

Flock Around 'The Clock'



Benjamin Norman for The New York Times

'The Clock,' a video work by Christian Marclay, uses thousands of film and television clips of timepieces to create, minute by minute, a 24-hour montage that unfolds in real time.

By RANDY KENNEDY
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Even when they involve 14-foot tiger sharks preserved in formaldehyde or pictures of Jeff Koons in flagrante delicto, commercial art gallery exhibitions in New York don't often draw capacity crowds. And they almost never move people to line up along the postindustrial streets of Chelsea on weekday winter mornings as if a sample sale were under way.

But at 9:30 Wednesday morning, with the cold wind raising tears in their eyes, Nick and Elspeth Macdonald from Park Slope, Brooklyn, huddled dutifully in front of the Paula Cooper Gallery along with 20 other people. They were all waiting to get inside to spend a little time with 'The Clock,' the widely praised 24-hour film by Christian Marclay that weaves together thousands of snippets from throughout the history of the movies (and, to a lesser extent, television), each clip marking the precise minute, or sometimes the second — with a glimpse of a clock or a watch or a snatch of time-related dialogue — in which the viewers are experiencing it in real time.

Over the last three and a half weeks the exhibition has built itself into an unlikely kind of rock-concert phenomenon, with crowds lined up on West 21st Street as late at 2 a.m. on Saturdays, when the gallery remains open overnight to show the film in its entirety, in a makeshift theater space that seats about 80 people. And as the exhibition approaches its final weekend (it closes on Saturday), the crowds have continued to build. By the gallery's rough count, more than 780 people passed through on Tuesday alone — some spending only a few minutes, some spending hours — and almost 7,000 people have watched the piece since gallery workers began

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Some attendees watching 'The Clock' at the Paula Cooper Gallery's theater

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Visitors waiting to see "The Clock" at the Paula Cooper Gallery's theater.

to keep track on Feb. 4.

"We decided not to limit the amount of time people can spend in there because the piece is about time, after all, about duration," said Anthony Allen, the associate director at Paula Cooper, who was helping to manage the line that had begun to build inside the gallery not long after the doors opened and the theater reached capacity. (This happened, to be movie-precise, at 10:43 a.m., just as [Humphrey Bogart](#) was waking up a druggie Gloria

Grahame in a scene from "In a Lonely Place" and not long after a crisply black-and-white [Richard Burton](#) glanced up in "The Spy Who Came In From the Cold" at a clock that appears in another movie.)

For Mr. Macdonald, a filmmaker and writer, as for many other fans of the piece, the exhibition has given rise to a contemporary-art version of the cultlike repeat turnouts for "Star Wars" in 1977. Though he described himself as not much of a Chelsea habitué, Mr. Macdonald said he was returning Wednesday morning to see "The Clock" for the fourth time, after having waited for an hour and a half in the cold to get in last weekend. That Saturday he finally made it inside at 11:30 p.m. and spent two hours watching the parade of cinematic watches — Timexes, Swiss Armies, Benruses, Patek Philippes — ticking away the minutes.

"When I finally decided I had to go home and left at about 1:30 in the morning," Mr. Macdonald said, "there was still a line of people waiting outside to get in. It's really hard to explain the attraction to people who haven't seen it. It's hypnotic. It's hard to leave."

Mary Ellen Whelehan, a former bank officer, was returning on Wednesday morning for a second viewing, in her motorized wheelchair, and said that she could recall seeing only one or two Chelsea exhibitions before. "It takes me two buses to get here," she said, waiting in line inside the gallery. "So if I'm coming back it has to be good."

Even the gallery staff sometimes finds that the piece makes it difficult to get work done. Emmanuel Annan, a security guard who was in charge of maintaining the line and getting people seated on Wednesday, was trying to station himself whenever he could in the curtained vestibule just outside the theater, so he could watch the movie and the crowd at the same time.

"Vanessa Williams!" exclaimed Mr. Annan, as the actress, [in the thriller "Eraser."](#) glanced tensely at a clock, marking off 10:25 in both reel time and real time.

Mr. Allen said that the gallery added an extra 24-hour showing last Saturday night into Sunday to try to accommodate the crowds. On weekend nights, he said, the line tends to build before midnight because people want to pass the witching hour inside, watching a particularly dramatic sequence of clips that build until the clocks and watches tick 12. "Then the people who have waited that long that late at night tend not to want to leave for a while, and so the line kind of freezes for the next hour or two."

He added: "I've been in there sitting next to people sometimes and they just start giggling because they can't believe it's actually happening, that it's real. And almost invariably people keep looking at their watches and their cellphone clocks to see if the movie is actually showing the time at the right time, and it always is."

Mr. Macdonald said that when he waited — and froze — to get in last Saturday, he had hoped that perhaps he would finally get to see the credits of the movie made from movies.

"I kind of thought, if there are going to be credits, they're probably going to be at midnight, right?" he said. "But nope. It just kept on going, like time itself."

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