CYANOTYPES

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY
This book is designed to celebrate the remarkable group of cyanotypes Christian Marclay produced between 2007 and 2009 at the University of South Florida’s Graphicstudio.

For more than forty years, emerging and established artists have been invited to work in residence at the Tampa studio. As a university-based atelier, Graphicstudio encourages artists to explore both traditional printmaking methods and new approaches in collaboration with a highly skilled production staff of printers and fabricators, and to tap the resources offered by the larger academic community. Artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein, Ed Ruscha, and more recently Allan McCollum, Vik Muniz, Los Carpinteros, Mark Dion, and Teresa Fernández have created innovative limited-edition works, both prints and sculptures, at the atelier.

This rich history of research and experimentation has inspired visiting artists to respond and explore new ground in their own practice. Graphicstudio first utilized the cyanotype process, invented by Sir John Herschel in 1847, with Rauschenberg in the early 1970s. Unlike silver-based photographs, cyanotypes employ an emulsion of iron compounds and are often referred to as ‘blueprints.’

Marclay was very familiar with the cameraless process of the photogram, but curious to explore the cyanotype technique and extend the scale and complexity with the expertise of Graphicstudio.

With the atelier’s team of printers, Tom Pruitt, Sarah Howard, Will Lytch, and Tim Baker, Marclay created each cyanotype by placing music cassettes and reels of unspooled tape directly onto photosensitive paper and then exposing it to light. Adopting and adapting two outmoded technologies—the cyanotype and the music cassette tape—Marclay continued to explore his interest in the resonances between the aural and the visual.

The printers’ notes on this project describe the first experiments as single exposures produced outdoors in the light of the sun. Tests were made of the emulsion formula and various papers to determine the ideal intensity of the Prussian blue color. A cold-press watercolor paper (Arches Aquarelle) was chosen as it allowed the best balance of scale, archival stability, and retention of emulsion density. As experiments progressed, wind and heat convection currents made the delicate strands of cassette tape squirm and flex, so for better conditions the project was moved indoors after a large, high-power ultraviolet exposure lamp was installed in one room.

Graphicstudio’s research into the procedural parameters of the cyanotype method offered Marclay the control and flexibility needed for his dramatic successes. Working in both vertical and horizontal formats, he created unique “drawings” by using multiple exposures and layering strands of cassette tape into a variety of compositions (using hundreds of music cassettes purchased from Tampa thrift shops). Using various compositional strategies, at times working at a scale of up to 100 by 51 inches, he ultimately created four series of unique cyanotypes: Memento, Mashups, Allover, and Grids, and an edition variée, comprising thirty-five images, titled Automatic Drawings.

This “blue book” brings yet another dimension to the dynamic relationship between artist and studio. Both Marclay and Graphicstudio decided that it was important to document the full scope of the project with a publication. Museums and collectors around the world have acquired many of the artist’s cyanotypes, and this book presents an opportunity to bring the works together and address their significance. JRP|Ringier copublished the book with Graphicstudio; Noam M. Elcott placed Marclay’s innovations in a broad historical context; David Louis Norr served as the publication’s editor; and the Swiss firm Norm designed it.

I extend my great appreciation to Christian Marclay for his continuing dedication to working at Graphicstudio on projects that will build our legacy and inspire generations of artists to come.

Margaret A. Miller
Professor and Director
Institute for Research in Art
Graphicstudio
University of South Florida
Tampa
Christian Marclay’s Memento: Survival of the Fittest (2008), a monumental blueprint or cameraless cyanotype, stretches out before us nearly four feet tall and eight feet wide. Perfect catenaries and irregular tangles of piercing whites and bright azures sweep across the image or recede into its Prussian blue expanse. We are thrust into a forest of light, or, better still, a tropical pool, from the depths of which we peer up toward the sunlight that breaks the plane of the water. But as our eyes float down to the bottom of the image, where broken cassettes litter this ocean floor and transform it into a dirty and abandonned dance hall, the plunging ribbons of light transmogrify into party streamers. And yet the ethereal light—striped of naturalistic or supernatural connotations—pulls itself out of the refuse and shines no less brightly for its bathetic associations. A transsubstantiation without the miracle.

Where to begin? The allusions tucked into Memento: Survival of the Fittest (fig. 2) range from natural history to the history of art, from media technology to popular music. Like the magnetic tape whose cameraless traces infuse the image with luridous debris, these allusions are freed from their sources only to be bound into inchoate knots not easily untangled. The cassettes that make up Memento: Survival of the Fittest, culled by Marclay from the thrift stores of Tampa, Florida, represent a pop-cultural miscellany. The work is in fact a memento to a specific media technology that is rapidly approaching extinction in advanced capitalist countries. And in this respect the title of the cyanotype could not be more fitting. Today, the term ‘survival of the fittest’ is most closely associated with Herbert Spencer and social Darwinism (the bunk application of evolution to the realm of anthropology and politics). But the phrase was initially understood by Spencer, Darwin, and their contemporaries as a synonym for ‘natural selection,’ Darwin’s equally famous term for the operative force behind evolution. Applied to the realm of media archaeology, the subtitle Survival of the Fittest might be viewed ironically: in an age of digital music, cassette tapes have gone the way of the mastodon.

But there is another face to natural selection, and it is expressed poignantly—if rather disdainfully—by R. Child Bayley in his 1908 tome The Complete Photographer, where he dismisses the blueprint as a printing method ‘which survives, as the Darwinians tell us some of the lower forms of life survive, from the extreme simplicity of its structure.’ Among the in-sights of natural selection or the survival of the fittest is the recognition that a human is no more “fit” than a bacterium, no more “selected” than an ant. Blueprints survived decades longer than their more rarefied competitors not in spite of their extreme chemical simplicity, but because of it. In other words, the traits that enable survival are not ontologically superior to others; they are simply better suited to their environment. In much of the so-called third world, you still get more mileage out of a cassette tape than from an iPod. Blueprints have a similar pragmatic advantage over digital scans in that they are likely to last much longer. Marclay’s commitment to “lower” forms of media and the simplicity of their structures sustain his extensive exploration of cyanotype photography and is nowhere in greater evidence than in one of his earliest cyanotype projects, the Automatic Drawings (2007–8), an edition varied that comprises thirty-five images.

Like all of Marclay’s cyanotype projects, the Automatic Drawings were created collaboratively with the Graphicstudio atelier, based at the University of South Florida in Tampa. Marclay’s work with Graphicstudio began several years prior with a suite of photogravures and continues to the present with

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1 The title derives from John Knowles’s Big Beach Outshove, a 2008 Evangelical Christian album featuring such tracks as “Children of Promise,” “Overwhelming Power,” “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus,” and “Survival of the Fittest.” This last song layers missionary lyrics above synthetic sound and 1980s beats. Its inclusion in Memento (Survival of the Fittest) testifies first and foremost to the mixed bag of pop culture available in the thrift stores of Tampa, Florida, where Marclay collected the cassettes with which he executed the work.


4 Media archaeologist Siegfried Zielinski has adopted a related approach—that of the geologist and zoologist Stephen Jay Gould—in order to deemphasize technological progress in favor of diversity: “excellence.” In this model, “excellence” is a measurement of diversification events and the spread of diversity. See Siegfried Zielinski, Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006). In his digital scans replace blueprints and digital music replaces cassette tapes, there may be a net increase in the reproducibility and transmissibility of information, but a net loss of excellence as all information is reduced to a common binary base.

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Further photogravures as well as a variety of hand- and hang- ing-scrols. The most feuded collaboration to date has been formed around the creation of cyanotypes: six separate se- ries—altogether 171 individual works—beginning with the Autographic Drawings. The Autographic Drawings are the simplest of Marclay’s cyanotype creations, but they contain the seeds for nearly all his other series. The title references the Surrealist practice, pioneered by André Masson in the 1920s, in which the artist’s hand is allowed to move without conscious purpose across the page to create a drawing “freed” from reason and rational con- straints. This practice was later pursued on a monumental scale and on American soil by Jackson Pollock and other Ab- stract Expressionists. In Marclay’s version, it is the chance meanderings and accumulations of magnetic tape that com- pose the automatic forms, which are then drawn by light di- rectly onto the photographic paper. If the compositional principle owes a debt to Surrealism, the technique—and, in many respects, the form as well—recalls the origins of cyanotype photography. Sir John Herschel, a prominent geologist and photographer whose work inspired, among others, the young Darwin, discovered the cyanotype process in 1842—three years after Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot announced their inventions of photography to selected scientists and the general publics of France and England. Unlike the daguerreotype (Daguerre) or the calotype (beautiful image), Talbot, however, the cyanotype (deep-blue image) was not photo-sensitive enough to be used in cameras; further- more, its fantastic blue was a liability for a young medium closely associated with naturalism and verisimilitude. Cyanotype- ers were initially taken up almost exclusively by a small elite of botanists for the purpose of plant illustration. The most famous series was that of John Todd and Mary Bergthold, who were married and moved to New York in 1845 to be the first female photographer. Thereafter, cyanotype practices were dispersed within intimate social circles: this is literally the context of illustrated books and graphic prints) and the works of botanists are best understood as a type of nature print, drawing, or illustration. See Carol Armstrong, "Cameralism: From Natural Illustration and Nature Prints to Maniacal and Photogenic Drawings and Other Botanographs," in Ocean Flora, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

When laid out across a table, Marclay’s photograph composes the ensemble is then exposed to an artificial light source rich in the ultraviolet range of the spectrum ‘‘similar to sunlight’, washed with tap water, and dried. But the com- parison with Atkins’s algae images has more than just a pseudo- morphological basis: the cyanotype chemistry used today is virtually unchanged from that of the 1840s—a mix of ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide. Furthermore, no two images by Atkins or Marclay are the same; each is a unique photographic inscription of the specimen made without re- course to photographic plate or camera. Formally, both Atkins and Marclay manipulate the specimen to fit on the page and reveal its structure through the relative opacity and trans- lucency of its various parts. Specimens are laid flat and move- ment is averted in an effort to create the clearest possible image. In both cases, the subject matter must be ‘‘killed’’ in order to be represented. This will be seen again in Marclay’s later series, such as Memento. Finally, for both Atkins and Marclay, production is ‘‘artisanal’’ despite the photomechanical context of illustrated books and graphic prints: and the works are dispersed within intimate social circles: this is literally the case for the dozen or so known copies of Atkins’s Photographs of British Algæ—original recipients included family friends and scientific luminaries like Talbot, Herschel, and Robert Hunt, a scientist and early photo-historian—but it is also true for Marclay’s Autographic Drawings, which were composed for Graphicstudio ‘‘subscribers,’’ a small circle of supporters and friends of the artist.

The fundamental difference between Atkins’s work and Marclay’s is, of course, history. Atkins embarked on her cyanotype- ization at the dawn of photography; Marclay delved into the cameraless blueprints in an era that has been dubbed ‘‘post-photographic.’’ Atkins’s once-living organic specimens resemble only slightly the dead media captured by Marclay. And of course, the practice of the nineteenth-century layman scien- tist bears little resemblance to that of the twentieth-century professional artist.

What separates Marclay from Atkins is the advent of modernity. Marclay’s camerless photography pur- posefully resurrects the history of modernism—a history that spans roughly the century from 1860 to 1960—and its relation to the popular. Memento: Survival of the Fittest, is not a re- memento to the natural selection of algae or media, nor to the brute materiality of plastic cassettes, a one-on-one technol- ogy for the reproduction of the image today. Marclay’s cyanotypes are mementos to a point in modernity when avant-garde forms laid claim to the popular imagination and borrowed from the drags of popular culture. That point in history now appears as distinct as cyanotype photography and Rolling Stones audiocassettes. And it is here, at the intersection of avant-garde art and the refuse of popular culture, that Marclay began his career.

In 1978, Marclay, who was born in the United States but grew up in Switzerland, had just moved to New York to study art at art student living in Brookline, Massachusetts. ‘‘At the time,’’ he says, ‘‘I was already thinking about sound.’’ So begins the artist’s account of his gramophone epiphany, more than three decades ago and almost exactly one hundred years after Thom- as Edison announced his invention of the phonograph. Marclay recalls:

I was living in Brookline; while walking to art school on a heavily trafficked street a block away from my apartment I found a record on the pavement. Cars were driving over it. It was a Batman record, a children’s story with sound effects. I borrowed one of the turntables from school to listen to the record. It was heavily damaged and skipping, but was making these interesting loops and sounds, because it was filled with sound effects. I just sat there listening and some kind of spark happened. . . . Just the fact that I picked it up was significant of that cultural difference. If I had grown up in the U.S., I would have just seen a record on the street. That’s what surprised me about American culture: its excess, the prevalence of so much waste. When I first came (back) to the United States (in 1977), it was a common sight to see broken records on the street. It took away the preciousness of the object.

Marclay pursued these skips, loops, and sounds through or- cheestrated improvisational manipulations of the gramo- phone—a technique popular through parallel develop- ments in hip-hop. His may be the only music career ever launched by a broken record. Marclay has revisited the scene of destruction in a number of installations—notably in Footsteps (1998) and Echo and Narcissus (1992), for which he covered a gallery floor with thousands of twodimensional sound effects and recorded the sounds, respectively. At first glance, these installations would seem to be comments on the programmed obsolescence that is a driv- ing force behind advanced capitalism. But Marclay added another dimension. The vinyl records of Footsteps—a con- tained sound of Marclay’s own footsteps mixed with the quick syncopations of tap dancers’ pattering feet. As visitors meandered through the gallery, they added the physical marks of Echo and Narcissus in 1992, Marclay began experimenting with camerless photographs (also known as photograms). Made through the interposition of objects between a light source and a photosensitive surface, photograms have been known at least since the 1860s, when Talbot placed leaves and lace on photosensitive paper and exposed them directly to light. Camerless photography of all kinds has been practiced by amateurs, children, scientists, and others since the invention of photography. The most familiar and widely disseminated form of camerless photograph is the X-ray image. Avant- garde artists—notably Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy—first explored the technique in the years following World War I. The critical response to the introduction of photograms into the popular culture of the 1920s confirmed the potential of this form of cameraless photography as a tool for the Duchampian spirit of the time. This transmutation from the aural to the optical register (albeit for sonic regurgitation into a capacity for visual reflection) is emblematic of Marclay’s œuvre; this transmutation is central to the work’s title) is a unique layer of meaning. The vinyl records of Footsteps include changes to the physical structure of the work—namely, a vinyl record’s recorded sounds and the destructive nature of vinyl’s internal structure. The book recorded and hansel—this is precisely the definition of that cultural difference. If I had grown up in the U.S., I would have just seen a record on the street. That’s what surprised me about American culture: its excess, the prevalence of so much waste. When I first came (back) to the United States (in 1977), it was a common sight to see broken records on the street. It took away the preciousness of the object.

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Avant-garde discourse in 1922 was split. On the one hand, Man Ray sold his first “rayographs” as he called his cameraless photographs: 10 to the fashion impresario Paul Poiret; they were first published in Vanity Fair (November 1922); and Man Ray eventually adopted the technique for advertisement spreads in Harper’s. In short, rayographs were utilized as a tool for the “New Vision” that was sweeping over Europe and America, a modern view inextricably tied to the marketing and sale of serially manufactured commodities. At the same time, a limited-edition portfolio of rayographs was advertised in terms of its artistic pretensions: “This is the first time that photography is placed at the same level as original pictorial works.”1 The title of the Vanity Fair piece in which the rayographs first appeared was “A New Method of Realizing the Artistic Possibilities of Photography.”2 The Parisian polymath Jean Cocteau quickly understood that the artistic value of the rayographs lay not only in their suppression of overt mimesis in favor of an at least partial abstraction, but also in the fact that each print is unique and no more reproducible than a drawing or painting. “Your prints,” he wrote Man Ray in an open letter from 1922, “are so precious because there exists only one of each.”3

Marclay has always been attuned to this contradictory dimension of cameraless photography. Every photograph he has created is a unique original. Indeed, his very first series—comprised of photographs of broken records—immediately invokes his early gramaphonic epiphany and, with it, the desire to restore the preciousness of the object taken away not by technological reproduction so much as by wasteful consumption. As its title suggests, Broken Record in 5 Pieces (1990) is composed of the fragments of a single gramophone record. But rather than attempt to make it whole again, Marclay emphasizes the preciousness of the vinyl disc through its transposition into a photograph. If in footsteps Marclay succeeded in transforming 3,500 identical records into 3,500 unique recordings, Broken Record in 5 Pieces transforms an anonymous and disposable record into a unique composition in black and white. “Yes, art. I know a gentleman who makes excellent portraits. This gentleman is a camera.”4 Like Marcel Duchamp—who, in the same year, famously answered a questionnaire on the artistic significance of photography with the rebuke “You know exactly what I think about photography. I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable. There we are”—Tzara was impatient with questions of art and artists. He believed that the rayographs freed beauty from the hegemony of a select elite. Cameraless photographs, after all, are among the simplest aesthetic objects to produce.

Even more than its first cyanotypes, Marclay’s first series of photographs are the simplest of photographs: black and white in a binary sense (that is, without tonal gradations); a layout that is neither aleatory nor composed, but bluntly documentary; life to such a degree that the titles—like Broken Record in Three Pieces (1990)—provide nearly complete descriptions; a one-to-one correspondence between referent and image with regard to size and transparency. If there is visual beauty in the work it is in the broken record itself: the contrast between its rounded and jagged edges, the fragmentary quality that makes it appear like pieces of a puzzle, its wreckage and its fragility. For Tzara, the broken record itself would clearly have sufficed. And if there is a need to record the record, cameraless photography succeeds in an artless transposition that captures the beauty of the pure material itself rather than the invention of the artist. Tzara’s description of Man Ray’s rayographs may be perfectly well applied to Marclay’s first graphs freed beauty from the hegemony of a select elite. Cameraless photographs, after all, are among the simplest aesthetic objects to produce.

The critic Douglas Crimp chronicled the shift from modernism to postmodernism in the visual arts through the work of Robert Rauschenberg: “Rauschenberg had moved definitively from the invention of the artist. Tzara’s description of Man Ray’s rayographs may be perfectly well applied to Marclay’s first 1925/27), trans. Janet Seligman (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).

10 “A New Method of Realizing the Artistic Possibilities of Photography,” Vanity Fair (November 1922), 58.
13 Crimp, “Echo and Narcissus,” 58.
15 Crimp, “Echo and Narcissus,” 58.
lights to produce creative light effects, rather than merely reproducing images of the outside world. To do so, as Moholy-Nagy made clear in both theory and practice the following year, it was necessary to do away with the camera and experience it as a window that precipitates the production of photographic surfaces. In other words, the same theoretical assertions that supported the photogram also called for a productive use of the gramophone.

Moholy-Nagy must not have mastered any attempt at productive phonography; he would never master an "ABC of the groove." But neither could he have anticipated its ultimate realization, as media-theorist Friedrich Kittler observes, among others: New York disc jockeys (who turn the esoteric graphisms of Moholy-Nagy into the everyday experience of scratch music.)

In the early 1980s, Marclay was among those DJs. But in his "turntablism" he broke out of Moholy-Nagy's binary conception of production-reproduction and set loose a whole complex of postmodernist preoccupations. (1) Early Marclay tracks, such as "Dust Breeding" or "Groove" (both 1982), reference classic avant-garde notions but depart entirely from Moholy-Nagy's fantasy of a gramophonological alphabet. Rather than manipulating the record grooves on a microscopic level in order to mix fragments of recorded music, "(2)" with sounds that derives uniquely from the properties of turntablist "production." In his music, Marclay exploits the production-reproduction divide by making productive use of reproductions. More than acoustic montage but far from an elementary language of the groove, the sonic practice that Marclay helped shift modern tastes from the artisanal and unique to the mass-reproducible. And while Moholy-Nagy still used camera-based photography, Marclay attains his close-up of record grooves without a camera. To make these images, Marclay repurposed traditional photographic equipment: rather than using a camera-based negative to create a broken, transparent record directly into an enlarger. But these formal and technical differences seem inconsequential in light of the dramatic formal similarities and underlying shared fascinations with the attributes of a specific medium. It appears that the many hands in Marclay's photographs are not those of the hands of a photographer but those of a DJ mixing his favorite tracks from the historical avant-garde. Rather than break with modernism, Marclay is replaying it.

In Marclay's version, however, there is a difference. And that difference, again, is history. New Vision photography helped shift modern tastes from the artisanal and unique to the mass-reproducible. And while Moholy-Nagy helped incubate new desires in modern consumers, Moholy-Nagy framed his discussion of advertising so much as he did his discussion of art: in terms of medium-specificity, visual literacy, the embrace of the new. Marclay revisits the materials, forms, and techniques of the historical avant-garde under markedly different economic and technological conditions. While the technological reproducibility of photography once dovetailed perfectly with the technological reproducibility of commodities, both photographic and commercial, the photochemical clock to the nineteenth century and allude to more recent art, creating strong dissonances between content and form. One recent reviewer likened the work to "X-rays of Cy Twombly or Jackson Pollock canvases" in an attempt to bridge the camarallesi technique and the art-historical allusion.

But the warring parties will not be reconciled so easily. Marclay's recent cyanotypes of cassette tapes grew out of a series of twenty-five photographs, each almost exactly one square foot, where ribbons and knots of magnetic tape pulled out of audiotapes leave white, wobbly patterns on a matte black ground. Like his earlier series, the new works consist largely of unspooled reams of cassette tape. But the two bodies of work are ultimately more different than similar, in material, color, orientation, scale, and historical references. Recent pieces such as Untitled (guns & roses, sonic Youth and Two Mix Tapes) (fig. 41) and Mashup / Two Cassettes (Dpysts, both 2001) (fig. 32) are composed not only of magnetic tape but also of the cassette containers from which they are pulled. In place of the "black ground of silence" that Marclay

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But the warring parties will not be reconciled so easily. Marclay's recent cyanotypes of cassette tapes grew out of a series of twenty-five photographs, each almost exactly one square foot, where ribbons and knots of magnetic tape pulled out of audiotapes leave white, wobbly patterns on a matte black ground. Like his earlier series, the new works consist largely of unspooled reams of cassette tape. But the two bodies of work are ultimately more different than similar, in material, color, orientation, scale, and historical references. Recent pieces such as Untitled (guns & roses, sonic Youth and Two Mix Tapes) (fig. 41) and Mashup / Two Cassettes (Dpysts, both 2001) (fig. 32) are composed not only of magnetic tape but also of the cassette containers from which they are pulled. In place of the "black ground of silence" that Marclay
To achieve the visual qualities evident in forms in which whites advance and darks recede without form, dispensing magnetic tape across the cyanotype paper. In traversing the perimeter of the recumbent canvas, pouring or Muth's famous photographs from 1950, (r) Pollock is seen of the two artists at work are highly revealing. In Hans Na's "Drip," the lines of color onto the material support. Photographs is the manner in which both Marclay and Pollock lay down, or Even more important—in terms of both process and product—roughly the same size (the cyanotype measures 51½ inches clay's These qualities are present in abundance throughout Marclay's 2001 black-and-white photograms may be most readily comprehensible like the force of gravity and the attendant horizon or verticality of their fabrication. Marclay's epitomizes the tension between the sublime and the abject was developed rather than diminishing the former. The tension between the sublime and the abject was developed by Pollock and his immediate followers not only in the legacy lies in the collapse of the serious, formal rigor expected of "high art" and the seemingly wanton adoption of quotidian materials (metallic house-paints, sticks in place of brushes) and the refusal of studied composition in favor of intuitive or automatic traces. The impression of Number 1A is as sublime as the means are abject—the latter magnifying rather than diminishing the former. To achieve the visual qualities evident in Allover's "Kenny Rogers, Rod Stewart, Jody Watley, and Others," Marclay lays out rectangular cassettes, circular bobbins, irregular plastic shards, and many feet of magnetic tape all over the paper—after which he makes the first of roughly three or four exposures. (x) So long as these materials do not move (rare in the case of the wispy tape), they appear shockingly white in the final print. Before each exposure, Marclay adds additional materials, whose blue traces range from an extraordinary lightness (in the case of minimal exposure) to a depth that rivals those portions of the paper that were fully exposed to the artificial sun. In a perceptual inversion, the materials most proximate to the paper during the exposures tend to be brightest and thus appear closest to the viewer upon perusal; the reverse holds true for materials layered later and higher: they appear fainter, darker, blurrier, and more distant from the viewer. A few very objects float untethered from their surroundings (consider the broken cassette above and to the left of dead center, or the bobbin just beneath and to the left of that same central point). On the whole, however, our eyes are led through a network of lines and forms without beginning or end. We are left to sweep the unsavory place for art—and either sublimated it in favor of the medical, even spiritual powers so often attributed to paint and canvas. At the same time, magnetic tape is perfectly respectable compared to handprints and cigarette butts, let alone bodily secretions. Where Pollock's immediate followers tended toward the extremes, Marclay seems to channel the Pollock described by art-historian T. J. Clark as "a petty-bourgeois artist of a tragically undulton type—one of those pure products of America." According to Clark: what is special about Abstract Expressionism—what marks it off from all other modernisms—is that the engagement is with the vulgar as opposed to the "popular" or "low." I think we should understand the "popular" in nineteen- and twentieth-century art as a series of figures of avoidance of the vulgar: that is, figures of avoidance of art's actual belonging to the pithos of bourgeois taste: a perpetual shifting and conjuring of kinds of simplicity, directness, naiveté, sentiment and senti mentality, emotional and material force, in spite of everything about art's actual place and function that put such qualities beyond its grasp. Abstract Expressionism does little or no such conjugating. That is what makes it hard to bear. We have largely lost touch with the "vulgarity" of Abstract Expressionism which, when compared to more recent cultural vulgarities, appears positively aristocratic. One would be hard pressed to gather a set of cultural references more closely aligned with "petty-bourgeois" (a.k.a. lower-middle-class) American vulgarity than those inscribed in the camerelasse traces and titles of Marclay's cyanotypes: Rod Stewart, Céline Dion, Antonin Dvorák, Britney Spears, and so on. (It is said that one collector passed on Memento: Britney Spears, (2008) fig. 7 lest he be tainted by the pop diva's allure. Marclay's monumental cyanotypes—and this is among their great virtues—restore to visibility the vulgarity of mid-twentieth-century American painting.

If Pollock, Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting, and mid-century America are the points of departure for Marclay's Mementos and Allovers, we are in need of an intermediary other than Warhol's Piss Paintings and Louis's Veil Paintings to deliver a Pollock less torn between the abject and the transcendent. That intermediary is Rauschenberg. Around 1950, shortly after Pollock completed Number 1A, Rauschenberg embarked on a series of Blueprints in which his then-wife, Susan Weil, and their friend, Pat Peerman, lay sprawled across the floor, and other bric-a-brac that would suit Anna Atkins' circle quite well. (w) (x) Exposing the paper with a sun lamp—much as Pollock had dripped his house paints and Marclay scatters his magnetic tape—Rauschenberg collapsed together the horizontal, the corporeal, the automatic, the vernacular, and the industrial. This was not a desublimation of art so much as a defiance of its potential "seriousness." Photographs of Rauschenberg and Weil at work were published in Life magazine in 1951, where the accompanying text explains: "Although the Rauschenbergs make blueprints for fun, they hope to turn them into screen and wallpaper designs." (They had already been used as window displays at the department store Bonwit Teller.) "Conservative critics beweared: wallpaper designs? "apocryphal wallpaper"? Fun? "Fun is a medicinal bath," as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote. "The pleasure industries never fail to prescribe it." If, barely two years prior to the story on Rauschenberg, Pollock appeared ill at ease in the pages of Life magazine: "Is He the Greatest Living Painter in
the United States? the headline asked famously and ambiguously, the younger artist made the pages of magazines like Life—as well as radios, television images, and other mass media—the very substance of his work. Art-historian Leo Steinberg understood Rauschenberg’s canvases to be flatbed picture planes similar to “tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be perceived, printed, impressed.” 31 Neither transcendent nor abject, Rauschenberg’s canvases do not avoid popular culture by rising above it or escaping it from beneath; they are simply surfaces on which mass culture collects—the way paint once pooled on Pollock’s canvases. How is this “cultural receptacle” evident in Rauschenberg’s early Blueprints? Initial impressions provide conflicting evidence. On the one hand, the Blueprints were produced in a resolutely horizontal position. On the other hand, the traces they bear are of the female nude, leaves, and other objects that link the works more closely with natural history than industrial culture. A resolution of the conflict may be approached through a consideration of the cyanotype process itself. After its initial exploration by Atkins and other botanists, cyanotype photography was largely forgotten.32 Thirty years of near oblivion paved the way for the reinvention of the process: entrepreneurs suppressed John Herschel’s name and formula as well as his appellation for the procedure. Instead of remaining a gentle- man’s (or gentlewoman’s) scientific hobby, the “ferroprussiate process”—as the cyanotype process was redubbed—was employed for photocopying plans of any kind: in a word, blueprints. By the end of the nineteenth century, blueprint paper was manufactured industrially: in 1918 England, a 30-by-3-foot roll of cyanotype paper cost as little as one pound sixpence. Plans for a battleship required some 11,000 square feet of the paper. (Already in the eighteenth century, Prussian blue was the first widely manufactured artificial dye; its history is indivisibly bound up with industrialization.) Cheap and easy, blueprints remained the dominant industrial reproduction process for decades. This widespread mode of reproduction—though already in decline in the face of competing technologies like diazo prints (also known as whiteprints or blue-lines)—was the medium of Rauschenberg’s Blueprints. Atkins conjured the ocean with her Prussian blue nature prints; Rauschenberg secured nature—in the form of the female nude and botanical elements—in terms of industrial reproduction. In other words, here even nature is rendered under the sign of mass media: a signal moment of “productive reproduction.” This is where Marclay takes up the mantle from Pollock and Abstract Expressionism: industrially produced house-paints are replaced with industrially produced magnetic tape; the canvas as an arena for action is exchanged for blueprint paper as an arena for photographic reproduction. But rather than capture vestiges of the existential self (Pollock) or nature (Rauschenberg), Marclay records the residues of industrialized culture: cheap audiocassette reproductions produced on the nineteenth century’s cheapest mode of photographic reproduction: blueprints.

Art-historian Thomas Crow argues that culture in the context of capitalism displays moments of negation and an ultimately overwhelming accommodation: “Modernism exists in the tension between these two opposed movements. And the avant-garde, the bearer of modernism, has been successful when it has found for itself a social location where this tension is visible and can be acted upon.” 33 Marclay’s cyanotypes do not necessarily negate the cultural products of advanced capitalism. Quite the contrary: rarely has Pollock looked so fresh; never has Britney Spears appeared more interesting. Visually seductive and formally enchanting (approaching, perhaps, even apocalyptic wallpaper), Marclay’s cyanotypes succeed not in direct negation—base materialism, desublimation, political criticism, or any other now-familiar strategy employed by modernist and postmodernist avant-gardes—but in rendering modernism’s overwhelming accommodation to capitalism uncomfortably visible. Rather than an oscillation between the transcendental and the object, Marclay fuses the beautiful and the vulgar.