

# Meditations on Christian Marclay's "The Clock"

by Ben Davis

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From what I was able to see, Christian Marclay's "The Clock" installation at Paula Cooper gallery was amazing. The line was really long, which must mean that all those people idling inside were rapt.

OK, so I did not actually get in to see "The Clock" (it closes this weekend). I didn't see it, so I can't really say anything about the experience. Then again, I'll also confess that even before going, I had already pre-planned the first line of my review. It was going to be something like, "I'm going to do something that an art critic should never do, which is to review something that I didn't fully see." And then I was going to confess, solemnly, "I did not make it all the way through Christian Marclay's '24-Hour Clock.'"

This is to say that "The Clock" is one of those artworks that is bigger than the actual experience of it; an artwork — like [Andy Warhol's "Empire"](#) or Douglas Gordon's "24-Hour Psycho" — that is simultaneously about the specifics of an immersive experience and also can be summed up in a single sentence. I'll even take a wild guess and say that Christian Marclay himself has not seen all of "The Clock," at least not all in one sitting. Which is not a criticism, because the film is by all accounts an amazing, larger-than-life feat, stitching together clips of people looking at clocks from thousands of movies, with the minute depicted onscreen synced up to coincide with the minute in real time, as you are watching it.

The experience is mesmerizing — or so I've heard. I tried to find some footage of it online, just to get a little taste, and all I could find was a [three-minute clip from the BBC](#) that was aired during the installation's appearance at White Cube in London. The clip at least gives you a sense of what the installation feels like (as well as a glimpse of the vaguely stoned look it elicits from spectators).

So, I missed my chance to see "The Clock." Is there anything to say about it still? By now, almost as much has been written about the piece's immense popularity as there has been about the work itself (see Randy Kennedy's "[Flock Around the 'Clock'](#)" from the Times). So, why is this project so popular? I have a couple of theories, completely uninformed by an actual experience of the film.

One is that Marclay's "Clock" is the definition of a crowd-pleaser: It doesn't need any explanation at all to tell you what is going on. It's not some abstruse conceptual statement. Nor is it a painting, which requires a bit more of a specialized type of appreciation. At its heart, "The Clock" is a bravura display of a form of creativity that contemporary, plugged-in people get: searching, sifting, cutting-and-pasting. Most people spend their days sorting through endless amounts of data, more data than we can ever possibly absorb, looking for something worthwhile.

Additionally, the work is probably popular because it is composed of clips from popular films. Marclay — who has a background as a DJ — knows the visceral pleasure of dropping a familiar riff. On his visit to Paula Cooper, Randy Kennedy described how even the gallery security guard couldn't help but respond to the piece, exclaiming "Vanessa Williams!" in recognition as a clip from "Eraser" flicked onscreen. There is a real, visceral pleasure associated with anything that gives you

something to do with all the useless accumulated cultural trivia that you have absorbed. (Remember "Eraser"?)

But, in the end, I have to think that there has to be something more than just these two things going on. Marclay is an artist who is prone sometimes to make one-liner art — for instance, his sculpture that takes the form of a really long accordion (as a commentary on the instrument's range), or his collages made of record album covers stitched together. These feel like shtick, not too much more than likable riffs on familiar things. Furthermore, the kind of work he's doing in "The Clock" is not a new mode for him — "[Telephones](#)" (1995), for instance, is a very similar work that stitches together seven minutes worth of movie clips featuring ringing phones. It's cool, but it's not transcendent. Particularly today, it feels like an overgrown YouTube video (YouTube artiste Rich Juzwiak has an ongoing [series of videos](#) aggregating all the times that people say "I'm not here to make friends" in reality shows. It's awesome.)

Consequently, my feeling is that there has to be something more that makes people as passionate about "The Clock" as they apparently are. And this probably comes back to the fact that it is an artwork about time. More and more, people are over-stimulated, overfed on information, constantly jumping on to the next thing, and therefore trapped in a universe of racing thoughts and molecular instants where nothing seems to connect to anything else. "The Clock" is like homeopathic therapy for data hysteria, sublating it, to use a big word, meaning incorporating and canceling. The video embraces the reality of the vast, incoherent wilderness of information we live in, but then firmly places the viewer back down into the basic human reality of a present that connects to another present and then to another, in some kind of holistic order.

That's my best guess about the phenomenon. Maybe I'll never know. But it's an educated guess, nevertheless: The way they work us around here, I was too busy to wait through that line to experience "The Clock" myself. I had to rush back to the office, and on to other things. I bet a lot of people have the same experience, and that the excuse to sit down and just experience time as it is happening is a wonderful thing. Enjoy the long weekend.

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