

Algorithms: Erasures and the Art of Memory

PAUL D. MILLER

Since his recording debut in 1995, musician, writer, and conceptual artist Paul D. Miller (1970–) has emerged as one of the most able theorists of DJ Culture. Miller is best known as DJ Spooky, that Subliminal Kid, a producer whose recordings and live performances are firmly rooted in HipHop, Ambient, dub, and drum 'n' bass, but also draw from the history of avant-garde art in the 20th century. His moniker “that Subliminal Kid” is borrowed from a character in William S. Burroughs’ cut-up novel *Nova Express*. He has collaborated with composers Iannis Xenakis and Pauline Oliveros, and produced an audio installation based on the work of Marcel Duchamp. Miller has also recently worked with free jazz masters William Parker, Matthew Shipp, Joe McPhee, and Lawrence “Butch” Morris. For Miller, the DJ is not merely an entertainer but an information handler who selects and guides the flow of audio data. The DJ’s mix is a composite of fragments drawn from a heterogeneous array of temporal, spatial, and cultural locations. Hence, according to Miller, the DJ regulates not only data but also the construction of time, memory, subjectivity, and experience.

The twentieth century encounter between alphabetic and electronic faces of culture confers on the printed word a crucial role in staying the return to the Africa within . . .

—Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*

Gimme Two Records and I’ll make you a universe . . .

—DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid

One of the first bootleggers, in this case one of the first people to sample music, Lionel Mapleson, used a phonograph recorder given to him by his close personal

friend, Thomas Edison, to record extracts of his favorite moments from the various operas that played at New York’s Metropolitan Opera house when he was working there during the years 1901–1903. These recordings of various arias comprise the first known texts created by the recording medium (all puns intended). With his recording-phonograph in hand Lionel Mapleson may just have written himself into history books as the first DJ. His phonograph [. . .] was a new way of data-handling that allowed the mechanical implementation of a non-sequential form of text, one including associative trails, dynamic annotations, and cross references—a host of characteristics one finds as common features of computers in our modern hyper-text-formatted world. A journalist writes of the experience of listening to these recordings [. . .]:

The sense is one of listening from backstage, through a door that keeps opening and closing, to bits and pieces of performances. The vantage point is at a little distance from the singers, and they seem to be heard through a certain amount of backstage clatter; sometimes they move out of line of hearing, and sometimes the noise obscures the voices. But mostly, they can be heard quite well enough for the listener to get a very definite sense of personalities and occasionally of the full impact of virtuosity, that in terms of the opera house today, is quite beyond the wildest imagination . . .

Partitioned subjectivity, cross-fades, sonic shock-wave sounds of seismic bass disruption, pitch, tempo, the inertial drag of bass de-tuned, compressed and pitch-shifted down, drums pitched upwards and downwards, sound as a unified field of spatial representation with its own aural logic, ego become a sonic wave form in the chaotic urban landscape of inner city pressure . . . these are things that go through my mind when I make music. [I] create electronic hybrids (some people still call them songs) that [. . .] create a milieu where a previously interior world could be brought to light through methods like keyboard mapping (delineating zones of aural speed) and time stretching words until they become an elemental part of the song, etc. I [. . .] create music that [. . .] reflect[s] the extreme density of the urban landscape and the way its geometric regularity contours and configures perception [. . .] To me, assembly is the invisible language of our time and DJing is the forefront art form of the late 20th Century.

Assemblages are passionate, they are compositions of desire. Desire has nothing to do with a natural and spontaneous determination; there is no desire but assembling, assembled, engineered desire [agençant, agencé, machiné]. The rationality, the efficiency of an assemblage does not exist without the passions that the assemblage brings into play, without the desires that constitute it as much as it constitutes them . . .

—Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

DJ culture—urban youth culture—is all about recombinant potential. It has as a central feature a eugenics of the imagination. Each and every source sample is fragmented and bereft of prior meaning—kind of like a future without a past. The

samples are given meaning only when re-presented in the assemblage of the mix. In this way the DJ acts as the cybernetic inheritor of the improvisational tradition of jazz, where various motifs would be used and recycled by the various musicians of the genre. In this case, however, the records become the notes. Also there is the repetitive nature of the music that allows for the unfolding in time of a recursive spatial arrangement of tones whose parallel can be found in the world of architecture, where structural integrity requires the modular deployment of building materials to create a building's framework.

Repeating then is every one, repeating then makes a complete history in every one for someone sometime to realise in that one. Repeating is in them of the most delicate shades in them of being and of feeling and so it comes to be clear in each one the complete nature in each one, it comes to be clear in each one the complete nature in each one and others to make a kind of them, a kind of men and women . . .

—Gertrude Stein, *The Making of Americans*

Triggered by the sensuous touch of the DJ's hands guiding the mix, the spectral trace of sounds in your mind that existed before you heard them, telling your memory that the mixed feelings you get, the conflicting impulses you feel when you hear it are impressions—externalized thoughts that tell you you only know that you have never felt what you thought you were feeling because you have never really listened to what you were hearing. The sounds of the ultra-futuristic street-soul of the urban jungle shimmering at the edge of perception.

We have also sound-houses, where we practise and demonstrate all sounds, and their generation. We have harmonies which you have not, of quarter sounds and lesser slides of sounds. Divers instruments of music likewise to you unknown, some sweeter than any you have; together with bells and rings that are dainty and sweet. We represent small sounds as great and deep; likewise great sounds extenuate and sharp; likewise divers tremblings and warblings of sounds, which in their original are entire. We represent and imitate all articulate sounds and letters, and the voices and notes of beasts and birds. We have certain helps which set to the ear do further the hearing greatly. We have also divers strange and artificial echoes, reflecting the voice many times, and as it were tossing it: and some that give back the voice louder than it came; some shriller, and some deeper: yea, some rendering the voice, differing in the letters or articulate sound from that they receive. We have also means to convey sounds in tubes and pipes, in strange lines and distances.

—Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis* (1627 A.D)

Sound as an isolated object of reproduction, call it our collective memory bank, is the focal point in my work. Like KRS One said a while back, "See how it sound, a little unrational . . ."

Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art, above all in the music . . . All of the intricacy, all of the discipline. All the work that must go into improvisation so that it appears that you've never touched it. Music makes you hungry for more of it. It never really gives you the whole number. It slaps and it embraces, it slaps and it embraces . . . The major things black art has to have are these: it must have the ability to use found objects, the appearance of using found things, and it must look effortless. It must look cool and easy. If it makes you sweat, you haven't done the work. You shouldn't be able to see the seams and stitches.

—Toni Morrison

Beats don't lie and sound is all about flow: don't push the river.

The basic unit of contemporary art is not the idea, but the analysis of and extension of sensations . . .

—Susan Sontag

I consider the mixes created by a DJ to be mood sculptures operating in a recombinant fashion. Based on the notion that all sonic material can be manipulated with the same ease that computers now generate composite images, the DJ combines the musical expression of other musicians with their own and in the process creates a seamless flow of music. In this light, the sample operates as a kind of synecdoche—a focal/coordinate point in the dramaturgical grid of life. Call the mixes and songs generated by the assembly process of DJing and sequencing etc. the social construction of memory [. . .] A mix, for me, is a way of providing a rare and intimate glimpse into the process of cultural production in the late 20th Century.

Notions of intellectual property and copyright law are brought into question as the communal reception of music takes on the significances of being the sonic equivalent to alchemy. The mix speaks to you of the bricolage of a place where the "self" exists as a deployed network of personae (the Latin root of personae means "that through which sound enters"), music created out of a particular scene or social grouping; and it shows the inexplicable mutability of sound as different people share the memories brought about by the same songs. It demonstrates the uncanny power to metamorphosize, through audio alchemy, the passage of sound into a kind of unspoken story, that like its predecessor, the oral tradition, can pass on "tales" of songs.

In the electronic milieu that we all move in today, the DJ is a custodian of aural history. In the mix, creator and re-mixer are woven together in the syncretic space of the text of samples and other sonic material to create a seamless fabric of sound that in a strange way mirrors the modern macrocosm of cyberspace, where different voices and visions constantly collide and cross-fertilize one another. The linkages between memory, time, and place, are all externalized and made accessible to the listener from the viewpoint of the DJ who makes the mix. Thus, the mix acts as a continuously moving still frame *camera lucida* capturing moment-events. The

mix, in this picture, allows the invocation of different languages, texts, and sounds to converge, meld, and create a new medium that transcends its original components. The sum created from this audio collage leaves its original elements far behind.

As a conceptual artist, my work focuses on what I call “Differentiated Being,” and its rapport with the electronically accelerated culture of the late 20th Century. The core elements that comprise my “art” are derived from my experiences as a young African-American male living as an object of history rather than its subject, and the social construction of subjectivity. For me, my world represents an artistic attempt at understanding the role of intersubjectivity and the creation of the art object. My work highlights the tenuous relationship of a youth culture based on rapid change, i.e. extreme cultural velocity, a paradigm in which what Lucy Lippard called “the dematerialized art object” holds sway [over] the static art object of the traditional European museum structure.

He will say, when he wishes to show that I am many, that there are my right parts and my left parts, my front parts and my back parts, likewise upper and lower; all different: for I do, I suppose, partake of multitude.

—Plato, *Parmenides*

I feel that because it is in a state of discrepant engagement with modern electro culture, the conventional museum structure is rapidly moving towards a state of desuetude with regards to modern electronic media’s impact on the generation to which I belong. Kinetic potential and its manifestation in cultural production are core tenets of my work. A shorthand way of describing its presence in the art objects (some still call them songs) I create would be to see that they focus on “art as potentiality” with regard to a state of being-as-void, or continuous becoming. There are many problems one encounters in the attempt to reconcile conventional “art” with the culture that I call home. But to me, fragmentation is what all of this is about. My work as a DJ is my prime inspiration; and it is the memories that I have gained from my various experiences as a DJ that fuel my inquiry into the art object as a vessel of cultural representation. I do not call my constructs paintings, but rather “objectiles”—that is, objects imbued with an extreme sense of cultural velocity—object + projectile.

In DJ culture music is carried by shards of time—records, CDs, and most popular amongst the initiates, the “mixed tape.” All of the previously listed objects are activated by various electronic appliances, thus the kinetic potential—the movement of a static object into a relation of dynamic movement with regards to a social function of electricity—that lies at the center of my oeuvre. To me, the mixed tape is the ultimate example of a new art object. By using a found object—the cassette—that has the ability to hold replicated information, and in turn can be used to reproduce that very same information whenever it is activated: the cassette arrives at a point where it is the electromagnetic equivalent of the blank canvas, and “all the world is in the mix.” The mix of found objects or self-generated music that a DJ records to tape, is representative of a style that s/he uses to evoke emotive responses in the listener, thus involving the spectator and creator in a situation

where the boundaries dividing the two blur. DJing is also informed by a fluid dialectics of culture that places it at the center of the transition from mimetic to semiotic representation that electronic artforms are highlighting. What these diverse new forms of representation indicate is a migration of human cognitive structures into the abstract “machinery” of the electronic environment.

I am you, you are me, with language, we are three.

—Paul D. Miller

Ideas improve, the meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author’s phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea.

—Comte de Lautréamont (1870)

The style a DJ uses is their imprimatur, their way of appropriating the psychological environment that the people that made the records put into their mix, and sharing it with those who attend the performance. In this way the DJ acts as a cipher, translating thought and sound into functional mood units whose accumulated meanings can be found in the audio equivalent of a paratactic structure of linguistic elements or what I like to call “the body telematic,” or what Artaud liked to call “the body without organs.” In this sense, the records, samples, and various other sonic material the DJ uses to construct their mix act as a sort of externalized memory that breaks down previous notions of intellectual property and copyright law that Western Society has used in the past. It is in this singularly improvisational role of “recombinater” that the DJ creates what I like to call a “post symbolic mood sculpture,” or the mix: a disembodied and transient text that mirrors the dematerialized art object mentioned earlier. Operating in a manner that is both enantiomorphic and tessellary, the DJ embodies a telematic relationship where “the sign” becomes sound seeking sense, thus the difference between semiotic and mimetic representation that I mentioned earlier. The implications of this style of creating art are three fold: 1) by its very nature it critiques the entire idea of intellectual property and copyright law, 2) it reifies a communal art value structure in contrast to most forms of art in late capitalist social contexts, 3) it interfaces communications technology in a manner that anthropomorphizes it. In this manner, DJing posits music as an extension of a neurolinguistic relationship of human beings to their, as Marx put it, “alienated life elements.” Those “elements,” seen through the medium of the mix, reveal to us a place where different voices, rhythms, and tones fuse to create a syncretic flow of sound as externalized memory. They become epiphenomena whose central purpose is to act as a mnemonic device: the social construction of subjectivity is informed by the memories that become the shared text of an attenuated media environment made possible by a variable architecture synthesized from the tones that comprise its forms. C.S. Pierce noted in his idea of semiosis a similar unfolding of human expression, albeit without its cybernetic implications (although they are implicit in his work, I believe), when he wrote back in the 19th century “that since any thought, there must have been a thought, has its analogue in the fact that, since any past time, there must have been an infinite

series of times. To say, therefore, that thought cannot happen in an instant, but requires time, is but another way of saying that every thought must be interpreted in another, or that all thought is in signs.”

Memory and temporal structure are the new spaces of art to me. Deleuze and Guattari arrive at a similar point in their critique of late capital and schizophrenia with the rhizome structure, a decentered and nonhierarchical form that perfectly illustrates their metaphor for counter culture. Among philosophers like David Hume, Giordano Bruno, Frantz Fanon, Martin Luther King, Friedrich Hegel, Nietzsche, and Malcolm X, a fixation on multiplicity gives their expression all the more immediacy because of its fragmented nature. This, to me is almost the equivalent of time travel along psychological association lines that artists and writers as diverse as Brion Gysin, Sun Ra, Alain Robbe-Grillet, William S. Burroughs, Marcel Duchamp, Rammellzee, Samuel Delaney, H.G. Wells, Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, Grand Master Flash, Sol Lewitt, and Yevgeny Zamyatin, to name a few, have based their works on. Adrift etymologically, the word “phonograph” means “sound writing.” In literature, the methodologies used to assemble the mix a DJ creates could be called stream of consciousness narratives (*roman fleuve*), or nonsequential (*roman mallaparte*). The previous meanings, geographic regions, and temporal placement of the elements that comprise the mix, are corralled into a space where the differences in time, place, and culture, are collapsed to create a recombinant text or autonomous zone of expression based on what I like to call “cartographic failure.”

Autonomous zones are interstitial, they inhabit the in-between of socially significant constellations, they are where bodies in the world but between identities go: liminal sites of syncretic unorthodoxy . . . Autonomous zones may be thought of, in temporal terms, as shreds of futurity. Like “outside”, “future” is only an approximation: there are any number of potential futures in the cracks of the present order, but only a few will actually unfold. Think of autonomous zones in terms of time, but tenseless: time out of joint, in an immanent outside (Nietzsche’s untimely).

—Brian Masumi, *A Users Guide To Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

All I can say is that in this era of hypermodernity, the current message has been deleted. Any sound can be you. It is through the mix and all that it entails—the re-configuration of ethnic, national, and sexual identity—that humanity will, hopefully, move into another era of social evolution. I can only hope that the world can shift into this new matrix without too much disruption. The other options—genocide, internecine ethnic strife and warfare, the complete destruction of the environment, and the creation of a permanent underclass that doesn’t have access to technology—are what the future holds if humanity can’t come to grips with these new and explosive forces technology has released in us all.