

# CINDERS AND ARCHIVES: MARCLAY, DERRIDA AND THE AFTERLIFE OF DEAD SOUNDS

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'Sifting through the archives': this phrase suggests the dust of centuries, a stratified archaeology of ashen layers, knowledge that is catalogued, perhaps hidden or even forbidden. Is the archive a vault for the preservation of things, the arrangement of ideas, the locus of power, the protection of reputations – or is it a promise 'of the future, *to* the future,' (Derrida 1998: 19) the place where new relationships emerge? Any archive, including those of sound and visual objects, is open to deconstructive analysis in terms of its structure, its contents, and its ontology. We could ask: how does a body of work and its virtual or physical presentation, fit into (or 'be' part of) an archive and what is its relationship with its users?

This paper will utilize methods drawn from deconstruction – including *différance*, instability and tele-techno-iconicity – to explore concepts of the archive as present in the work of Christian Marclay (b. 1955) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004).[1] I have deliberately limited the discourse to these two creative voices although many others could join the wider conversation, including Mark Fisher (2014), Tim Ingold (2016) and Carolyn Steedman (2001). I will begin by discussing why Marclay and Derrida form an appropriate pairing. I then proceed to investigate sounds, structures and objects in relation to the archive, firstly through a taxonomy and then through more reflective discussion and conclude by considering further possibilities for sonic praxis in the wider field of problematicity that is hauntology.[2]

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Consider the two quotes below, one by a creative practitioner in sound and the visual arts, one by an author of philosophical texts, both much concerned with the nature of archives, archival structures, and archontic principles:



We think that with these new technologies we can record things, capture things and keep them for future generations...but those archives are becoming less and less permanent. I actually enjoy that tension... (Christian Marclay, 'Overtures')[3]

...the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. Jacques Derrida (1998: 16-17)

Christian Marclay is known for his work as a highly innovative turntablist and experimental music creator, whose work frequently circles around archives and archival concepts. As evidenced by the above quotation, through his work with the manipulation of 'found' objects – records, CDs, photographs, and film – and their afterlives, in works such as *Record Without a Cover* (1985), *More Encores* (1988),[4] and *Accompagnement Musical* (1995), Christian Marclay raises the question of the sound archive, its portability and its listening cultures. He also problematizes the curation and bricolage of sounds and sound documents, the contradiction between ephemeral sound itself, as 'permanent' document, and through their inevitable decay (in both live and recorded forms). Marclay also questions the permanence that the archive (in many instances) stands for.

In *Archive Fever* (1995) Derrida deconstructs the nature of recording and inscription, of documentation, of electronic communication and retrieval, mediated by an extended contemplation of psychoanalysis and its forms and systems of 'writing' and documentation. In the above quotation Derrida questions the archive's forms and structures while also interrogating its atemporality. It is a place that creates its contents – it creates the event.[5] He questions the idea of the 'dead' or nostalgic document, instead proposing that the process of archiving makes a new, living event. Thus dead becomes live, archived becomes performative and the archive is interactive, it speaks to the future. There are also hidden archives within things and texts, with implied cultural and historical archaeologies, even when their purpose is lost and must be [re]imagined. Repurposed sounds and objects, texts – including scores – that are now untranslatable or open to multiple interpretations through their (wilful?) refusal to provide any contextual 'rules.' Derrida also interrogates this area of thought in both *Specters of Marx* (1994), where he initiates hauntology as a new domain of academic research, and *Cinders* (2014), where he problematizes the act of sound recording.[6] Derrida himself argued that deconstruction was eminently suitable for all fields of research. In conversation with Peter Brunette and David Wills, he remarked:

I would say that the idea that deconstruction should confine itself to the analysis of the discursive text...is really either a gross misunderstanding or a political strategy designed to limit deconstruction to matters of language. Deconstruction starts with the deconstruction of logocentrism, and thus to want to confine it to linguistic phenomena is the most suspect of operations. (1994: 15)

A number of conceptual questions arise regarding the process of curating an archive: there are questions of structure, of presentational format – in digital texts, sound files (MP3s), artworks and recorded performances (MP4s) if the archive is virtual, contrasted with the physical texts, performance detritus and exhibits of the material archive. How is the format of the archive structured by its contents and how do the contents adapt to the form of the archive? Is the ‘event’ that Derrida speaks of – the creation of new objects (rather than a collation of old ones) in order to form a new archive – a curation? From a hauntological perspective we could ask, how does the inclusion of ‘dead’ pre-recorded voices and ‘found’ materials, whether LPs, CDs, audio tapes, time loops or live/dead radio signals, sit within the archive, and does the housing and dissemination of that archive make any difference to the archives or its contents’ afterlife?

### Marclay’s archives

I’ll begin by creating a loose taxonomy of contents that can be found across Marclay’s creative outputs. I’ll then expand this taxonomy into a more detailed discussion of the questions that arise.

#### 1. Sounds:

- their recording and status as portable, temporal audio-documents;
- their assemblage and reuse, including the manipulation and rebirth of the ‘cinders’ of sounds;
- the listening cultures that accompany them.

#### 1. Structures:

- the effects of electronic/digital formats and the implications for memory;
- archive as institution;
- Derrida’s ‘archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique’ and the consignation of memory to documents (physical or digital), which Derrida sees in terms of *différance*;<sup>[7]</sup>
- the collection (archive, as body of work) of texts and performances—which are digitally recorded and stored (in a physical or virtual archive), and which also re-use other electronic archives in the process—and their assemblage;
- archival formats and their implications for their readers and listeners.

#### 1. Objects:

- scores, instruments, papers, records (LPs), turntables and CDs;
- the materiality and fetishisation of the means of performance, as can be found in *Recycled Records* (1985-86); *One Hundred Turntables* (1991) and *The Sounds of Christmas* (1999);
- the problematisation of the archive as active player or innocent bystander.

### 1. Sounds

Music making is a temporal, ephemeral, and often social practice. Thus, the audio *document* opens up a field of contradictions. The recording forces the live performance (which itself was a 'fixed' moment drawn from an endless lexicon of performance possibilities) into a format where it can be replayed until it breaks and is no longer audible.[8] The immediacy and sociability of the original live event is gone, but Marclay (2014: 25) says: 'records are about dead sounds, but when I bring records into a performance and play with them, I change my role from a passive listener to an active player; the same is true for the audience. I give a new life to these dead sounds'. Whether or not listening is a passive activity is subjective, but the social and performance possibilities for the audio-document – its 'afterlife' – open up another field of enquiry.[9] A note of caution, though, of the dead and the living Derrida says: 'Let us guard against saying that death is opposed to life. The living being is only a species of what is dead, and a very rare species.' (ibid: 51) Perhaps it would be better to refer to Marclay's audio documents as 'undead' sounds, as zombies[10], zombies who problematise the metaphysical spatial opposition of near and far and the temporal opposition of past, present and future?

As the recording of any sound performance places it within the categories of audio-document *and* the processes and structures of memory[11], I will approach recording from two different angles, starting with the audio-document, its afterlife and how this pertains to the archive.

If, as Derrida asserts, the living being is only a species of what is dead, and the archive is a pledge or promise to the future, then the recorded and edited audio-document, the live performance (that was recorded), and the performances to come that reuse and repurpose the earlier audio-document(s) are all parts of the *same process*. Repurposing sound documents is nothing new. From their earliest days, records were more than *just* recordings, their inherent artistic possibilities as found objects having been explored by Cage, Henry, Stockhausen, et al. Marclay's 'hybridisation' of genres—for instance, sculpture and sound in *Record Without a Cover*—further problematizes the sound document itself as a stable medium. *Record Without a Cover* deliberately invites damage to the sound object and its archive—it is literally supplied 'without a cover'—the physical scarring of the surface as the result of a temporal process, creating an evolving soundscape, supplementary to the original recording.[12] The record itself is composed of excerpts from other records, so there is a double questioning of sound composition: as archive of found sound objects, and as post-recording afterlife. Suddenly the owner becomes an interactive listener/composer and *Record* forces this listener/owner to question the ontology of the audio document. The collage of found objects, and the pops, hisses and loops caused by its scarification, make it impossible to suspend disbelief and imagine that the recording is a 'live' event. Instead, we are listening to a lifetime of 'record' experience; we are listening to the medium itself. 'The vinyl record becomes a palimpsest that has a history of layered marks that you can't erase; incidental scratches become a natural part of the piece, not a mistake but integral to its meaning and composition' (Estep 2014: 39). The recorded work *More Encores* [13] is another telling example from Marclay's catalogue that brings undecidability to the foreground through 'the archival implications of a medium that purports to capture forever the fleeting elements of a temporally singular musical event' and the 'impossible' possibility of repeated 'live' performances promised by technologies of reproduction' (González 2004: 33).

Thus, Marclay's oeuvre embodies a certain cultural history of music-making and listening, individuality and sociability. At the same time the record is foregrounded as fetishized found object and as process and medium of recording through the damage caused by natural temporal processes and deliberate acts of manipulation. The LP, tape or CD, as Derrida says, is 'a graphic space open to multiple readings,' and here those readings imply multiple physical actions and

iterations. Yet each performance decision is made in the moment, 'calculated and by chance' (Derrida 2014: 7-8). Undecidability is foregrounded.[14]

Returning to those scratches on the surface of the record, those scars of experience: are they part of the archive, a record of the passage of time on a single audio-document; or are they the archive itself; or a combination? Derrida notes:

Again, inscribing inscription, it commemorates in its way, effectively, a circumcision. A very singular monument, it is also the document of an archive. In a reiterated manner, it leaves the trace of an incision *right on* the skin: more than one skin at more than one age... Each layer here seems to gape slightly, as the lips of a wound, permitting glimpses of the abyssal possibility of another depth destined for archaeological excavation. (1998: 20)

The scratches, whether deliberate or accidental, are another document of the archive; in the same way that writing cuts into the surface of the paper, we sense the action through the absence left by the cut; its *différance*. We sense the infinite depths of layers that are implied by that cut. And the cut applies to more than just the scratches applied post and during performance; the record (or CD) is also a spiral cut, the incision a fundamental part of the recording process – thus a damaged record is a double cut, that resonates with Derrida's 'bottomless chessboard on which Being is put into play.' (Derrida 1984: 22) Archived documents and, in particular, audio-documents, speak to us still. These sonic 'ghosts' – including radio and TV broadcasts – are still, in a way, a living presence, what Derrida refers to as phantoms:

Perhaps he does not respond, but he speaks. A phantom speaks...this means that without responding it disposes of a response, a bit like the answering machine whose voice outlives its moment of recording: you call, the other person is dead, now, whether you know it or not, and the voice responds to you... (Derrida 1998: 62)

We respond to the audio archive by listening, by applauding, by congregating, by using; and, even though in some sense we are talking to the voices of the dead or listening to echoes, the archive must, and will, always speak to the future.

To record, to archive, is the promise *of* the future, *to* the future. The promise of the archive '...as wager [*gageure*]. The archive has always been a *pledge*, and like every pledge [*gage*], a token of the future. (Derrida 1998: 18)

## 2. Archival structures – structures of memory

... *every* archive, we will draw some inferences from this, is at once *institutive* and *conservative*. Revolutionary and traditional. An *eco-nomic* archive in this double sense: it keeps, it puts in reserve, it saves, but in an unnatural fashion, that is to say in making the law (*nomos*) or making people respect the law. (Derrida 1998: 7)

As Derrida remarks, the archive as structure and system of rules, conserves, preserves, and commits to memory so that *wemay* forget. Of course, archives are not infallible, for how often have we found that the object at the end of a link is no longer there—having been lost or even 'disappeared' [15]. Archives decay, things become obsolete, technological retrieval systems no longer work and the memory of the process of retrieval as well as the object itself are lost. This begs the questions: is the archive doing too much of our thinking for us? Is the archive as

'institution' too embedded in structures of power? Can it be challenged from within: are there radical hermeneutics at play?

As John D. Caputo (1987: 235) comments on this subject, contained within a broader discussion of Derrida and the academy:

Institutions are the way things get done, *and* they are prone to violence. They are inextricably, undecidably, pharmacologically both things at once. Nothing is innocent... One needs to operate within the university... in order to expose it to its other, to the abyss, to keep its standards and its preconceived notions of rationality in play, to keep reason in play and to keep the play in reason.

Thus the archive can indeed be radical, in that it can be used, as though against itself, in order to promote the free play of inquiry and knowledge[16]; or, as Derrida says, 'the archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself' (Derrida 1998: 12). So, if we accept the archiving archive as Derrida would say, as a process of decentring, *différance*, and play – that is the undecidability that Caputo mentions above – then the archive is a place of constant movement, of challenge and counter-challenge, of conservation and institution, of double and triple layered substrates of memories, of new networks of relationships which themselves make spaces for the event... of archiving.

Like Caputo's example of the academy, the museum too is an example of the archive as institution and the institution as archive, for what do museums do but collect, collate, fetishize, order, appropriate, or even steal, and sometimes serve an explicit cultural/political agenda? Marclay seeks to problematise the museum's archiving ontology by deconstructing the exhibition and the exhibition space in a playful although thought-provoking way. *Accompagnement Musical* (1995), *Arranged and Conducted* (1997), *Keller and Caruso* (2000) and *Shake, Rattle and Roll (fluxmix)* (2004)[17] all focus on museum collections.[18] For *Accompagnement*, Marclay took objects from assorted museums in Geneva, all related to the activity of sound making from around the world. Pictures of music-making, music related images applied to any surface, instruments and so on, were (by the standards of the museum as institution) haphazardly jumbled together across multiple spaces, thus forcing the viewer into a new experiential perspective of the archival institution in what Marclay described as 'these flea-market-like installations' (Marclay 2014: 49). The anticipated academic pathway is no longer present, and neither is the aspect of sound – it wasn't an interactive installation, so the instruments on display could not be played by the public, a point made doubly clear by a separate collection of empty cases in one of the installation's spaces, leaving memory, or even audio-hallucinations, to supply the missing (traditional) 'musical' sounds.[19] A radical reinterpretation of the archive as silenced *otobiography*.

'I had never thought much about how sound could be experienced through touch, this was fascinating' (ibid: 40). *Keller and Caruso* takes a similarly sideways approach to the realm of sound (listening) and vision (or their lack). Utilising the Peabody Conservatory of Music's Caruso archives, including reportage of the meeting between Caruso and Helen Keller in 1917 (where she felt the vibrations of his voice), in an installation of sound making and recording objects (record players, discs, records, video), also with braille and sign language, *Keller and Caruso* problematises access to the archival institution and access to the experience of sound and vision, through the difficulties of experiencing and 'interpreting' the whole installation by one person and the impossibility of *ever* experiencing the *whole* archive.

Due to Marclay's fondness for randomly distributing exhibits, these works can be viewed as exercises in 'disrupt[ing] people's habitual ways of processing information,' (Estep 2014: 41) a

way of 'reacting to the whole art system of creating collectable objects' (Marclay 2014: 48), about 'critiquing the institutionalization of the art object, but in a playful and humorous way' (ibid: 49). A group of disparate objects can be made to resonate (in sonic and visual terms) simply through their proximity. The rest is up to the individual viewer, who now finds themselves given agency regarding how they 'compose' and 'hear' an installation.

### 3. Objects

these shows are not didactic. They don't inform the viewer about the art object and its historical value; it's more about using the art objects like raw materials in playful ways, and it makes you look at the objects differently. (ibid: 49)

The importance to the museum as archival institution, of the fetishisation of objects, of histories and *systems* of order and cataloguing, cannot be underestimated. When Marclay turns these systems inside out, and attempts to overturn the institutional fetishisation of objects by placing them, *not* as part of an *academic* collection, but within the 'storage room,' 'junk shop' approach, the archive works in a different way. As Marclay says, 'the reason they are together is to offer a third reading totally disconnected from their initial usage' (ibid: 85). Thus, the archive works through a new set of associations, either by collation (they are all related to music in some way); through proximity (they are in several rooms, linked by passages which encourage circulation); through location (the music shop); or through other senses (*Keller and Caruso* problematises sight, sound and touch). It is to the realm of touch; the materiality and fetishisation of objects, and the ways of overturning this fetishisation, that we now turn.

How do objects relate to or even inhabit the archive? Marclay asserts that his work 'makes you look at the objects differently,' while Derrida tells us that 'order is no longer assured' (Derrida 1998:5). In the museum pieces, Marclay focuses on the musical use of a substantial array of objects, many of which are not musical *per se*, objects that are now part of a system of bricolage, in that they are put to uses outside of their original or expected purpose. There are two realms in which these objects operate: the tactile and the material realm – the ways in which they are used in performances – and the cultural realm of histories, purpose, value, collectability, prestige, and fetish. If they are no longer somatosensory, but can be only heard or seen (as in films and online recordings), does that remove their fetish value, and allow them free play in the virtual archive? In the same way that the status of the records in Marclay's work is problematised by damage and re-use – who wants to collect or buy a damaged record?[20], but the records' *original desirability* is still there as part of its history – the cultural and economic history of these objects has not been erased just because they have been re-purposed. They are simultaneously old and new; undecidable and perplexing, and their habitation in the virtual archive magnifies that perplexity. We find listening cultures have been disrupted through the foregrounding of the medium itself, and although the body of the fetish is gone, the history of that fetish, its *différance*, remains:

The *trouble de l'archive* stems from a *mal d'archive*...It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably from searching for the archive right where it slips away. (Derrida 1998: 91)

## Concluding Thoughts

Marclay continues to perform as both soloist and collaborator, manipulating and archiving found objects in much of his work. His more recent creative outputs – *The Clock* (2010)[21], *Made to be Destroyed* (2016) and *Sound Stories* (2019)[22] – problematise archives and archiving, extending and paralleling many of the ideas Derrida first presented in *Archive Fever*. Both *The Clock* and *Made to be Destroyed* are cinematic film montages, the first an installation of time related film clips – such as clocks, watches, sundials and so on, that shows the passing of 24 hours in real time – while the second uses the same archival processes of retrieval and compilation themed around the filmic destruction of artworks and buildings. Composed of sampled Snapchat videos of everyday life, *Sound Stories* in some ways provides a summation of three important strands already present in Marclay’s work: sound, film and the museum. The five installations, two of which are interactive, present a curated amalgam of the mundane as aesthetic ‘new’ experience, reminiscent of the Cagean embrace of plurality present in works such as *Musicircus* (1967).

As with much deconstructive thinking and writing, as many new questions are raised as answers are given. Thus, Marclay’s work opens into a yet wider field of problematicity, so where to next? It’s an open choice, but in terms of musical practice, the pursuit of a hauntological thread could yield interesting results in performance, composition and other creative arenas that embrace technology and genre ambiguity. This thread could lead on to the highly diverse work of creatives such as The Caretaker, William Basinski, Aphex Twin, and the Black Meadow Archive project, where Derridean ‘techno-tele-iconicity’ (Derrida 1994a: 63) takes centre stage in a world of fractured sonic memories and obsessive loops and time that is truly ‘out of joint’ (ibid: 1).

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## Endnotes

1. NB All text references to Derrida refer to English translations of his works.
2. See Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (2006) and Mark Fisher’s *Ghosts of My Life* (2014) for detailed discussions on hauntology. Derrida attaches his neologism to the ‘medium of the media’ (Derrida, 2006, 63) where its ‘techno-tele-iconicity’ constitutes a ‘dimension of performative interpretation’ (ibid) which is ‘neither living nor dead’ (ibid). Fisher then takes this concept further, extending its remit to sound archives and acts of recording and compositional approaches derived from the two. For example, this approach is illustrated by Marclay’s extensive use of vinyl as aesthetic medium in its own right.
3. Marclay, C., quoted in ‘Overtures’, González, J., 2005, 63.
4. Christian Marclay – More Encores (1989). Available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Viyk4sdyINI> (accessed July 2022).
5. For example, the news media creates ‘events’ through its coverage, and the news media can itself become the ‘event’ as in a ‘media circus.’ A performance has to be set up in order to be documented; then, during the process of documentation, sometimes re-takes have to be made in ‘live’ shows, because the footage first captured was not suitable or the process of



documentation had technical issues, etc., which can also lead to misunderstandings such as “can we do that again?” “no, you’re on air.”

6. See also *Copy, Archive, Signature* (2010) for Derrida’s interrogation of the photographic archive.

7. See also ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’ in *Dissemination*, 1981.

8. Which opens a new field of performance, of course.

9. For more on this subject see: Thom Holmes, *Electronic and Experimental Music. Technology, Music and Culture* (2020) and Christoph Cox & Daniel Warner, *Audio Culture*, 2017.

10. They could also be considered as *pharmakoi*, one of Derrida’s ‘undecidables’. See *Plato’s Pharmacy* (1981).

11. See *Archive Fever*, pages 11-15 for Derrida’s introductory statements on the instability of memory within the archive, the necessity for its structural breakdown in the process of archiving and retrieval and its relationship with psychoanalysis.

12. As can be clearly heard in these two different YouTube examples. Christian Marcaly – Record Without a Cover (available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QArTJnze6c> accessed July 2022). Christian Marclay – Record Without a Cover (available here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uV7\\_grskvLQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uV7_grskvLQ) accessed July 2022).

13. *More Encores* (1988) is a re-mix (re-appropriation) of found sonic objects, including excerpts from recordings by John Cage, Maria Callas and Louis Armstrong. Unusually for Marclay, the excerpts are (in many cases) easily identifiable.

14. These same principles can also be applied to the use of radio, time loops, and other live/dead, self-archiving undecidables.

15. However, Mark Fisher would argue that the digitalisation of archives means that what we have lost is ‘loss’ itself. See *Ghosts of My Life* (2014).

16. *Record Without a Cover* (1999) comes to mind here.

17. Shake Rattle and Roll: Christian Marclay. Available at: <https://walkerart.org/calendar/2004/shake-rattle-and-roll-christian-marclay> (accessed July 2022).

18. Similar processes can be seen in Cage’s posthumous work for museum, *Rolywholyover A Circus* (1993). For more on this exhibition, see Koshalek and Lazar (1993).

19. Ambience becomes the predominant soundscape instead.

20. Perhaps more people than we might first imagine...

21. Christian Marclay – The Clock. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mJW2VVOaC0> (accessed July 2022).

22. Christian Marclay: Sound Stories, LACMA: <https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/christian-marclay-sound-stories> (accessed July 2022).

