

# Christian Marclay Compositions

Exhibition from 12 April to 24 September 2019



Christian Marclay, *Sound Cluster* (detail), 2017. © Christian Marclay. Photo © White Cube (Ollie Hammick)

'Music runs through  
almost everything I do.'

Christian Marclay

RESPONDING TO THE CONTEXT of Barcelona as a centre of experimental music, this exhibition explores the work of acclaimed Swiss-American artist Christian Marclay (b. 1955), presenting a selection of works focusing on his sound compositions, from graphic scores to video installations. From the outset of his career, Marclay has engaged with experimental music, investigating the relationship between sound and vision, exploring the ways that sound can be manifest visually. As the artist himself has said, 'music runs through almost everything I do'.

The exhibition examines Marclay's interest in composition, understood as the ordering of sounds in time and space. In his work, however, he undermines our customary relation to the audible, subverting our cultural understanding of sound as well as our phenomenological perception – or sensory experience – of it. Even while the works included in this exhibition address musical or sonic composition, paradoxically only the video installation *Video Quartet* makes sound overtly and continuously. More frequently, the exhibition foregrounds silence and the visitor sees rather than hears sound, challenging us to think of sound visually and conceptually. Some works are scores that will be activated by musicians and vocalists at specific moments during the exhibition. In the words of one critic, Marclay asks us to listen with our eyes.

Each work shown reveals a different approach used by Marclay to create sound compositions, often through appropriation and montage. While the idea of sound and its visualisation predominates, he also works with found materials from popular culture and mass media, which are then interpreted by live musicians. The works selected thus also demonstrate his involvement with performance and his tendency towards inviting participation and collaboration. Through his redeployment of popular sources, such as comics or movies, and his tendency to traverse traditional hierarchies of both content and medium within his work, he also presents a subtle and subversive humour.

Marclay's work engages with the way that the conventions of composition have been challenged through both avant-garde and popular music. After studying in Boston and New York in the 1970s, he became part of the radical art and music scenes that saw him connect with a previous generation of artists, including Dan Graham and Bruce Conner; with his contemporaries in experimental music, such as John Zorn; and the Punk and No Wave music scene, including Sonic Youth. He became involved in performance through his influential role in the development of turntablism (the use of records and turntables to make music, mixing and manipulating records live) and sampling, or sound collage. This background in performance is signalled through numerous works shown, as well as a programme of performances that occur within and in parallel to the exhibition.

Fundamental to the exhibition are several major video works, including the masterpiece ***Video Quartet*** (2002), a four-screen, audiovisual composition made from movie clips, the only work shown that uses sound directly. The excerpts feature moments when music or sound occurs in feature films, which Marclay collages together so that each screen features a different clip that is carefully synchronised with others to form an overall musical quartet.

In the interactive installation ***Chalkboard*** (2010), Marclay invites visitors to participate in the act of composing by marking an architecturally-scaled chalkboard ruled with musical staff lines. This open, incremental and evolving composition is then interpreted by musicians in a series of performances scheduled during the exhibition. Afterwards, the board is erased, and the process restarted until the next performance. The show includes a number of works Marclay describes collectively as 'scores', but which often take unconventional forms. *Chalkboard* is perhaps the most clearly recognisable as a score, nevertheless it undermines established music scoring through the freedom the artist gives to the audience to make any mark that they wish, including drawings, scribbles and graffiti, and the latitude afforded to the musicians to play according to their own free interpretation of the 'score'.

The exhibition includes several of Marclay's 'graphic scores', such as **Zoom Zoom** (2007–19), a slide projection, and **Manga Scroll** (2010), a 20m hand scroll. Both works are part of an extended investigation into onomatopoeia - words that replicate the sounds or actions that they describe. *Zoom Zoom* is comprised of photographs taken by the artist documenting the use of onomatopoeia in the urban environment, in advertisements, branding and design. These images are shown as a single-screen projection without sound. It is conceived, nonetheless, to be performed by a vocal artist, with the artist triggering the images from a laptop in a call-and-response duet. *Manga Scroll* is similarly composed of onomatopoeia but in this case the words have been collaged from North American translations of Japanese graphic manga novels into an undulating, linear composition on a long paper scroll. It is likewise a vocal score and the basis for interpretation. A number of small collages, including **Vertical Explosion** (2015), **Torn Sounds** (2017) and **CRASSHH!** (2017), similarly address Marclay's fascination with onomatopoeia.

**Imaginary Records** (1987–97) constitute an extended series in which Marclay intervened by collaging the covers of vinyl records. Through this process, he often simplified the design, removing extraneous details, and emphasising with humour the theme of sound, or silence, through word play and visual-textual puns. A series of small-scale sculptures including **Breathless II** (2000), a recorder with multiple holes, a set of glass **Drumsticks** (2000) and **My Bad Ear** (2004) similarly stress the failure or frustration of musical experience, in the way that Surrealism addressed withheld desire. **Chorus II** (1988) likewise addresses Marclay's fascination with the absence rather than the presence of sound, here it is a series of images of open mouths shown together as an ensemble choir.

The text work **Mixed Reviews** (1999–2019) is a collage composed of extracts from music reviews, consisting of sentences that describe musical sounds. For each display, the prior translation is retranslated into the language of the place in which it is shown, the descriptive phrases becoming ever more distant from the sounds they were initially intended to represent, highlighting the fact that the text is itself an abstraction through language that can only ever approximate the sounds. Here, the text will be translated into Catalan for the first time.

For ***Graffiti Composition*** (1996–2002), Marclay pasted blank music sheets around city streets in Berlin and after an interval documented, with photographs, the addition of notes, drawings and graffiti found on the ripped, torn or otherwise abraded posters. The 150 photographs of the amended sheets thus form one of Marclay's earlier scores, a collaboration with a multitude of unnamed contributors. ***Ephemera*** (2009) and ***To Be Continued*** (2016) are also scores, but while *Ephemera* takes the form of 28 folios that gather examples of musical notations found on packaging, clothes, record covers and other printed materials, *To Be Continued* makes use of a variety of sonically evocative images, musical notes and onomatopoeias from comics collaged and returned to a comic book format.

The most recent work in the exhibition, ***Investigations*** (2018), reflects Marclay's interest in photography and non-traditional use of classical instruments. This score was made from a collection of 100 found images of hands playing the piano. The score is to be interpreted by a large ensemble of pianists, who are asked to decipher the sound made when the photograph was taken.

A group of 'action paintings' (2013–15) returns to Marclay's work with onomatopoeia, a combination of paint and silkscreen. Onomatopoeias humorously denoting 'wet' sounds are collaged from comic books and then silkscreened over corresponding painterly actions. The immersive installation ***Surround Sounds*** (2014–15) is a 360-degree video installation made from scanned comics. This time, onomatopoeias are animated into an all-encompassing, four-screen silent composition. Like much of the exhibition, it is both playful and contradictory: the visitor is quite literally surrounded by a visual cacophony, despite hearing nothing, and is invited to imagine the sounds whirring, buzzing or swooping around them. Through his compositions, Marclay plays with and subverts our everyday experience of sound. His work makes us think again about our cultural, emotional and sensory relationship to our visual and sonic environment.



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Exhibition organised and produced by MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona.

**Curated by**  
Tanya Barson  
(Chief Curator, MACBA)

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### Publication

The book examines Christian Marclay's work through his engagement with composition, understood as the ordering of sounds in time and space, but also as visual composition. It includes essays by the critic Erika Balsom, the curator Tanya Barson and the writer Tom McCarthy. Trilingual edition (Catalan, Spanish, English).

### MACBA App

Enjoy the explanatory files for a selection of works in the exhibition, as well as detailed information on exhibitions and activities, videos, curiosities and practical information about the Museum.

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### Accessible visits

Visits with accessibility for people with hearing difficulties available on request at [educacio@macba.cat](mailto:educacio@macba.cat)

### Let's talk about...\*

#### Christian Marclay

*Let's perform Christian Marclay*

With Serafín Álvarez, artist, researcher and teacher.

Saturday 13 April, 6 pm

With Miquel Bernat, percussionist.

Saturday 11 May, 6 pm

\*For this exhibition, the programme *Let's talk about...* becomes *Let's perform*.

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### Exclusive guided

Led by Tanya Barson (in English).

Friday 7 June, 11 am

Led by Anna Cerdà

Thursday 27 June, 6 pm

### Day and Night of the Museums

Christian Marclay and the vocal artist Shelley Hirsch perform the graphic scores *Zoom Zoom* (2007-19) and *Manga Scroll* (2010).

Saturday 18 May, 7 to 11 pm

### Performances and activations

Some of the exhibited works will be regularly activated. Consult the timetable at [macba.cat](http://macba.cat).

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### Opening times

Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, 11 am to 7.30 pm (from 25 June to 24 September, from 10 am to 8 pm)

Tuesday closed

Saturday, 10 am to 8 pm

Sunday and public holidays, 10 am to 3 pm

Every Saturday, from 4 to 8 pm, entrance to the Museum is free.

The Museum entry ticket is valid for a month.

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