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Fine Art

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What value does changing the progression of time hold in a contemporary art context?

Christian Marclay: Insanity or Brilliance

Time, as defined by the Oxford Dictionary is “the indefinite continued progress of existence and events in the past, present, and future regarded as a whole.” Although the absolute rate at which time passes is constant, it appears to speed up during good times, while slowing down or nearly freezing during the dull ones. Time tells us when to wake up in the mornings, when to have our meals, and when we need to catch the next train. Conveying time in cinema is a rushed, condensed, and often an exaggerated form of the rate at which reality happens. The significance of time and movement in conveying a story has evolved throughout cinematographic history. Time is traditionally shown as a progression of events. An average film has a running time of one and a half to two hours; therefore, only key scenes demonstrating plot and character development are used in creating the progression of time. There is no room for excess. Contemporary art has challenged the rational allocation of time and purpose of conventional plot, resulting in the disconnection of time, plot, and setting. “The work of contemporary artists is a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that challenges traditional boundaries and defies easy definition” (Art 21, 2015). For instance, Christian Marclay's film installation *The Clock* exemplifies the qualities of success in the “rethinking of the familiar.” This monumental 24-hour film has earned him high praise and critical acclaim largely due to his willingness to break the traditional rules of the progression of time in film in order to create an individualized viewing experience that is on the brink of insanity and brilliance.

Christian Marclay is a Swiss-American artist who was born in California on January 11, 1955. From an early age he became intrigued by music and the emotional reactions evoked from individuals. However, he later studied visual arts at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston. It was in his young adult years in which Marclay began dabbling in a

completely different genre, performance art. He began expanding his love of collages, by experimenting with musical filmmaking. As that passion began to grow, he started to combine music and moving images, creating an entirely different kind of collage. He famously stated that “for every technology of reproduction, there are matching techniques for its deconstruction or reinvention” (*Christian Marclay*, p.66, 2005). With this in mind, he began cropping and editing scenes from TV shows, news reports, and films and adding sound effects and music to create a video collage. He began defamiliarizing the familiar.

Though Marclay has ventured into various realms of styles, he has become known for his visual and sound collages, including *Telephones* (1995) and four-screen *Video Quartet* (2002). Arguably his most successful and well-known piece, however, would have to be his



Christian Marclay, *The Clock*, 2010

Courtesy White Cube, London and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

film *The Clock* (2010), for which he won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Biennale. This monumental 24-hour video montage is comprised of thousands of clips from over a hundred years of cinematic history. It is a fully functioning synchronized clock, which means that if the time shown on screen is 12:07, then in reality it is also 12:07.

Unlike traditional films, the only representation of time in Marclay's work is a clock. This single linking device creates continuity with time rather than with plot or characters. For instance, the early morning scenes are comprised of individuals being woken up by the ringing of an alarm clock, or in the case of recent footage, a cell phone. In a way, watching *The Clock* is like receiving an individualized “tour through film history” (Fear, 2012). The

types of clocks seen throughout the installation vary from simple wall clocks, to pocket watches, alarm clocks, plain wrist watches, and even the famous clock on Big Ben. The piece as a whole succeeds in connecting scenes from venues such as houses, hospitals, banks, shopping centers, and police stations. It holds tension, love, loss, anxiety, anger, frustration, happiness, and more. The clashing nature of black and white film with the bright colors and outfits of the 80s exemplifies its intriguing qualities.

It took Christian Marclay two years to create this masterpiece. He had a team of six assistants helping him find scenes to include in the montage. Although he had help during the selection process, he alone was in charge of the editing.

He had complete creative control, which allowed him to create magnificent transitions between scenes. Since his piece was premiered at the White Cube gallery in London, set-up and presentation became equally as important as the film itself. The gallery space was set up like a large, comfortable living room with multiple sofas and a large screen with surround sound.

Marclay wanted the environment to resemble that of a drive-in theater, since the audiences would come and go as they pleased.

Possibly the biggest reason Marclay's *The Clock* was so successful because it allowed an individualized interpretation. Upon stepping foot in the space, the audience is initially faced with a playful guessing game involving which scenes are taken from which films or programs. Each audience member recognizes various actors and actresses from past and current times. While the crowd clearly enjoys the guessing game, the encounter of this anachronism urges the audience to look at a phone or watch that is not part of the film.



Christian Marclay, *The Clock*, 2010

Photo: Ben Westoby. Courtesy White Cube

Checking that the time in the film is in fact synchronized, becomes a side effect of Marclay's work. At the same time, the piece can also have a quiet and hypnotizing quality to it. The viewer's internal struggle of whether or not they have seen enough is a constant reminder of the work's brilliance. The audience wants to see as much of the 24-hour monster of a film, because the direction of the film remains unknown. After a while, however, time seems to become a "series of numbers which order[s] the mosaic of moods and moments" (Bradshaw, 2011).

Apart from the various tributes to other films, *The Clock* brings further viewing challenges. It does not have a pre-disposed storyline; on the contrary, there is no plot, and there is no beginning, middle, or end. This allows the viewer to have creative control. The work becomes disconnected from time and transforms into a memory of the past which holds a new, avant-garde, existential meaning for whomever embraces it. For some it might be a reminder of the "good old days" and how our lives have ceased to become busier and more complicated. Therefore, "part of what makes it work is the fact that viewers are forced to choose: your life schedule versus the screen's schedule" (Fear, 2012). While this could prove a success, it also opens the doors to the work's failure. The viewers could completely miss the value their own opinions hold in the matter of the installation, or dislike the overall hectic appearance of the piece, which consequently would make the work lose much of its purpose. The work's success inevitably rises and falls with the corresponding reaction of each member of the audience. The installation and Marclay's reputation, therefore, are in the hands of the viewers, who face the continuous psychological battle.

As *The Clock* is a 24-hour long film, it is close to impossible to watch it in a single viewing. It creates a clear juxtaposition between our lives and the screen's life. It is close to impossible to stay awake for 24 hours straight, as it is to watch this film for its entire

duration. Marclay's decision to have the installation take an entire day reflects human tendencies. We can focus for short periods of time on a certain task, but rarely for a long period of time. This also applies to his work. He is aware of the fact that there will only be a handful of people willing and capable of sitting through a 24-hour film. Therefore, I believe it makes perfect sense to have audiences come and go as they please, in representation of individual tendencies of zoning in and out of a conscious mindset. In this case, the audience members become part of the artwork itself.

Christian Marclay's ingenious day-long installation represents much more than a collage comprised of thousands of film clips from history. It is a glorious, shining beacon that holds an individual significance to the members of its audience. It fully encompasses Marclay's never-ending fascination of lone-standing objects and moments. Through the process, he learned the magic and intricacy involved in filmmaking and brilliantly stated at the premier for *The Clock* that "...when you take something apart, you get a great sense of what it took to originally put it together." Marclay has set the standard high for success in the contemporary art market of today. He defamiliarized our familiar perception of time by creating a work so obscure and incoherent, yet adhering to realistic progression of time that it grazes the border of apprehension and comfort.

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Christian, M. (2010) *The Clock*. the artist. Photo: Ben Westoby. Courtesy of White Cube.

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