

# dj spooky

lorenza pignatti

**Lorenza Pignatti:** You are a DJ, producer, writer, editor, and artist, but you are primarily known as the pioneer of the electronic music known as “illbient.”

How would you describe this music?

**DJ Spooky:** Illbient was meant to be a tongue-in-cheek joke about how desperate everyone is for labels. My style as an artist doesn't fit into any of the usual categories—performance or sound art, digital media, sculpture, painting—because at some level

I engage them all. I wanted to create an “open source”

document describing what

I was up to, and at the same time the term was meant to be blank and

“meaningless.” When someone says “hip-hop” you automatically understand what that means. When someone says “illbient” there's a lot of room for interpretation.

The main thing is to think of the creative act as a gathering of elements—you can reconfigure the found object into whatever context you want. The idea of the “sound system” is a central theme in my work, but it's a conceptual statement about dematerialization and transience.

**LP:** Is it correct to say that with a multimedia platform capable of handling all aspects of digital creativity, the DJ becomes a sort of trickster?

**DJS:** When I use my computer to make work, I'm doing the same thing Richard Serra does. The difference is between context and content. The trickster is someone who obeys no rules, and the fun thing about blurring all aspects of the creative act is that, like Duchamp, it's playing with the obvious—it becomes a deep inquiry into how we think about the cultural process. We

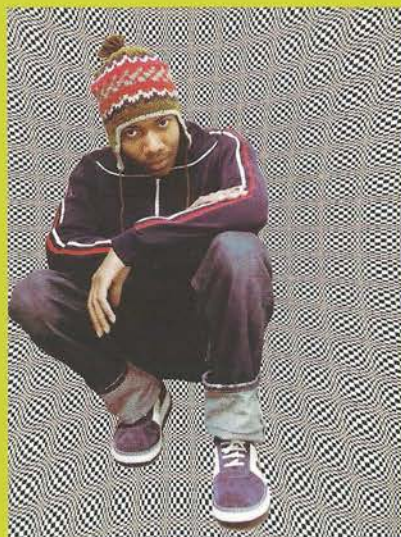
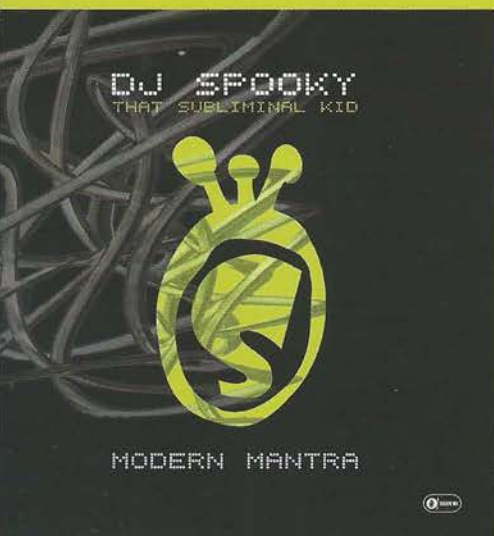
need more artists playing these kinds of games. I think of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna

Simpson's recent video work as examples of a progressive critique of African-American culture, without all the weird identity-politics baggage, and that's something I'd like to figure out with sound: how to play with history and make it become a truly open archive. Acceptance of history as a series of interlocking illusions means you have to engage the fictions and add your own, instead of being controlled by someone else's script. DJs do this on one level, but I formalize the process and use it as an all-encompassing environment for visual, sound, and digital media.

**LP:** With essays published in journals like “Parkett” and “Artforum,” you are considered an established critic.

Who are the artists you are most interested in at present?

**DJS:** I'm interested in a lot of contemporary art, but at the end of the day a lot of what you see in the gallery system is so boring and out of touch with reality that it's totally uninteresting. I like Duchamp, but I'd collage him with Aaron Douglas' geometric forms from the Harlem Renaissance. I also like what the graphic designer Francis Hopkinson did with the US flag, changing it so that it could expand infinitely as



the country absorbed different states. I like Alex Steinweiss—the guy who invented the record album sleeve back in the '30s. These people interest me because even if they aren't that well known, they've influenced and affected almost all aspects of daily life. I like artists who reach outside the limited domains of the art world, who reflect on the overall conditions of the world around us. At the moment I'm a big fan of Tony Oursler, Mariko Mori, Chris Ofili, the SoundLab collective, Scanner, Saul Willams, Yoko Ono's "instruction" poems, Anti-Pop Consortium, Philip Glass' operas, Chris Csikszentmihalyi's "robot DJ," Hype Williams' videos, Matthew Shipp's jazz . . . I write a lot of art criticism, but it's such a pain in the neck dealing with the white American art scene when it comes to talking about multicultural art, so I've focused more on making art than writing about it.

**LP:** What do you think about VJing? The scene seems to be improving quite a bit, and the art world is becoming more interested in VJ projects.

**DJS:** I love VJing—I think it blows away a lot of what's going on in the art world. But the people who make this kind of art don't waste their

time trying to convince the art world about what they're doing; they go straight to commercial culture. The main thing we need to think about these days is *convergence*. Many people on the older scene don't really get it, and they never will until it becomes so big they can't ignore it. I think there's room for everything, and life will be a lot more dynamic when people finally accept this fact. It's a big world, and there are other ways to think about the way human culture is evolving. Technology has far outstripped our social conventions, and we're trying to figure out how to integrate this situation in a really confusing human world that's on the edge of being posthuman.

**LP:** You've recorded and collaborated with a wide variety of preeminent musicians and composers, including Ryuichi Sakamoto, Iannis Xenakis, Kool Keith, and Yoko Ono. What are you working on now?

**DJS:** I'm in the middle of finishing a jazz record and a couple of museum and gallery projects. One of them is a remix of the infamous Ku Klux Klan film

*The Birth of a*

*Nation*—the first movie to really deal with the "nonlinear" nature of cinema and how we think in a mass-culture format. It was also deeply racist and repugnant. I plan on remixing it into something different, using it as a platform for a new kind of art situation. There will be dancers, costumes, and text. It'll be a kind of postmodern opera.

Born in 1977, Paul D. Miller (aka DJ Spooky) lives and works in New York. His artwork has appeared at the Whitney Biennial, Venice Architecture Biennale, Vienna Kunsthalle, Andy Warhol Museum, and other venues. His recordings include *Riddim Warfare*, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*, *The Viral Sonata*, *Synthetic Fury*, and *Modern Mantra*.  
www.djspooky.com

♦♦ DJ Spooky *Modern Mantra*, 2002, CD cover, Shadow Records.

♦ DJ Spooky Portrait by Christian Witkin.

♦ DJ Spooky Live in Paris, 1999. Photo Credit: P. E. Rasotin/Warner Classics.

