

scratch. In keeping with the active, adaptive character of contemporary art practice, many of the artworks are site-specific or have been developed in conversation with Ghaznavi since her initial studio visits. While I remain skeptical of using landscape (topography) as the loose organizing concept for a geographically mandated exhibition, Ghaznavi's approach was admirable in prioritizing the meaningful development of art and artists.

While *Writing Topography* highlights insightful connections between artists and art works, there are definitely outliers. Mandated to relate different practices, developed in diffuse contexts, this unruly character is typical of survey exhibitions, and may pose an attractive challenge for future curators contracted to formulate the biennial. After all, refusing to resolve can be both pointed and political, and there are so many other narratives that remain to be written.

A re-incarnation of what was originally established as a juried prize in 1987, the Marion McCain Exhibition of Contemporary Atlantic Art is designed as a biennial survey of contemporary visual art practices in the Atlantic Canadian provinces. While it may have currency in the naming of an art prize, this wordy exhibition name lacks legibility in the international context of contemporary art, and in so doing may undermine the artists it seeks to support. An alternative such as "the Atlantic Biennial" would better align the project with recognizable trends in contemporary art presentation.

Speaking from a part of Canada that is proportionally more rural, with higher rates of poverty and unemployment, Ghaznavi's exhibition gives expression to some of the formative cultural experiences created by these geopolitical conditions. As a survey of contemporary art in Atlantic Canada that adopts the biennial format, *Writing Topography* productively explores modes of cultural inquiry that are only possible because of these conditions, not in spite of them.

sophia bartholomew is an artist based in New Brunswick.

Christian Marclay:
Surround Sounds
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by Godfre Leung

Facing the entrance to *Surround Sounds*, the eponymous video installation around which Christian Marclay's latest exhibition at Paula Cooper Gallery was organized, is a series of works on paper from 1989 featuring page-size comic panels painted over in black acrylic, with only their cartoonish onomatopoeic words unobscured. On first impression, *Surround Sounds* seemingly updates these early works for the age of immersive spectacle, excising stylized *zooms*, *thumps* and *booms* from comic books and animating them on a black background across four synchronized wall-sized channels in a fourteen-minute silent *Fantasia* of seen but unheard sounds. However, the exhibition's prefatory works on paper also suggest that we can experience *Surround Sounds* with the viewing habits of a comic book reader. Through those eyes, the now-conventional black box of 21st century video installation art morphs into noir-ish panels from 1930s detective stories.

Despite the large scale of *The Clock* (2011), which has attracted for Marclay wide popular audiences and resounding critical acclaim, *Surround Sounds* signals its distance from the big-budget, major-studio aesthetics and 3D simulacra of a Doug Aitken or Janet Cardiff through the sly inversion of its partially sarcastic title; the pleasures offered by *Surround Sounds*

have little to do with Dolby 7.1. Instead, we perceive Marclay's animations partitioned across four resolutely two-dimensional frames. The viewer, physically between these frames, perceives from within the structural logic of the *strip* form. At many points the centripetal logic of the gallery walls-cum-comic panels remains intact. However, *Surround Sounds* also exploits the crossing or dissolution of the comic strip's occasionally permeable gutters, usually an exceptional event in comic books, as the mechanical dancing of Marclay's onomatopoeic texts regularly and intrepidly traverse the gallery's corners. The viewer therefore often experiences the temporal and spatial syntax of the comic strip in moments when its integrity breaks down.

Surround Sounds also exploits its multi-channel format by often directing the viewer's gaze to one wall only to then divert it to the far edge of another wall, occasionally even surprising the viewer with a new animated sequence directly facing where she is looking, and so presumably behind her back. Here, the new animation announces itself not to the viewer's peripheral vision but by a change in ambient light. On this point, the three-dimensional relay of the viewer's attention is not totally unlike the surround sound aesthetics of Cardiff – or the spectacular sound design of the blockbuster superhero movie that is the millennial descendent of *Surround Sounds*' source material. However, the viewing habits most directly engaged by *Surround Sounds* are those of simultaneously open application windows on computer screens, themselves now increasingly split across multiple monitors. While in *Surround Sounds* an animated *krak!* might catch the corner of the viewer's eye, startling her as a panned sound effect would in a film, the two-dimensionality of its frames places the viewer squarely in a virtual rather than verisimilar space, a kind of spatio-temporality more reminiscent of Marclay's earlier multi-channel work *Video Quartet* (2002) than of IMAX. To speak of the perceptual attention and viewing habits engaged by *Surround Sounds*, a blinking *beep* or *blip* that catches the corner of the viewer's eye might most appropriately be related to an alert sound emanating from a buried chat window in Mac OS' virtual, multi-frame architecture. Here, the viewer's experience takes

place within a field of textual operations, as opposed to in a panoramic field that we could identify as cinematic.

In the catalogue to the recent blockbuster Italian Futurism exhibition at the Guggenheim, literary critic Jeffrey T. Schnapp describes F.T. Marinetti's phonetic poem *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914) as "a text on a mission: to carry out a wholesale demolition of existing literary culture in the act of giving birth to a poetics consonant with the era of industry, wireless telegraphic networks, and mechanized mass warfare."¹ By contrast, the mission of *Surround Sounds* seems at first modest. In Marinetti's own words, the onomatopoeics of Italian Futurist poetry "reproduce[s] the countless noises of matter in motion," most notably those of the immersive technological *Gesamtkunstwerke* that he and his Futurist colleagues identified in the modern industrial city and in mechanized warfare.² The ever-solidifying canon of sound-based art, which firmly includes Marclay's *Record Without a Cover* (1985), is built around noise as its fetishized term, citing modernist origins such as the Futurist *Parole in libertà*, the *zaum* poetry of Russian Futurism and Dadaist phonetic – though, oddly, rarely also optophonetic – poetry. The silence of *Surround Sounds* therefore also seems a provocation: to declare Marclay's distance from this lineage and to pose the music–noise and signal–noise binaries that pervade sound art scholarship as peripheral concerns to his more reflective, and poetic, engagement with our perceptual experiences of media and technology.

Godfre Leung is a Minneapolis-based critic and assistant professor of art history at St. Cloud State University.

¹ Jeffrey T. Schnapp, "On Zang Tumb Tuuum," in *Italian Futurism 1909–1944: Reconstructing the Universe*, ed. Vivien Greene (New York: Guggenheim, 2014), 156.

² F.T. Marinetti, "A Response to Objections" (1912), trans. Lawrence Rainey, in *Futurism: An Anthology*, eds. Lawrence Rainey, et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 127.

Christian Marclay, *Surround Sounds*, 2015, installation view at Paula Cooper Gallery, New York, 2015. PHOTO: STEVEN PROBERT; © CHRISTIAN MARCLAY; IMAGE COURTESY OF PAULA COOPER GALLERY, NEW YORK.

