technology in order to expand artistic expression, and sometimes the obsolete technology itself becomes an art form. Christian started working with records just before the appearance of CDs which would soon be making vinyl obsolete. I think you sensed somehow not consciously, but. . . .

MUSIC: Well, even though Christian began manipulating records before CDs were available, his work can be seen now as a reaction to technology, to digital technology. Obviously, you are both more interested in critiquing a medium rather than in cutting-edge technology.

MARCLAY: I remember when my attitude towards the record changed from being this object to be respected, collected and stored for posterity, into a piece of plastic that had no more value than a coffee cup in the gutter. Coming from Switzerland to the United States in the 70s, I noticed that change in attitudes towards objects. I would see records on the street, in the gutter. I would see thousands of records in thrift shops that nobody wanted, that nobody cared about. It was in some way that cultural change that allowed me to see a different attitude towards records, and I pushed in that direction, considering them as just a cheap commodity to be used and abused.

MUSIC: So, in a way you use records just as a Fluxus or Dada artist would use junk?

MARCLAY: Yeah, and the more I used it, the more I started thinking about the object and reflecting on it and playing with its meaning—its cultural value ver-

sus' its commodity value, and how it has affected the way we perceive music and time. And so a lot of my work has been about trying to understand this object.

MUSIC: You have made a few records, too.

MARCLAY: When I made a record, it had to be critical of the vinyl object. It could not only be a document. *Record Without a Cover* was the perfect medium for my ideas, a record that was not about permanence, but about change. It was sold without any protective packaging. By the time you bought it in the store, it was already damaged during shipping and handling. It was a record that threatened everything you were taught about records and how to handle them. It even threatened your needle. You couldn't be a passive listener, you had to be involved. It was intriguing, unstable. It was a record about records.

MUSIC: Earlier you mentioned a CD by DJ Shadow. Of course, a number of DJs are releasing records and CDs now. What do you think of DJs in the recording studio—studio DJs?

MARCLAY: I liked working with records as a performance activity. I used the records in front of people. It was a live event. There are very few recordings because I wasn't really interested in making new records, but more in using "dead" records in a "live" situation. So people understood where the music came from. It was very simple, everybody could understand the process because they knew how to use records. Once you are in a recording studio, you start using all the technology that's available. That technology is not visible or audible necessarily. You get this kind of mystery, in some way a hierarchy. Technology can sometimes create that hierarchy. There's the technicians, the . . .

TONE: . . . composer, conductor, performer, engineer . . .

MARCLAY: . . . And then at the bottom of the pyramid, the listeners, who are just like, "Wow, how did he do this?" I like it better when someone says, "Oh, I could do that." And that's what the old mechanical turntable and vinyl allow me to do. You know, in the 80s everybody wanted to be a guitar player. Now in the 90s, everybody wants to be a DJ. To me the guitar always had a mystery. You had to be really skilled and studied in some ways—even though you had a few illuminated geniuses like Arto Lindsay who just learned by doing it—but there's something about a record and a turntable that seems so easy. I think that's what the big deal is. That's why everyone wants to be a DJ, because it's so easy.

TONE: Well, you're a master. Master of—

MARCLAY: . . . Not a DJ.

TONE: A meta-DJ. I think there's probably a big difference between analog and digital in terms of playing discs. I think digital is basically unpredictable. There are so many bits and bytes of information condensed in one tiny space, and you can't locate which part of the disc produces this sound. But for you, you almost locate, you can actually see the sound. CD players are instructed by the information on the CD—when to stop, how fast to spin—and if you dysfunction that information the disc cannot progress the way the piece goes. So, I do a kind of de-controlling of the sound-producing process, of the system of music itself. Well, it's essentially a Fluxus event. The idea of performance is sort of de-controlled.

MARCLAY: And not knowing the outcome, not being totally in control, and accepting that randomness.

TONE: Basically, as a performance artist we do the same thing, but towards the material I also de-control the material.

MARCLAY: So you're a master of de-controlling?

MUSIC: Tone's a digital master, and Christian's an analog master. [Laughter]