

Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition

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Lip Synch: Marclay Not Nauman

Bruce Nauman's video *Lip Synch* (1969) shows the artist's head upside down and close up, his inverted mouth at the bottom of the screen repeating the words "lip synch," as the sound gradually moves out of synch with the image, this drift transforming the engorged neck and pulsating mouth into a part object, erotically charged. The video clearly pays homage to the technical breakthrough in film history when, in 1929, synch sound did away with silent film and brought a new dimension to cinema. Video, a later generation of motion-picture technology, had synchronous sound available to it right from the start. It is to this dimension that Nauman points in *Lip Synch*.



Christian Marclay's magisterial work *Video Quartet* (2002) spreads four separate screens of DVD projection across forty feet of wall, each screen showing the unreeling of a compilation of film clips from well-known works of sound cinema. The four different tracks compete for attention for the most part, but occasionally they display the same image, creating synchronicity along the horizontal expanse of the work. The effect, not unlike Hollis Frampton's *Zorn's Lemma* (1970), is a visual grid: the vertical axis becomes the unreeling narrative of the constitutive shots—including Janet Leigh's scream in the shower from *Psycho* (1960), or the meditative humming of Ingrid Bergman's "As Time Goes By" from *Casablanca* (1942)—the horizontal one, the repetition of the visual fields, or the competition among them for dominance. Repetition is, for the most part, a matter of analogy, as when the full-screen image of a spinning roulette wheel rhymes visually with a record on a turntable, as well as with the circles of drumheads seen from above. These turning disks, needless to say, create the kind of self-reference—here to the reels of film itself—familiar to us from modernist art.



But Marclay's prey goes deeper into the nature of his own medium by meditating on synch sound itself as the "technical support" of cinema. I am using the term "technical support" here as a way of warding off the unwanted positivism of the term "medium" which, in most readers' minds, refers to the specific material support for a



Right and facing page:
 Christian Marclay.
 Video Quartet. 2002.
 Courtesy Paula Cooper
 Gallery, New York.

traditional aesthetic genre, reducing the idea of medium to what Michael Fried complains of as the basis of the “literalism” of the art he rejects. “Part of my argument with Clement Greenberg’s reductionist, essentialist reading of the development of modernist art,” Fried writes, “was precisely this case history in Minimalism of what happened if one thought in those terms.” It is an objection that Stanley Cavell seconds by dismissing “medium specificity” as producing “the fate of modernist art generally—that its awareness and responsibility for the physical basis of its art compel it at once to assert and deny the control of its art by that basis.” Both critics reject the version of modernist “medium specificity” articulated by Greenberg.

“Technical support” has the virtue of acknowledging the recent obsolescence of most traditional aesthetic mediums (such as oil on canvas, fresco, and many sculptural materials, including cast bronze or welded metal), while it also welcomes the layered mechanisms of new technologies that make a simple, unitary identification of the work’s physical support impossible (is the “support” of film the celluloid strip, the screen, the splices of the edited footage, the projector’s beam of light, the circular reels?). Dziga Vertov’s *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), perhaps the most medium-specific film in the history of cinema, dramatizes the act of modernist self-reference that reveals the nature of the medium, as his own camera tracks the movie’s cameraman through the city, while, from various conveyances such as cars or horse-drawn carriages, the latter films the urban landscape, an activity of surveillance that provokes the viewer to reflect on the unseen cameraman who is even then filming the filmer. By dramatizing this normally invisible actor, Vertov forces into experience that part of the cinematic





medium—the celluloid support of the filmic image—that is not usually exposed to view. Vertov’s prey in manifesting the medium of his art is wider than the physical support of the representation. As well, he dramatizes the fact of editing—the normally invisible joining together of sequences of action to produce a narrative—by reversing the forward motion of such narrative, to produce the feeling that the spools of film are being wound back through the projector’s gate onto the reels from which they originally issued—an effect Annette Michelson identifies with the poetic trope “hysteron proteron.”¹

If the traditional medium is supported by a physical substance (and practiced by a specialized guild), the term “technical support,” in distinction, refers to contemporary commercial vehicles, such as cars or television, which contemporary artists exploit,² in recognition of the contemporary obsolescence of the traditional mediums, as well as acknowledging their obligation to wrest from that support a new set of aesthetic conventions to which their works can then reflexively gesture, should they want to join those works to the canon of modernism.

Marclay’s focus on his technical support manifests itself early on in *Video Quartet* when the left-most screen shows a clip of cockroaches running soundlessly across the keys of a piano, returning us thereby to silent film. In doing so, we have the sensation

1. See her fundamental essay, “The Man with the Movie Camera: From Magician to Epistemologist,” *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (February 1972), pp. 62–72.

2. I am referring to artists such as James Coleman, whose technical support is the slide tape, more currently embodied in the technology that underwrites Microsoft PowerPoint; and William Kentridge, who exploits (and brilliantly develops) the support of animation.

of looking at the projection on this field winding backwards into the history of the movies to the onset of sound itself. The sensation is one of actually seeing the silence as well as the gridlike layering of the cinematic medium's additive condition of the soundtrack's audio edge running along the celluloid strip of the images. A composer, Marclay has made quasi-sculptural works out of sound materials, such as skeins of audiotape, an unpleated accordion, or telephone headsets cast in series. None of this has the originality or focus of *Video Quartet*, as it unpacks the specificity of synch sound, making it visible to us and converting film's narrative continuum into a fundamentally visual simultaneity.

Leviathan

Is it time to puncture the secret about Conceptual art kept so long by its supporters and advocates, who are bent on declaring it the form the avant-garde has assumed in our time? This "secret" is the deepest identity of Conceptualism, which is, at its core, the contemporary avatar of kitsch. Benjamin Buchloh long ago exposed the formal emptiness of the movement by characterizing its notions of structure as "tautological."³ The calling-card sentiment of this kind of tautology (I am thinking of Joseph Kosuth's work *Five Words in Blue Neon* [1965]) is enough to attach it to the most spurious forms of cultural exchange for which "kitsch" is the baldest term. 

From "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" we have the definition of the phenomenon pronounced by Clement Greenberg: "Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times." Against the spurious condition of kitsch, Greenberg pits an authentic avant-garde that calls for the artist to "imitate" the medium of his own craft, making of that re-authenticated medium the artist's subject matter.

A contemporary avant-garde has organized itself to reject Conceptual art, which it views as the most recent form of kitsch. As it had been in the past, the cultural ambition of such avant-garde artists is vested in making their own medium into the subject matter of their art.

As I have argued in a series of recent essays on this phenomenon, these artists do not work with the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture, which they view as exhausted, but are instead forced to do something as counterintuitive as inventing a new medium.⁴ Accordingly, they reach for modern, technological mechanisms as the "supports" for their own work. Examples would be the art of Ed Ruscha, for whom the automobile has served as medium—his parking lots, gasoline stations, and highways, articulated as the secondary supports for the car itself.

3. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990), pp. 105–43.

4. See my "Reinventing the Medium," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999), pp. 289–305.



*Sophie Calle. Exquisite Pain. 1984–2003.
Courtesy the artist.*

James Coleman has fashioned a medium from the commercial vehicle of the slide tape, a more ubiquitous version of which would be the computer program PowerPoint. The last three decades have provided us with the development of conceptual photographer Sophie Calle, whose technical support is the investigative journalist's documentary research.

The modernist reflexivity of Calle's art is a matter of what Jacques Derrida calls invagination, by which he means the folding of one story within another through the invention of a character who exactly repeats the opening of the first story, thereby setting it off on its narrative course once more.⁵ *Exquisite Pain* is Calle's account of her acceptance of a three-month fellowship in Japan, despite her lover's threat to abandon her should she leave him for so long. Before she leaves, they make a pact for a reunion in a New Delhi hotel one year hence. But in place of her lover, she receives a telegram message that an illness will prevent his arrival. The missed encounter, which Calle names "Unhappiness," is then symbolized by a red telephone atop the sheets on the hotel room bed, while the successive photographs

5. See Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Glyph* 7 (1980).



Calle. Exquisite Pain.
1984–2003. *Courtesy the artist.*



“The Man with the Address Book,” serial published in *Libération*,
August 2–September 4, 1983.

of it bear numbered stamps that perform the daily countdown to the advent of “Unhappiness.” The telephone’s performance of invagination is written onto its rotary dial, the numerals of which synthesize the act of counting and thus form an emblem of the anguished waiting for her lover’s call.

In characterizing Calle’s technical support, we need to watch its journalistic reports, which take the form of interviews with eyewitnesses in order to discover the identity of a missing subject—as in *The Address Book* (1983), when Calle telephones the numbers listed in the little agenda she’s found in order to build, through others’ descriptions of its owner, a fantasy picture of this missing persona. As many have observed, Calle herself became a character in the novel by Paul Auster called *Leviathan* (1992). But what is not often noted is that *Leviathan* adopts Calle’s own medium, using her interview technique to construct a true picture of its missing protagonist, Benjamin Sachs. After his narrator and sleuth report that, at the time of his death in a roadside explosion, Sachs had been writing *Leviathan*, his latest novel, invagination makes its appearance when the narrator names his own investigative dossier, the one we are even then reading, *Leviathan*.

The documentary report is once again employed in *The Shadow* (1981), in which Calle is followed (and photographed) by the detective she’s asked her mother to hire. From the outset, Calle refers to the detective as “him,” the man whose intense visual focus on her becomes eroticized as an aphrodisiac, propelling her to want to seduce him. She leads “him” into the Louvre to show him her



Calle. The Shadow. 1981.
Courtesy the artist.

favorite painting. She calls up former lovers to meet her in order to parade them in front of “him.” She spies “him” looking at her: “My eyes meet, on the other side of the Boulevard Saint-Germain, those of a man about twenty-two years old, five feet six inches tall, short straight light brown hair, who jumps suddenly and attempts a hasty and awkward retreat behind a car. It’s ‘him’”—a “him” who then enters the work as the image captured by a friend of Calle’s, commandeered to photograph the sleuth as he follows her to make his report. Two reports thus converge and, in accord with invaginary structure, repeat one another. Calle’s report is the diary she keeps of her day’s activity and the way the presence of the detective affects her emotionally. An example: “Nathalie walks with me to a hairdresser on rue Delambre. It is for ‘him’ I am getting my hair done. To please him.” The detective’s report, on the other hand, as he carries out his professional duty, exactly repeats Calle’s itinerary from the distanced and neutral perspective of the stranger.

Many of Calle’s works are a search for affect, for emotion, as represented by the “Unhappiness” that is *Exquisite Pain* or by the excited exhibitionism of *The Shadow*. Having chosen the journalist’s report as her medium, her work expresses itself as paradox: her medium not only unable to support, but contrived as well to deaden, the feelings she is looking for. That these feelings are able to surface, as in *The Shadow*, despite the deadpan nature of her chosen support, endows her medium with the special resonance that propels it into visibility for the audience of her art.