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The Hole is the Untrue. *The Art of Spinning a Broken Record*

John Mowitt

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Du disque à l'oeuvre
The Recording at Work

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Article abstract

This is a theoretically driven consideration of the relation between art and the vinyl record that foregrounds the motif of "destruction" in attempting to comprehend this relation. Christian Marclay's well-known work, *Record Without a Cover*—designed to be destroyed by individual consumers—serves as the touchstone for a series of reflections on how the aesthetic medium of the cinema has staged the destruction of records (Richard Brook's *Blackboard Jungle*), or how sculptures can be fashioned from destroyed records (Jean Shin's *Sound Wave*). In all cases, what resists destruction is the spindle hole, a hole that in Marclay's recent works is given sonic resonance in "the scream" issuing from the mouth, a hole in the face. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's discussion of "the hole" in psychosis, the essay considers how Marclay's work operates less as a presentation of aesthetic truth, and more as an aesthetic probing of the politics of art, that is, the ability of aesthetic practice to pose questions about the ideology of an institutionally sanctioned principle of the shiny semblance (*schöne Schein*). Theodor Adorno's inversion of Hegel's "The Whole is the True," is thus inverted—reversed and destroyed—in turn.

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Abstract

This is a theoretically driven consideration of the relation between art and the vinyl record that foregrounds the motif of "destruction" in attempting to comprehend this relation. Christian Marclay's well-known work, *Record Without a Cover*—designed to be destroyed by individual consumers—serves as the touchstone for a series of reflections on how the aesthetic medium of the cinema has staged the destruction of records (Richard Brook's *Blackboard Jungle*), or how sculptures can be fashioned from destroyed records (Jean Shin's *Sound Wave*). In all cases, what resists destruction is the spindle hole, a hole that in Marclay's recent works is given sonic resonance in "the scream" issuing from the mouth, a hole in the face. Drawing on Jacques Lacan's discussion of "the hole" in psychosis, the essay considers how Marclay's work operates less as a presentation of aesthetic truth, and more as an aesthetic probing of the politics of art, that is, the ability of aesthetic practice to pose questions about the ideology of an institutionally sanctioned principle of the shiny semblance (*schöne Schein*). Theodor Adorno's inversion of Hegel's "The Whole is the True," is thus inverted—reversed and destroyed—in turn.

Keywords: Theodor Adorno; destruction; Jacques Lacan; Christian Marclay; spindle hole.

Résumé

Cet essai propose une réflexion théorique sur la relation entre l'art et le disque vinyle que l'on tentera de comprendre par la mise en avant du motif de la « destruction ». L'œuvre bien connue de Christian Marclay, *Record Without a Cover*, conçue pour être détruite par les consommateurs individuels, sert de point de départ à une série de réflexions sur la manière dont le médium esthétique du cinéma a mis en scène la destruction de disques (*Blackboard Jungle* de Richard Brooks), ou sur la manière dont des sculptures peuvent être façonnées à partir de disques détruits (*Sound Wave* de Jean Shin). Dans tous les cas, ce qui résiste à la destruction, c'est le trou de broche, qui, dans les œuvres récentes de Marclay, trouve une résonance sonore dans « le cri » qui sort de la bouche – un trou dans le visage. S'inspirant de la discussion de Jacques Lacan sur « le trou » dans la psychose, cet essai examine la manière dont l'œuvre de Marclay fonctionne moins comme une présentation de la vérité esthétique que comme un examen esthétique de la politique de l'art, c'est-à-dire de la capacité de la pratique esthétique à poser des questions sur l'idéologie d'un principe institutionnellement sanctionné du beau semblant (*schöne Schein*). L'inversion par Theodor Adorno de l'affirmation hégélienne selon laquelle « le vrai est le tout » est ainsi à son tour inversée – renversée et détruite.

Mots clés : Theodor Adorno ; destruction ; Jacques Lacan ; Christian Marclay ; trou de broche.

Art/Records/Politics

What follows was occasioned by an event staged at the Université de Montréal under the heading, "From Record to Art/The Record as Art," an event in conjunction with an exhibition dedicated to the recently acquired record collection of Charles Gagnon. I gratefully received a piece of this collection as a token of appreciation upon my departure from Montréal. The asymmetrical antimetabole that structures the title invites a form of attention that urges one to carefully weigh both Record and Art. Neither can be taken at face value, for if something must happen to a record such that it can be considered Art, then it follows that something must likewise happen to Art once it subsumes the record. To get at this transubstantiation—and here I am showing my hand—it is desirable to situate any consideration of the specifically broken record in relation to the infinite conversation about the concept of Art to be found in certain precincts of Western critical theory, notably in the work of Theodor Adorno especially as it struggled to assess the impact of mass culture (everything from phonography and radio, to cinema and television) on Art as both concept and phenomenon.

One of the important connotations of "a broken record" is someone given to griping or whining, both instances of repeated complaining, a practice recently rehabilitated by both Sara Ahmed and Avital Ronell (Ahmed 2021; Ronell 2018). I invoke this work here to concede that the relentless consistency of Adorno on the status of "serious" art, or simply Art, urges one to recognize in him something of a 'Head-Whiner'. But as Ahmed and Ronell will attest, this is not a serious argument against him, as the content of his consistency is both important and immediately relevant here.

As many readers will know, the corpus of Adorno is substantial even if narrowed to concentrate on his discussion of Art. So where to drop one's needle? Because we are dealing here with the matter of the reproducibility of the work of art, it seems relevant to track some of his engagement with Walter Benjamin's presentation of the aesthetic impact of technical reproducibility and the "destruction" or "loss" of aura. As the differences of opinion that flared around Benjamin's 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Era of its Technical Reproducibility" have been well-combed, let me sample a few highlights. Although one has to search for it, Benjamin's discussion of cinema is meant to re-frame the then-current debate about whether cinema is Art. He answers that it isn't, not because it is a mass and therefore vulgar form, but because in destroying aura (the unique here and now of a work), reproducibility eliminates Art as an evaluative telos or standard. The message of this medium is distinctly conceptual. This relation between destruction and the fate of Art is one I will emphasize in approaching the broken record, whence the emphasis I am placing on it here.

Famously, Benjamin's essay (in all three versions) ends by calling for the politicizing of Art, a rhetorical formulation treated like an antimetabole with "aestheticizing politics" operating as the echoing phrase. It is clear from his discussion of fascism (he means Nazism here) that the politics he is locating in Art's relation to reproducibility bears immediately on the violent confrontation in the thirties between the National

Socialist Workers Party and what he simply calls "Communism." This too then is a sign of the decline of Art: it is valued and promoted by the forces of reaction insofar as they bother to situate their struggle over the State within the cultural sphere at all.

Adorno would have none of this, and his reaction to Benjamin's work from this period is unforgiving (Taylor 1979). His concern is that reproducibility alone cannot innervate the masses, a point made even more emphatically in rejecting Benjamin's essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" for publication in the journal of the Institute. What is missing is theoretical mediation, that is, a thought process that produces the connection (whence "mediation") between technology and subjectivity. But then begins Adorno's fancy footwork. Conceding that the autonomy of Art and its distance as concept and phenomenon from the forces of commodification that organize mass culture is purely ideological, he nonetheless attributes to Art, however compromised, the crucial socio-political force of negation. Only Art agitates thinking to the point of revealing and sustaining a radical repudiation of the given. Only such a repudiation can ground a progressive politics of the Left in Adorno's present. One is tempted to treat this as the very recipe for dialectics, but on the pages of his *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno was prepared to concede that "reification," or *Verdinglichung* (Georg Lukács' alternative spelling of "commodification") had, through the 20th century, extended as far as thought itself, thus requiring an immanent critique of dialectics as such.

The lines dividing the two men could not be clearer. Or perhaps not. After and even slightly before Benjamin's death in 1940, Adorno began to steadily shift closer to Benjamin's position on the politics of Art. For example, in his voluminous writings about radio, done under the auspices of Paul Lazarfeld's Princeton Radio Research Project, he quite conspicuously invokes the concept of "technical reproducibility" to critique Günther Stern's account, in *Spooks in Radio*, of the ubiquity and spatial diffusion of the wireless (Adorno 2009, pp. 83–84). Moreover, in the Adorno–Benjamin correspondence from the period, Adorno solicits from Benjamin some of his work on radio, notably his 'listening models' as preparation for his work with Lazarsfeld (Adorno and Benjamin 1999, p. 240). Although radio appears only in a footnote to "The Work of Art," a certain receptivity is clearly being announced by Adorno.

What is at stake here for the concept of Art comes out more forcefully later in Adorno's tenure in the United States. Specifically, during his affiliation with the [Friedrich] Hacker Foundation of Beverley Hills, he wrote, in English, a study with the wily title, "How to Look at Television." Here, "look" has the explicit dual connotation of "watch" and "conceptualize." Perhaps because of his affiliation (Hacker had been an avid follower of Freud), Adorno's elaboration of the conceptualization of television makes constant reference to the notion of physiognomy deployed so gingerly in his radio writings, but recast as the relation between the manifest (surface) and latent (deep or hidden). Within this frame, Art takes on a distinctive profile. Situating television within the history of popular culture he writes:

> The more the system of "merchandising" culture is expanded, the more it tends also to assimilate the "serious" art of the past by adapting this art to the system's own requirements. The control is so extensive that any infraction of its rules is *a priori* stigmatized as "high-brow" and has but little chance to reach the population at large. (Adorno 1954, p. 215)

Striking here is Adorno's reappropriation of the thesis concerning the destruction of Art at the hands of reification (here "merchandising"), a situation that produces a definitive isolation of Art both by subordinating it to rules set by the market, and by neutralizing any defence of Art through ridicule. The marginalia, *fetisch* that one finds in Adorno's unpublished "Memorandum: Music on Radio" every time he uses a Latin or French phrase (in this case *prima facie*!), indicates that already in New York, Lazarsfeld was teasing Adorno about his "elitism," his self-imposed exile from the public (Adorno 1938, p. 103). Thus, even as he stubbornly whines about Art's waning critical autonomy, he concedes both that, as Benjamin had argued, technical reproducibility has won the day, and that his own "high-brow" strategy is doomed to seal its own fate.

Although one could argue that, especially in "The Storyteller," his essay on Leskov, Benjamin moves to meet Adorno in the middle on the politics of "aura," the detailing of this gesture, although fascinating in its own right, is not as immediately relevant as is a provisional gesture of summation, namely, the drawing of attention to the insistently political character of the concept of Art when "looked at" from the standpoint of its encounter with the record, here the incarnation of technical reproducibility. Indeed, it is in relation to this discussion that the motif of "destruction" takes on perhaps even an "overdetermined" relevance when considering the Art/Record dyad. Put differently, the matter of destruction comes to bear as much on the record as disk, as on the record as idea. If, as will be argued, Art as the shiny semblance is to be deemed "serious," it is because it is a semblance of the whole, of the principle of totality. In designating this whole as untrue, Adorno is assessing Art in political terms. Art is not false, but in its semblance it must include what makes the whole unbearable. In other words, there is a hole in this whole. There is also a hole in a record.

Side A, Breaking Records

Germano Celant, Ursula Block, Michael Glasmeier, and Trevor Schoonmaker, especially the exhibition, "The Record. Contemporary Art and Vinyl" he curated in 2012, have cut the groove that this occasion replicates. But, as will soon become apparent, these remarks and their discourse aim to take up the problematic of the record as art by approaching it through various aesthetic iterations of works in which destroying records is filmically and sculpturally represented, culminating in an encounter with some of Swiss/American artist Christian Marclay's work.

More precisely, in spinning out and off from his 1985 "sound piece," *Record Without a Cover*, I am proposing to approach the encounter between art and records under what I have called the aesthetic and political heading of "destruction." Not 'destruction' as the bland synonym for the ravages of use, but 'destruction' as the practice articulating the contact zone between medium and message as it arises in sound art (whatever we might take that to mean).[1] My orientation is thus theoretical,

1 I take the liberty of referring the reader to the recently published *Oxford Handbook of Sound Art* where, in a carefully curated collection of statements, the issues swirling around thinking the specificity of

not because I am interested in "pure" theoretical destruction (for example, Martin Heidegger's "*Destruktion*" of Western metaphysics), but because destruction as a link between medium and message calls for types of conceptual precision that theory seeks to provide. At issue here are the senses of destruction that converge in aesthetic practice, senses that can be isolated outside and inside Marclay's corpus, where both in his turntablist performance on Sanborn and Holland's *Night Music* in 1989 and in "Guitar Drag" ten years later, different but related articulations of sound and destruction appear. Art (and) destruction *re(in)volve* him.

Figure 1: Christian Marclay, Record without a Cover *(1985), black vinyl, first edition, 12 inches (30.4 cm) diameter. © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.*

Two examples will help pin down relevant "senses" of destruction as it comes to bear on the medium of the record. The first involves the allegory of record destruction presented in the 1955 film, *Blackboard Jungle* (Brooks, 1955). Long heralded for its bold use of the then-emerging rock-and-roll music (Bill Haley's Comets perform "Rock Around the Clock" under both the title and the credit sequences), the film can be credited with much more, including its startling heralding of "media studies." What matters more immediately here is the friendship between Rick Dadier (Glenn Ford) and Josh Edwards (Richard Kiley). Both are committed to finding some way to "reach" their otherwise delinquent and therefore unreachable male students. Edwards, who teaches math, decides that music might work, especially his fastidiously curated record collection of jazz masters. Dadier, in the wake of Edwards' failure, introduces animated film (whence "media studies") into his English class. The scene of Edward's failure is the one that interests me here.

It unfolds in 30 shots strung between two overlap dissolves. Although the dissolve is the preferred punctuation device in this film, this is the only sequence where at the

sound art are aired at considerable length. In the interest of full disclosure, my own, "The Ding In Itself" appears in the Table of Contents.

mid-point the word 'solve' (written on the *blackboard* of the title as if "dis" has been smudged out) is edited into Edwards' head, forming an intricate rebus whose effect is to draw our attention to the techniques of the medium: the board/screen. These dissolves assume a certain parenthetical profile, mimicking the contour—( )—of the records whose integrity are at issue in the sequence.

Figure 2: Richard Brooks, Blackboard Jungle *(1955). Josh Edwards (Richard Kiley) at the blackboard.*

The scene opens and closes in Edwards' classroom. The students, led by Artie West (Vic Morrow) cajole "Teach" into playing one of his records. He selects one the title sequence of the film has cued us to anticipate, Bix Beiderbecke's 'Jazzing the Blues'. The students take immediate and aggressive exception, a reaction that quickly escalates into a sustained assault on Edwards' treasured collection. In an earlier scene at Ned's Bar, where this one is prefigured, Edwards tells Dadier that it took him 15 years to gather this collection, many of whose elements are irreplaceable. Marclay has explicitly and repeatedly thematized this becoming-unique of the reproducible, so it deserves to be flagged here.

Immediately in the wake of the riotous destruction of Edward's collection (and we later learn, his record player), we find him standing among the fragments. Noticing students rushing out of the room, Dadier enters to console Edwards.

Stunned, myopic, and roughed up, Edwards repeats to Dadier: "I just don't understand, Rick. I just don't understand." Ultimately, his incomprehension leads him to abandon teaching and capitulate to the uneducable. However, joining his voice on the soundtrack—and it is this that stands out in the sequence—is the sound of the last record played as the needle fails to lift out of the run-out groove. It is mixed very high on the audio track of the film, behaving like what Adorno once called the "hear stripe" that scored everything broadcast on radio in the 30s and 40s. It sets up a sonic counterpart to the shattered records scattered about the room, indicating that behind the music, what insists, what plays on is the apparatus, the rhythmic, stutter-like movement back and forth toward the spindle hole. Here, as Adorno had observed in "The Form of the Phonograph Record," the hole operates as an abyss,

attracting and repelling the musical sound inscribed on the record (Leppert 2002, p. 277). If we think of recorded sound (whether on records or film soundtracks) as an articulation of art and records, *Blackboard Jungle* conspicuously converts records into art under the sign, at once diegetic and non-diegetic, of destruction. Of course, it does so in a way that invites a certain thematic reduction of destruction—Artie and his "savage beasts" who favour Sinatra are manifestly untamed by music confused with mathematics—but, this is where the residue, the remainder of the 'hear stripe' becomes relevant. It and the hole it circles associate destruction and aesthetic practice, implicitly politicizing any judgment of a deficient, thus false, wholeness thought to be conveyed through destruction understood thematically.

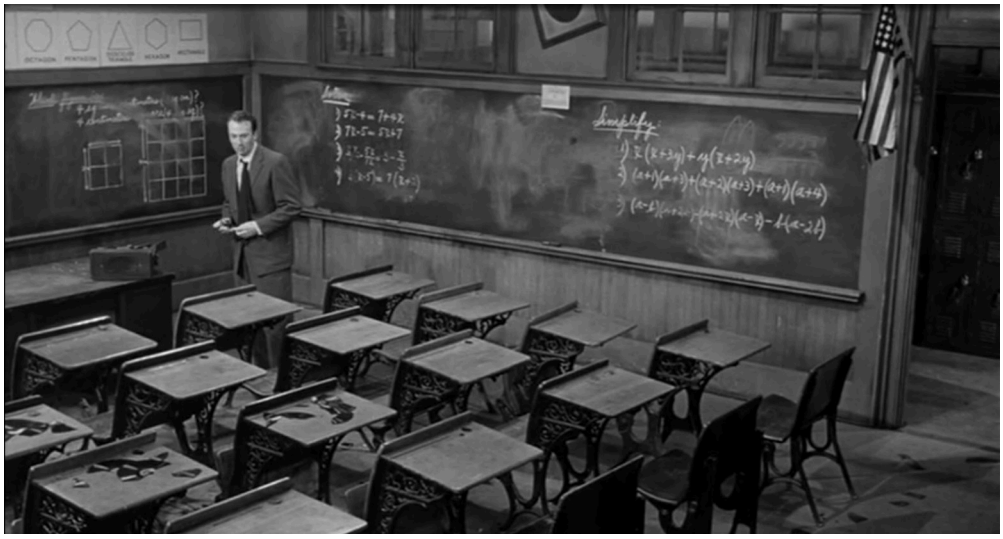

Figure 3: Richard Brooks, Blackboard Jungle *(1955). Josh Edwards (Richard Kiley) surveying the destruction of his collection.*

In this context, invoking Adorno, whose misread contempt for jazz was much publicized, invites consideration of the parallel between him and Artie Shaw. Given the former's response to student protest in Frankfurt and elsewhere during the sixties, this parallel quickly becomes strained. But precisely for that reason, it urges us to recall that Adorno's well-known discussion of "jitterbugs" at the close of "On Popular Music," (and it is Josh's fanaticism if not his footwork that links him, rather than Artie, to the "jitterbug") invokes a Kafkaesque metamorphosis that, in envisioning the becoming-human of the insect, affirms that destruction has its dialectical edge. Artie's contemptuous embrace of the beast as a metaphor for the conflict between students and the school highlights the non-dialectical character of Josh's mourning. He has lost something irreplaceable. That nothing comes of this loss underscores the absence of a properly dialectical sublation. Instead of something emerging from this cancellation of the irreplaceable, nothing does. Josh loses his collection; the school loses Josh. In this, Adorno's insights from the early forties have both anticipated and outdistanced those plotted in the film's framing of jazz. Variations of/on destruction whence my earlier cautions about reducing its concept to a mere theme.

Second example. Here we edge closer to Marclay's material, in that the piece *Sound Wave* is literally constructed of melted and fused records, in effect destroyed. *Sound Wave* was created in 2007 by the Korean-born, Brooklyn-based artist Jean Shin. Shin is internationally recognized as what, in an anthropological context, would be called a "bricoleur," that is, an artist who fashions works out of the detritus of the "at hand." In Shin's case, these are often quite large-scale works that, among their many effects, transfer to the English language itself the status of a found object, here, the acoustic soundwave re-assembled/signified as an oceanic wave *of* sound. Paronomasia, always hinting that language is playing with itself and obliging speakers to routinely say more than they mean, is also deployed here to take a pile of things and render it a language user, a speaker. And what that pile mouths is "sound wave." The site of transduction occurs at the point where the grooved information, what Adorno called "writing," realizes itself (in the strong sense of the word) in the form of a wave created out of a heteronomy of vinyl disks so inscribed. Potential sound transduces to actual image while blatantly punning. Gesture of greeting, swell of sea water, disturbance of equilibrium. At one and the same time.

This is a different sort of rebus than the one isolated in *Blackboard Jungle*. Likewise, the destruction practiced to generate it is different. Shin's records are not broken into fragments and thereby rendered unplayable. Instead, they are warped and fused, evoking less the curve than the "curl" of the needle. Similarly, Shin's piece links destruction and the dialectic between reproducibility and uniqueness, not by underscoring the power of chance, but by transforming the significance of collecting; art as the effect of collecting, not its object. Here a different form of repetition menaces aura, namely, the repeated act of adding to a collection from which aura arises as an effect rather than a cause.

In Benjamin's 1937 essay, "Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian," he offers us an angle from which to appreciate this transformation. He writes: "The great collectors distinguish themselves largely through the originality of their choice of subject matter" (Benjamin 2002, p. 282). And then, situating Fuchs among such collectors he adds: "Fuchs belongs in this line of great and systematic collectors who were resolutely intent on a single subject matter" (*ibid.*, p. 283). In fact, if we are to trust the testimony offered in Benjamin's radio talk from 6 years earlier, "Unpacking My Library," his passion for books not only explains his friendship with Fuchs, but suggests that the mantle of "great collector" rests more comfortably on his shoulders. Fuchs, it turns out, collects *many* things. Regardless, what emerges here is the notion that the originality or uniqueness associated with art, with its aura, now manifests in the homogeneity of what the collector collects, a homogeneity that becomes significant precisely in the deliberately reproduced act of gathering and owning. Destruction thus takes hold of the evaluative distinction between original and copy, both at the level of what is collected, say books, but also at the level the compulsive and ultimately repetitive act of collecting. But there is more than that.

It is easy to miss, but the Fuchs essay, aside from anticipating many of the formulations from the posthumous "On the Concept of History," argues for a theory of *art history* where historical materialism operates as the unabbreviated form of the word "history." Benjamin, who in the earlier radio talk links collecting to the temporal

belatedness figured in Hegel's owl from the *Philosophy of Right*, thus appreciates Fuchs' formulation of the decisive impact of collecting on art, writing:

> It has been his [Fuchs'] goal to restore to the work of art its existence within society, from which it has been so decisively cut off that the collector could find it only in the art market; there—reduced to a commodity, far removed both from its creators and from those who were able to understand it—the work of art endured. The fetish of the art market is the master's name. (*ibid.*, p. 283)

In the radio talk, Benjamin declares the collector to be a "physiognomist," that is, a deep reader of surfaces, and here the work of the collector uncovers that the work of art, as commodity, has lost its enabling link to the social world of producers and receivers, and through that very loss, become "art." One senses here the outline of Benjamin's critique of "aura," except that it is now linked to the essentially reproducible gesture of removing the *same* things from the exchange of commodities. A "Klee" (the master's name) is a reproduced singularity in which circulation comes to rest. Destruction here alights on the fetish of the signature as guarantor of aesthetic value, price as the very form of exchange value.

Shin's work arguably deploys this type of metacommentary in intricate ways, reminding us, among other things, that "on" has now displaced "of" as the correct prepositional articulation of work and art. *Sound Wave* is thus a work *on* art. To hear what it says, it helps to recognize that she collects. She collects debris, vibrant matter, but she also collects collections. Indeed, she seems to collect precisely the sort of collection coveted by Josh Edwards in *Blackboard,* although her selection is differently curated. In effect, she has fully subordinated the recording to the record. To call up Benjamin's shelving principle in reverse, she judges books by their covers, or at least the form of the covers. Although it is less conspicuous in *Sound Wave* than other works, for example, *Reclaimed*, Shin's collecting of collections exhibits ecological ambition. The practice of destruction is, in some respects, a form of restoration where the classical task of art imitating nature, is here deployed as displacement. The nature that debris and wreckage has eliminated, except as myth, is raised up into what art restores as collected trash. In some quarters, this might be called the negation of a negation, the destruction of destruction, perhaps then even deconstruction. As a final spiralling twist, someone must take possession of this and, as it were, sign for it, restoring the authority of the collector, if not the artist. Gagnon's collection, now exhibited in a suitable site, might then be understood as this sort of work of/on art. In celebrating it, we ought not lose sight of its effects, many of which are not simply aesthetic.

Side B, Record Breaking

In 1985, Recycled Records (*nota bene*) of New York City released a copy of an art work by the "turntablist" and sound artist Christian Marclay titled *Record Without a Cover*. Since that time, thousands of copies have been in circulation and it was reissued by Locus Solus in 1999, a year before Marclay's collaboration with Luc Peter on the film *Record Player*. Whereas record album covers had long been regarded as works

of visual art (think, for example, of Andy Warhol's cover for *The Velvet Underground and Nico*), Marclay sought to present the vinyl album itself as the art work, and of a rather particular kind. In sharp contrast to the "Golden Record" attached to the Voyager space probes by Carl Sagan and his team, where the recorded information's permanence found its technical echo both in the inscription material (gold) and in the protective lamination used to cover the record, Marclay's record begins with roughly five minutes of no information ("silence"), has no cover, and is designed to be simultaneously personalized and destroyed by its recipients, the record collectors. This shrewd restoration of Benjamin's "aura" finds its surprising material realization in the spindle hole that allows for the transductive reversal called playback. This tactic enables the articulation of person and destruction to cross the sonic horizon.

Obviously fascinated with this sonic gesture, Marclay installed *Footsteps* in the Stedhalle Galleries in Zurich four years later. Again deploying the conceit of the record without a cover, Marclay taped 3500 copies of a record in the process of becoming *Footsteps* to a gallery floor and invited visitors to walk on them. The vinyl discs were later removed and sold as works personalized through, in this case, collective destruction.

Of course, and it is matter I have raised with Marclay, what perversely resists the aim of the installation (and the *Record Without a Cover*) is the spindle hole itself, a hole about which Adorno wrote: "It would be then that, in a seriousness hard to measure, the form of the phonograph record could find its true meaning: the scripted spiral that disappears in the centre, in the opening of the middle, but in return survive time." (Adorno 2002, p. 60). For English speakers, this articulation of the relation between truth and a hole almost immediately evokes Adorno's signature inversion of Hegel from *Minima Moralia*: "*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*" (the whole is the untrue). As such it urges us to explore how Marclay's work on the record as a medium of sound art is also a probing theoretical examination of the "aesthetics" of sound. This extends beyond John Cage's embrace of the silence that isn't silent and urges that we think carefully about the status of the true, as it appears as the hole into which the spiral, however disfigured, descends. Can this hole appear in sound? Is it Art? A final work of Marclay's will help us ponder these imponderables.

Figure 4: Christian Marclay, Untitled (Concentric Waves) *(2020), digital chromogenic print, 31 1/2 x 23 5/8 in. (80 x 60 cm). © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.*

The Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, California has long been interested in the convergence between the LP record and art. In 2018, it hosted a show curated by Antoine de Beaupré called, "Art and Vinyl. Artists and the Record Album from Picasso to the Present." The show included everything from Picasso's dove that adorned a collection of songs by Paul Robeson, to a copy of Marclay's *Record Without a Cover*. However, more recently, in spring 2021, The Fraenkel mounted a show of Marclay's then-most current works, including the collage shown above. This piece, *Untitled (Concentric Waves)*, appears among a sequence of similar works characterized thus by the gallery:

> The voice is at the centre of the exhibition. In a series of photographs showing screaming faces, cut and torn fragments from comic books, movie stills and images found on the internet are arranged into haunting, mask-like composites, and then recorded by the camera. Capturing the paper's inherent creases and tears, the photographs mix analogue and digital elements and investigates the computer screen as a contemporary physical surface. (Fraenkel Gallery 2021)

Mounted during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the curatorial evocations of things found on the internet, mask-like composites, and the computer screen as a contemporary physical surface feel overdetermined. But "screen" as an unmistakeable echo of "scream" opens other possibilities. Specifically, if, as is stated in the gallery's promotion of the exhibition, Marclay's work "reflects" (an old aesthetic chestnut) the "anxiety" of the "global moment," then clearly the scream (think here of Munch's well-known painting, *Der Schrei der Natur*), not the voice, is the centre of the exhibition. But more than the centre of the exhibition, the scream—perhaps even specifically the screaming face or mouth—is the hole, both in the exhibition, but also in the "record"

whose concentric waves spiral around the mouth in *Untitled (Concentric Waves)*. As with *Record Without a Cover*, the hole spins firmly in the midst of the destruction that frames it, confirming the association I am making here between these two moments in Marclay's corpus. But this confirmation brings only fleeting joy, for it leaves one with the problem of reading the connection not between the hole and the mouth, but between the hole and the scream. Why should the scream obtrude?

As noted earlier, Adorno's instructions regarding television watching ("how to look") make direct and sustained use of Freudian concepts. Unlike his host, Hacker, who was committed to commemorating the legacy of psychoanalysis, Adorno kept his distance, investing only, as he once put it, in its exaggerations. Unknown, apparently, to either Hacker or Adorno was the project, long underway but announced publicly in 1955 (thus virtually coincident with "How to Look"), of Jacques Lacan's "return to Freud" (Lacan 2006, p. 334). This commemoration of the Freudian legacy discovered in Freud's early work far more than the structural logic of physiognomy and its cautious applications to da Vinci or Michelangelo. What it discovered was the solicitation for a reading of the Freudian corpus that, through a blend of Wittgenstein of *The Philosophical Investigations* and Saussure's *Course on General Linguistics*, put speech and language at the heart of his return, a return that described both a revisionary looking back, and the temporal structure of the signifier. The uncanny moiré that resulted from the superimposition of Freud's text and Lacan's reading spawned countless psychoanalytic innovations, not least of which being Lacan's acute interest in what Freud often designated as the unanalyzable. It is among these innovations that we find a suggestive orientation in approaching Marclay's screaming faces.

In Lacan's Seminar III on *The Psychoses*, one comes upon a cluster of interventions, titled in the Grigg translation, "In the Environs of the Hole," or, in the French, "Les entours du trou." These rather obliquely echo earlier passing references (see section XV) to "the hole" (*le trou*) where, in his lecture on 18 April 1956, Lacan says, with an atypical and thus consoling bluntness: "psychosis consists of a hole, a lack, at the level of the signifier" (Lacan 1981, p. 201). Given that Seminar III is dedicated to the unique analytical challenges posed by psychosis, this feels important and it is, but because received Lacanian *doxa* has cemented the relation between lack and desire, his evocation through a syntactic appositive, of lack and the signifier invites a gloss.

In relation to desire, and this is the very essence of the critique of Lacan to be found in *Anti-Oedipus*, lack designates its absent cause. Following Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegelian *Begehren*, desire, by virtue of its structural logic, passes through the Other's desire, and in missing this object causes the subject to become, that is, to be in the process of becoming, unified in suspended agitation. It is in this sense that Lacan will speak of the *dialectic* of desire, and it is on these grounds that Deleuze and Guattari wish he wouldn't. But how does this bear on the signifier? Or, put differently, must lack be rephrased as hole precisely when speaking of the signifier? It is worth noting that in *Untitled (Concentric Waves)* (another parenthetical "disk") what is also arrayed around the spindle hole is the label, in effect, the speech bubble whereon the record's "name" and provenance are inscribed. In Marclay's piece, the force and problem of this naming hovers above the concentric force field in a letter boxed collage of visages. Eyes eying what the scream unleashes both in ecstasy (think

Beatlemania) and terror (think Marion Crane). The piercing and pierced scream thus draws from the drowning label a "something" (as Adorno might insist) that in agitating a profusion of signifiers clarifies why Lacan can't put them down.

Throughout Seminar III he makes persistent reference to the linguist Emile Benveniste, but it is obvious from his sustained consideration of the relation between metaphor and metonymy that the sign donor for structural anthropology, Roman Jakobson, is also on his mind. Less obvious, but perhaps even more urgent, is Lacan's repurposing of the Saussurean concept of the signifier. Scandalously, Saussure had defined the signifier as the acoustic *image* of the signified and, to accommodate the possibility of multiple languages, stressed that this double articulation of the linguistic sign was arbitrary, that is, strictly conventional. Putting perhaps exaggerated emphasis on one of the illustrations from *The Course on General Linguistics*—Saussure's diagram of the relation between thought and signs (see page 261)—Lacan subtly shifts the status of the signifier, bringing out its material qualities, qualities that later prompted him to rename it "the letter." The signifier thus becomes the very *medium* of the subject's relation to language. It belongs to language, if at all, only to the extent that the speaking subject—and he is playing here with the grammatical concept of person—finds its material support in language.[2]

Thus, when earlier I cited Lacan as linking psychosis to "a lack, a hole, at the level of the signifier" (supra), it was in order to suggest that the Lacanian hole designates, since we are now squarely on the terrain of media, a glitch, a skip in the speaking subject's material support. This is more than a slip, more than a "*Fehlleistung*" (failed action) and, if not more than a lack, decidedly different from it. As we have seen, when speaking of the spindle hole on a record, Adorno named the hole an abyss, an *Abgrund* (unground) through which time drained from the medium of phonographic reproducibility. Although his intertext is more Nietzschean than Freudian, Adorno's abyss sucks into its vortex what in the speaking subject solicits its relation to the signifier. What then does the mouth do when urgent, necessary words cannot come out? It screams. The buccal cavity gapes into the hole where the medium of the signifier misses, or at best grazes, the speaking subject. Articulated with the rectum, the mouth thus serves as the spindle hole of the human body. The scream then might be taken as a sign of a phonic spectrum operating through, or beneath, the sonic articulation of sound and sense.

Adorno's repurposing of Hegel is meant, among other things, to draw attention to the incapacity of the subject-of-philosophy to say what is true about the whole, the human totality. Every effort to say, or even think the totality misses it. And yet, *this*

2 In this context one reads with keen interest Lacan's discussion of "discourse" in Seminar XX, *Encore* where he writes: "It is also that which expresses itself in what I called a moment ago the current discourse, writing it almost in a single word, the *current disc* (disque-ourcourant) the disc also outside the field, outside the game of any discourse, namely the disc as such—it (*ça*) spins, it spins very precisely for nothing. The record (*le disque*) finds itself in the field on the basis of which all discourses are specified and where they all drown[.]" (Lacan 1999, p. 44; my translation). Although one needs not to conflate discourse and the signifier, the emphasis here on the nothing that spins in and as disc-ourse brings such formulations well withing the orbit of Marclay's work and my reading of it. Many thanks to Nicholas Chare for reminding me of the pertinence of these passages.

is true, a contradiction that forms the very yoke of Adorno's negative dialectics. If I may be permitted a final linguistic extravagance, perhaps under such circumstances, what is untrue, is *le trou*, the hole that is/not the whole. This paradoxical still point in the spinning record that even the ravages of human use leave outside time, allows one to state, if cursorily, what Marclay has to teach us about records and Art. What his work teaches is not that records and/or their covers can be articulated *with* art, or that records can be conceived *as* a medium for art, but that in staging the medium of the speaking subject, records suspend us *before* art, urging us to hear ourselves before the question: is there such a thing as Art? In this, Marclay is working in accord with Adorno's quip in *Aesthetic Theory* that "artists are always also at work on art and not only on art works" (Adorno 1997, p. 182). What record do we have of these works? Is it collectable? Such questions urge us to concede that Marclay's practice of destruction, in finding its limit in precisely the hole that points outside the record, is uniquely valuable in posing the problem of what and where Art might be.

Bonus Track

In 1963, Adorno published a collection of essays now collected in English under the title, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. In the opening intervention, "Why Still Philosophy?" he re-mixes the line from *Minima Moralia*, "The Whole is the Untrue," that I have been needling here. He writes:

> Traditional philosophy's claim to totality, culminating in the thesis that the real is rational, is indistinguishable from apologetics. But this thesis has become absurd. A philosophy that would still set itself up as total, as a system, would become a delusional system. Yet, if philosophy renounces the claim to totality and no longer claims to develop out of itself *the whole that should be the truth,* then it comes into conflict with its entire tradition. This is the price it must pay for the fact that, once cured of its delusional system, it denounces the delusional system of reality. (Adorno 1998, p. 7; my emphasis)

In this re-mix of the Hegelian reversal, philosophy itself succumbs to a delusion that borders on psychosis, that is, as totality—the principle and concept—empties out of philosophy, the world itself succumbs to delusion. In effect, a vortex opens between philosophy and the world. This vortex is a true hole precisely of the sort Adorno sees information spiralling toward in "The Form of the Phonographic Record." For Adorno, this vision animates a re-legitimation of philosophy reassembled around the principle of mediation, the practical and theoretical articulation of fragments. For Marclay, and implicitly, for us, the true hole through which the medium of the record survives its destruction invites one to treat the virgule around which spins our chiasmus—art as record/record as art—as a spindle, and in doing so, sense the rattling provocation that what is swallowed up here is Western philosophy itself. A final needle drop in *Aesthetic Theory*: "The vortex of this dialectic ultimately consumes the concept of meaning" (Adorno 1997, p. 178). In another context, this has been called, "provincializing Europe." In the context framed by these remarks, we are compelled to also call it, "politicizing Art."

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