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THAT SUBLIMINAL KID



This interview was conducted in Chicago on May 19, 2001, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.¹

DJ Spooky: My name is Paul Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky—That Subliminal Kid, a.k.a. the Alphanumeric Bandit, and various other pseudonyms. My work revolves around the social implications of technology and how that reflects throughout the entire spectrum of the culture. It can take the form of sound, digital media, installation art, language art, conceptual art. It's a cross-platform representation of the total theatre or the total artwork—Wagner meets virtual reality. At the same time, it's a reflection of the specifically African-American-based aesthetic dealing with sound that is part collective memory. I guess you could say I'm a memory artist. [laughs]

Romi Crawford: I know that you're familiar with the work of the influential scholars Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cornel West, and Houston Baker, Jr.. How do you utilize some of the tropes of African-American expressive discourse that these intellectuals have posited in your art practice?

DJ Spooky: Of the three the most relevant to what I'm doing is probably Gates in his critique of signifying and double-coded language and the way words can migrate through both written text and oral culture. His essays on signifying and how that was an extension of other issues in black-American culture have been the most important for me. West has different angles on the notion of circularly engaged philosophy, and I like his critique of pragmatism. He's a definite heir of the William James/WE.B. DuBois aesthetic of social activism combined with highly refined philosophy. Baker's work is a bit more remote. It's not as struc-

turally part of what I'm up to, but I respect it. Conceptual art in the sixties—Joseph Kosuth putting words on walls, Sol Lewitt's critique of geometric form—the whole school of thought that language could be broken out of its context was critical for me. Also the '80s, which kicked in with people using the subway system as their own discourse network. At the same time, there was Jacques Derrida talking about erasure.

To me turntables are also a kind of writing. The word *phonograph* means sound writing. Turntables stand as a double greeting: they're about entertainment culture, music, theater, and club culture; they're also a form of

inscription—the needle in the groove. A lot of the early Afro-American recordings were instrumentals. People gather together, have jam sessions, and try to work out a post-New Orleans aesthetic. When that migrated up to Chicago and New York, recording sessions became formalized. I'm in an industry that has also been part of a social culture. So I'm trying to get a whole century's worth of aesthetic development with sound and recorded media. When you apply the DuBois critique of African-American culture and duality to Gates, you're dealing with writing and text as well as oral versus fixed text. The record is a platform. I think of it as invisible or dematerialized sculpture because we're doing a collage of different time periods, different memories, and it's improvised. I call it “cybernetic jazz.”

Carol Becker and Romi Crawford

An Interview with Paul D. Miller a.k.a. DJ Spooky— That Subliminal Kid

1. The complete videotape of this interview is archived at the Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



DJ Spooky live in Paris, 1999.
Photo P. E. Rasotin/Warner
Classics.

Crawford: You invoked DuBois' theory of double consciousness. Part of what is so interesting about what you do as an artist is that you straddle two different art worlds and communities—hip-hop culture and mainstream—or if not mainstream, the more recognized working artists' domain. What is it like for you to be an artist who lives that aspect of double consciousness, with a place in the high and the low?

DJ Spooky: I don't really believe in the high/low distinction. I think it's usually an artificial construct, as with most things in our culture. America in the nineteenth century was looking for ways to define its identity against and absorb the aesthetics of European high culture. That is why there are all these federal buildings that look like old Greek temples. People thought Shakespeare was the higher version of what was going on in England, while he was actually writing mostly for the people and was considered more of a bard or folk musician. But when people need to define class issues, he's elevated in the hierarchy. Even opera used to be much more of a popular medium. As an African American, you know, I'm looking back at a history of erasure anyway, when people were displaced and taken across the Atlantic. Each culture deals with disruption and displacement, but from radically different perspectives. Whether you're looking at Michael Jordan all of a sudden being a multimillionaire or at the high-art-world scene, one is based on economics and the other is an artificial social hierarchy of tastes.

Michael Jordan versus some big art collector? Each one is considered a high person in his or her scene. To me the healthiest thing is not to give any social stratification the credence of permanence. It's all flux. Mid-America is the land of change. I don't even consider myself hip-hop. It's post-hip-hop or post-something. People need music to define their identities. Each generation has its own soundtrack and own way of engaging. I'm not really a conformist. Art for me can be sound, sculpture, painting, the databank, the archive. It doesn't have to be just painting or sculpture or hip-hop. It doesn't just have to be a beat or someone rapping about being or not being from the ghetto. I'm an artist who likes to play with things as free-floating signifiers.

Crawford: One of the paradigms you've added to the lexicon of African-American artistic tropes is the notion of the cut. Could you describe the cut and its relationship to formal art movements, collage, and pastiche?

DJ Spooky: The word cut makes me think about roads and highways cutting across the landscape. Flying over major urban areas you see the countryside, and then slowly it becomes more geometric, with roads carved into the land. By the time you get to Manhattan or another center, you see all these geometric stratifications, layers of cuts. The urban planner Robert Moses leveled much of the Bronx to build highway systems. He sliced through what were then different layers of class. Ghetto communities were much more affected by this road-building project than others were. That influenced how people viewed community, which affected hip-hop music. That's one kind of cut. Another kind of cut is the film cut. For the early filmmakers, such as Georges Méliès and the Lumière brothers, editing and being able to splice film was part of how to put scenes together. Related to this was the collage culture of Pablo Picasso and the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire, who were juxtaposing phrases and pulling random elements together to make language poems. Then there is jazz's layering and its radical juxtaposition of totally nonsequential riffs. Film cuts, literary cuts, sound cuts—each one reflected the culture itself.

In America, everybody had to collage together their identities—whites, blacks, and, after a certain point, Indians because they got moved around so much and their tribes were broken up. This is the land of the blank slate, so it's a cut-and-paste culture. Now you can jump from website to website, paste together essays and sound fragments—it's sampling. These issues have migrated almost fully intact to the digital age.

Crawford: Media culture, the digital age—how does this mixed-media approach facilitate the fragmentation that you're addressing, which is part of the contemporary experience of personal identity?

DJ Spooky: In her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* the sociologist Sherry Turkle documents studies on how watching TV and looking at information on computer screens affects children. One thing she noticed immediately is that people would come up with new pseudonyms and nicknames and create different methods of engaging with the information on the screen. I think that's fascinating because it gets at the mirroring or mimetic function between the screen and the self. I think fragmentation is a more wholesome viewpoint than that of Immanuel Kant and universal aesthetics, notions of totalized environments of the

European Enlightenment. Fragmentation is usually a means of absorbing a very dense narrative. People take slivers of things. Patois develops when one culture's language gets appropriated. English and German are built on fragmentations of many dialects. The Roman and Chinese empires systematized things but they weren't dealing with globalization. The twentieth century was the age of systems, developed to standardize and homogenize huge routes for moving people, goods, and information. We had access to new information paths—the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television. All these could convey not just goods and information but an entire psychological ambience.

Some people think fragmentation is unhealthy or it's schizophrenia or madness. In other cultures, shamans retain a sense of magic realism, speaking in tongues. I am a partisan trying to figure out how to make all these disparate elements reflect a pan-humanism. That's what deejaying is about to me. I can play the same records here that I can next week when I'm in Russia, Tokyo, or Brazil. People can deal with it. It is the Joseph Beuys notion of social sculpture. I think art in the near future will be much more about environments than just objects on the wall. Sound is a good way of figuring out these environments.

Crawford: You have an amazing ability to reference different realms of knowledge—psychology, history, American history, African-American studies, philosophy. What do you see as the distinction between information and knowledge?

DJ Spooky: Improvisation is where real knowledge comes into play because you generate new information. Knowledge is action. Information is more static.

Crawford: When you are on stage, there's a computer, a screen, a music soundtrack, and your spoken voice. All of these are at play. And you laugh a lot. How important is playfulness in your approach to art making?

DJ Spooky: The art object changes all the time for me. Being in the studio and making tracks is one art form. Another is deejaying live and finding different ways to engage the club environment. Sometimes I still make physical objects. I'll do a series of paintings, as in my CD with the little painting of interlocking rings. These are all examples of the critique of the multiple and how you can continuously make copies of things. I'm at a crossroads in my own art right now. Part of me wants to make films that people can connect with, and another part wants to deal with the Internet a lot more. For the moment, deejaying live is more fun. I think public performance should be a joy, life affirming. If you're rapper KRS-One, you want to be like, "I am the man." If you are Cornel West, you want that gravitas. I like to be a little lighter, create my own space, have a sense of humor, and keep things open. I try to invoke that with my art, although people feel I'm too theory oriented. You can be theory oriented and have a notion of praxis. I try to be what I call "actionary" rather than reactionary.

Crawford: Do you think it's important for artists to have a background in art history?

DJ Spooky: As someone who's very into history, I would say yes. Then again, many of the more interesting developments happen when people don't pay any attention to history. A lot of kids who have no knowledge of it are doing amazing graphic work. Instead of trying to study a painting by Caravaggio, they watch



DJ Spooky performing at the Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, June 2000. Photo Gabriel Price.

the Jetsons and put that on a train. That's wild. It gives you a whole other take on magic realism in our contemporary culture.

Crawford: You said that you have been criticized for basing your work in theoretical frameworks. Do you think there's any way for artists today to operate outside of a theoretical influence?

DJ Spooky: It relates to the previous question about knowledge of history. Theory is just one code. Everything is theory. If you were to sit down with the rappers Rakim or Dr. Dre or Eminem, they would tell you they have ideas about how life could be, should be, would be. Derrida, Michel Foucault, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston—they're gonna have ideas about life, too. It's a more expansive idea of what theory is.

Crawford: You just mentioned Eric B. & Rakim. What is your relationship to the old-school-music scene? How do you want to position yourself in relation to the founding fathers of hip-hop?

DJ Spooky: My absolute hero is Afrika Bambaataa. Without a doubt, he's the most future-oriented of them all. Grandmaster Flash, Kool Herc, Grand Wizard

Theodore—I think it must have been an amazingly strange time, dealing with these fragments of club culture and the changing landscape of New York in the seventies. I used to be a lot more into punk, early hip-hop, and dub reggae. I'm really into dub—King Tubby and The Scientist. The late sixties scene in Jamaica is a big influence. Bambaataa gave the notion of channeling the anger and bitterness of being outside the American mainstream into a constructive thing. Again, being actionary rather than reactionary.

Carol Becker: One of the things that young people ask me a lot, because they are bombarded with so much information, is how do you know what to know? It's a dilemma. So I ask you, how do you know what to know?

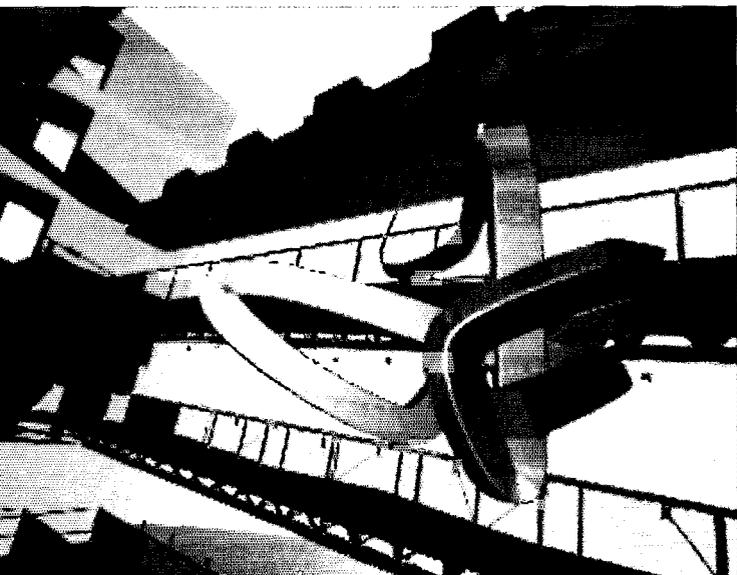
DJ Spooky: What works, as a writer, artist, and musician, is a triangulation among the three. I call it dialectical triangulation. If the crowd is not rocking to this one beat, you gotta get it out and get the next record in. If the essay is not able to contain or convey the information, then you gotta get it out of there . . .

Becker: So that means changing the form?

DJ Spooky: The content, the form, all are variables. There's nothing fixed. Everything is completely open to revision and change. It's more accepting of the flow of life as we live it. If I hate an essay, ten years later I might keep one version of it just to remember how I used to do it, but I'll change it. The same thing happens when they reissue the Beatles—they'll remaster or digitally edit it. In this culture, we have less and less veneration of primary sources as stable, static things—unless there's an aura of history. It's why the members of the Frankfurt School were up in arms—against Americana—they thought it would be a turbulent explosion of impermanence. European intellectuals thought American stuff was always about the next trend and the next and the next.

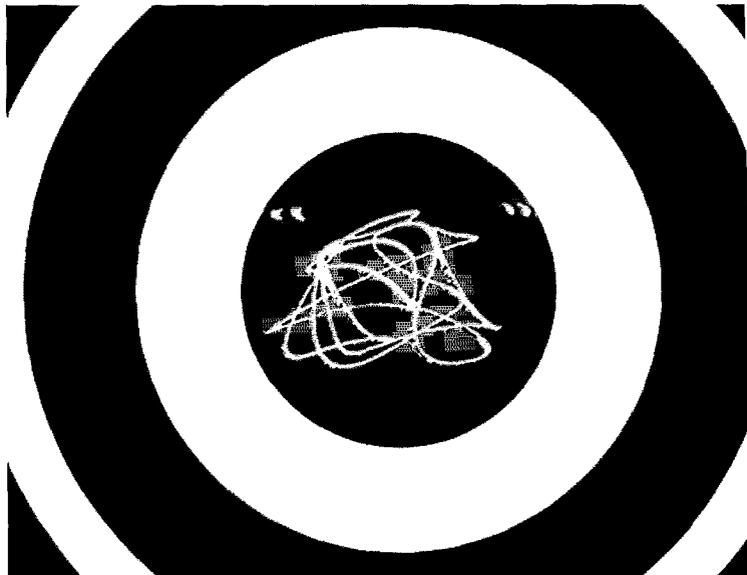
Becker: Being European, coming from a homogenous society, maybe it was hard for them to understand the fragmentation and the layering of culture over culture in a situation where there's no one culture. You talked about fragmentation. In traveling all over the world, moving nomadically through this globalization, you're embodying it in the way you're making your art and living your life. Do you think America is in the vanguard of this because of the complexity and fragmentation of this society?

DJ Spooky: Absolutely. America is the global operating system at this point. Everybody who can and would like to get away from the social stratification of their own culture, whether they're from Europe, India, South America, or Timbuktu, views America as the land where you can finally make your own thing happen. As an African-American, I'm an insider, but it's a paradox. Jamaican immigrants here have a very different experience than African Americans. When the rest of the world looks at America, for the most part what they see is black-American culture—jazz, blues, rock, hip-hop, fashion, sports, but not the fine arts. Norman Mailer's essay "The New White Negro" deals with the relationship between black and white Americans as one of intense psychological projections on both sides, where one lives through the eyes of the other. America has an unhealthy amnesia about its racial history. Everything is much more mixed than anyone wants to admit. Think, too, of the top British writers—some of them



DJ Spooky and Bernard Tschumi. *Anodyne*, 2001, Digital video still. Produced for the 49th Venice Biennale. Courtesy of the artist.

DJ Spooky. *Another Forensic Charade*, 2001. Digital image. Courtesy of the artist.



were Irish, others were French immigrants. The wordplay that comes with one culture's migration into another, when people play with another culture's language—like what Joyce would do with English, or black-American English and its wordplay—fascinates me. That's the double-coding and signifying that Gates discusses. One of the more paradoxical movements in American culture is this mirroring: white kids walking down the street with baseball caps and baggy pants, and this post-Eminem dialect.

Becker: What do you make of the fascination of white suburban culture with black culture?

DJ Spooky: It's a strange thing. Michael Taussig, the anthropologist who went to Central America to study patterns of fragmentation and violence in postcolonial societies, observed that once one culture moves in and has destroyed another culture, a ritualized violence occurs. Then the new culture appropriates the old one almost totemically. A culture in South America would kill off its Indians and then come to believe that Indians were the holy spirits of the land, so they would name towns after them. This happens here, too. The football team of the U.S. capital is the Redskins. My take on the suburban kids is that they view black culture as a never never land, like some sort of floating cyberspace where they can make up their own identity with the operating system of the other. I visited Celebration, the suburban Disney-planned town in Florida. When you watch a movie like *Pleasantville* or *The Truman Show*, you realize that was—and still is—the American dream for a certain segment of society. Then you find that all those kids want to listen to Dr. Dre. It's hard to absorb, but it makes sense. It's just the rebellion of each generation against its ancestors and parental forces. In his book *Flash of the Spirits*, Robert Farris Thompson describes the Afro-Caribbean diasporic art and the early Europeans there who felt that they had lost their whiteness. They said that they walked like Africans now. It's the gestural and psychological environments that people respond to naturally. Michael Jordan and Mohammed Ali were powerful centers of force to help people define their own identities. One society

colonizes and shatters another. It actually unfolds in the culture at large, like power dynamics in psychology.

Becker: It's so interesting that you call yourself a memory artist. It's a very significant role. Given that you're so political in your analysis, what do you feel is your responsibility as a memory artist in a society that doesn't want to have a memory?

DJ Spooky: I'm political in a certain sense, mainly around the notion of fighting stereotypes in patterns of thought. To me being political is mostly trying to create an environment for more progressive culture in general.

Becker: When I said political, I meant that it's difficult to talk without talking about society. You're in it. It's hard for you to act as if all the things you do are apart from history. You can't help but frame your work within a political context.

DJ Spooky: When you look at most other historical cultures, you find the bard, the griot, the troubador. He's always there to reflect the culture at large. In the griot tradition or in several Native American cultures, there was always some way of conveying history. In America, it's a paradox for me to exist. I really feel like I'm a member of the Fourth World at the edge of the intersection of the first three. Artists like Shirin Neshat, Mariko Mori, Shazhia Sikander, or Arthur Jafa, or the Sound Lab scene in New York are trying to reconfigure the stereotypes and archetypes that motivate what goes on in art. A lot of it is about film and psychology or history. For me it's just something to play with. But in order to play well, you have to know it.

Becker: You have said that you think the art world has been very reluctant and maybe irresponsible in not writing about or discussing hip-hop or post-hip-hop. Why do you think that is?

DJ Spooky: It's an issue of class and social stratification, as though to let that in would be the end of the world. I'm sure one day there'll be an equivalent of an Eminem who can translate it for them. They'll let that in and celebrate it. Graffiti had been staring people in the face for years. It only became trendy for a microsecond in the gallery scene. Jean-Michel Basquiat was the most that they could deal with. The graffiti artists and performers Rammellzee and Phase Two didn't get to the same zone as Basquiat. He really hit the core. But he was viewed as the shaman figure for that generation, the Jimi Hendrix of the art world. In hip-hop, people are building their own narrative structure. They don't really care to engage the conventional art world. Left to its own devices it will stick to a relatively narrow orbit and keep spinning. My own struggles as an artist dealing with the conventional art world have centered around these issues. It hasn't been about the notion of class and social structure. It's been more about what people view as valid—painting on the wall, sculpture. Even after twenty years of conceptual art, they still find it difficult to think of a mixed tape playing in an empty room as a piece of work.

Becker: Given my own interest in young artists, I'm always wondering how to create an environment that is encouraging to big spirits who want to break through all those boundaries. I'm always thinking about what young artists need to know. What do you feel they do need to know?



DJ Spooky performing at the Sonar Festival, Barcelona, 1999. Copyright 1999 Eva Marie Pinon.

DJ Spooky: Young artists need to know how things work. If you were a painter in the Renaissance and didn't know the egg yolk versus the egg white, or how to mix your oils . . . It's the same thing today: if you don't know how to use software or turntables or video equipment, you won't have the same ease that you could. More than the history, facility is important—being able to really engage the medium and noodle around. That's where art will come from.

Becker: What about intellectually?

DJ Spooky: Intellectually, the thing is to be open. The more closed you are, the worse it is. That's when you get a bad breeding pool of ideas. If one society interbreeds over and over, you get declining intelligence, bad immune systems [laughs]. Incest does not necessarily breed geniuses. It's the same with ideas. Fresh infusions, being open. That makes for a healthier situation.

Carol Becker is the dean of faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is the author of several books including *Zones of Contention; Essays on Art, Institutions, Gender, Anxiety* (State University of New York Press, 1996) and the recently published *Surpassing the Spectacle: Global Transformations and The Changing Politics of Art* (Roman and Littlefield, 2002)

Romi Crawford is the director of the visiting artists program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a scholar, curator, and educator whose work revolves around the topics of race and its relation to American visual and artistic culture.

Paul D. Miller is a multimedia sound artist based in New York City.

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