

Rhythm Science is a print-based multimedia work. Formatted as a book, the work cites on its cover the author Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid. However, the design team COMA has had a major role in shaping the experience Rhythm Science provides. The physical construction itself entices one’s imagination in a way reminiscent of LP album covers. The book is printed on two-sided paper (rough/smooth) and is pierced by a hole running through to the last page, where a CD lies waiting for the curious browser. Pages alternate between text and graphic collage, becoming something hybrid in the process. While Miller provides the words, music, and many of the incorporated visuals, the success of the mix is due mainly to COMA’s deft visual and tactile manipulations. The volume is printed in brown and green ink, however, full use is made of the white paper stock to add a third colour to the designers’ palette. Similarly, the work is divided into three parts: an A side (pp. 3-106), B side (pp. 107-128), and C side (the CD). Working in threes is meant to exemplify the spirit in which Miller creates music. To paraphrase his own statement, “All it takes is a DJ and two turntables to create a universe” (p. 127). But what does it take to create a DJ?

We learn that DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid began as a conceptual art project for Miller while he was “floating” in New York after having finished a philosophy and French literature degree in the mid-1990s. Miller made it a habit of distributing the question “Who is DJ Spooky?” on stickers accompanying mix-tapes he would record and pass out at parties. As the tapes were copied and redistributed, that question created a space for Paul D. Miller to occupy as a DJ, sample-based composer, and writer. Spooky’s notoriety preceded him in the true sense of the words.

Miller began publishing theoretical articles on DJing, sampling, and sonic collage during this same period (in venues such as The Village Voice, Artforum, and Parkett). The style employed in these early pieces reappears in the current manuscript and is strongly reminiscent of DJ mixing and sample-based hip hop production. Miller frequently jumps from one theme to the next, often relying on poetic turns of phrase to convey connections difficult to express deductively. At other points these cuts are more jarring and one is left to ponder the meaning of his juxtapositions. Ideas are layered on top of one another as much as they are strung together. Writing is treated as a musical endeavour:

There’s a reflexivity that comes with having to compose and letting language come through you. It’s a different speed, there’s a slowness there. And I’m attracted to writing’s infectiousness, the way you pick up language from other writers and remake it as your own. This stance is not contradictory: DJ-ing is writing, writing is DJ-ing. Writing is music. I cannot explain this any other way. (p. 57)

Although phrases such as “Check the flow” (p. 8), “Feel the frequencies” (p. 28), and “Do you get my drift?” (p. 92) repeatedly entreat us to accompany him on this text-mixed adventure, it must be admitted that many of Miller’s philosophical speculations are difficult to follow. The autobiographical material that makes up the other half of the writing, however, provides insightful commentary on DJing and remixing from an artist who is aware of the social and historical significance of his chosen technology (the turntable and sampler). The CD has also been skilfully constructed and is mostly made up of rare vocal recordings by authors such as Antonin Artaud, e. e. cummings, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, and Gilles Deleuze mixed with ambient electronic beats.

Rhythm Science’s multimedia and autobiographical tactics reflect the direction of Miller’s recent online and installation work (see www.djspooky.com). The ideas, thinkers,
and artistic practices he articulates are inevitably discussed from his perspective as a contemporary (and prolific) sound (re)mixer. First-person passages are used to contextualize these opinions in an attempt to render them more universal. A case in point:

When I first got to New York, I had started Dj-ing in the same spirit as I’d done the Eclectic Jungle [radio] show in college. My style was an experiment with rhythm and clues, rhythm and cues: Drop the needle on the record and see what happens when this sound is applied to this context, or when that sound crashes into that recording. The first impulses I had about Dj culture were taken from that basic idea—play and irreverence toward the found objects that we use as consumers and a sense that something new was right in front of our oh-so-jaded eyes. (p. 45)

This is an interesting inversion, as much popular and academic literature on DJing and/or sampling (the rhythm sciences) places these practices outside of the realm of everyday experience, limiting their significance to the nightclub or hip hop recording studio. Miller, however, develops them as heuristic devices for understanding our common postmodern condition. In a society saturated with reproduced information (sounds, images, texts), the individual is forced to select from these sources according to her own tastes, beliefs, and motivations. DJs and sample-based musicians simply make their choices public. Miller explains:

A deep sense of fragmentation occurs in the mind of a Dj. When I came to Dj-ing, my surroundings—the dense spectrum of media grounded in advanced capitalism—seemed to have already constructed so many of my aspirations and desires for me; I felt like my nerves extended to all of these images, sounds, other people—that all of them were extensions of myself, just as I was an extension of them. . . . By creating an analogical structure of sounds based on collage, with myself as the only common denominator, the sounds come to represent me. (pp. 21, 24)

Elsewhere Miller claims that “[s]ampling plays with different perceptions of time” (p. 28). The gist is that remixing music from previous recordings employs editing and filtering mechanisms similar to those we unconsciously use when making sense out of the cacophony of reproduced sensory inputs we receive in the course of a regular day. Rapid cuts, incongruous blends, and unexpected juxtapositions are as commonplace as a television in a crowded café or a flip through the radio dial.

Broadcast sounds and images shape our private spaces of mental contemplation. We are never passive receivers, however. Sensations are mixed and remixed as our attention flows. It is this process of continuous and shifting interaction that constitutes self-consciousness. DJing and sample-based music celebrate this phenomenon of affect. As such these pursuits exemplify the conception of technology as a fusion of “arte, techné, and logos—a melding of the Greek words for art, craft and word. Rhythm science imposes order upon skill and the ability to deploy them both in electro-modernity’s sociographic space” (p. 72).

In the end, Rhythm Science reads best when approached as a springboard from which to launch one’s own mental musings. Although the CD and fancy design artfully propel the book into the category of “seductive theoretical fetish object” (p. 125), the work’s lasting value resides in its capacity to (re)introduce its audience to the phenomenological experience of reading in itself. It is through experiencing the production of others that our own thoughts, memories, and feelings are born. This is what Rhythm Science makes transparent: “We’re in a delirium of saturation. We’re never going to remember anything exactly the way it happened. Memories become ever more fragmented and subjective. [The question remains:] Do you want to have a bored delirium or a more exciting one?” (p. 29).

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