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# ART BEAST

## Christian Marclay: One of Today's 10 Most Important Artists

by *Blake Gopnik*



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**Newsweek critic Blake Gopnik chooses the creators who could next Leonardo, Rembrandt, or Picasso—including Christian Marclay whose fascinating recent montage stopped New Yorkers in their tracks. Watch videos of his work.**

In January, something unheard of happened in New York. A commercial show of substantial contemporary art—of video art, no less—became a popular sensation. People lined up for hours in the bitter cold to take in a new work called *The Clock* by the Swiss-American artist Christian Marclay.

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The piece was nothing more than a 24-hour montage of film clips about time keeping, but it delved deep into how culture—the culture of movies, in this case—track the unfolding of things. “You always think that artists are above pop culture, no, that’s where we live,” says Marclay, breakfasting at Balthazar cafe in New York City. “Entertainment is a dirty word in the art world.” But by pulling Hollywood at the seams—he was one of the first artists to make work by sampling old movies—Marclay is revealing the artful way it has always been knit together.



Courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

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Marclay is 56, tall and thin with close-cropped hair that's beginning to gray. He moved from New York to London a few years ago but is back in town to catch

friends and some shows. "At the heart of it, everybody is touched by art," says Marclay. When they're looking at pop culture, however, "they may not know it's art they're seeing."

I balked at first at how *The Clock* had such immediate appeal, because what's easy and instant sometimes lacks depth and staying power. But Marclay's likable piece seems profound, thanks to its immaculate crafting and its fiendish, subtle complexity. After years of work with a team of assistants, Marclay got his thousands of clock shots to synchronize with the actual time in the place where they're being seen. The work's soundtrack, taken from the same films as its images, is equally miraculous, in such constant contrapuntal play with its visuals that Bach would have been proud. (On Saturday, *The Clock* won him the prestigious Golden Lion prize at the Venice Biennale. In 2002, Marclay made a four-screen projection called *Video Quartet* that was a wild riff on Hollywood sound. It may turn out to be even greater than his *Clock*.)

Yet there are also Marclays that are absolutely simple. For a video called *Guitar Drag*, he mounted amplifiers and speakers in the back of a pickup, plugged in a Fender Stratocaster, then dragged the poor instrument along country roads. As the video progresses, what begin as power chords become a barely audible rumble, released by a guitar that's now kindling. The piece was taped in Texas, where two years earlier three white men had similarly dragged a black man, James Byrd Jr., to his death.

Marclay's range is impressive. He's a legend in the DJ world, where he's credited as one of the inventors of "turntablism," the art of using spinning records as noise-and-rhythm machines. And he is the artist who, more than anyone, brought sound into the hallowed halls of fine art. Last summer, when the Whitney Museum hosted a Marclay retrospective, you never knew whether you'd encounter a singer improvising

from a Marclay "score" (nothing more than a compendium of sound effects transcribed from comic books) or a musician playing Marclay's *Wind Up Guitar*, a hybrid of plucked strings and music boxes.

Marclay says his career began in the late 1970s when, as an art student newly arrived from Switzerland, he hung around the New York's alternative scene. He says that the groundbreaking bands he saw prompted a question: "Why wasn't music considered art?" Marclay, a visual artist who can't read or play a note, set about making sure it would be.

As Marclay heads from the café, I ask a final question: What show was he heading to see? MoMA's "Picasso and his art of guitars," answers Marclay.

There's no art so current it doesn't have roots.

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*Blake Gopnik writes about art and design for Newsweek and The Daily Beast. He previously spent a decade as chief art critic of the Washington Post and before that was an arts editor and critic in Canada. He has a doctorate in art history from Oxford University, and has written on aesthetic topics ranging from Facebook to gastronomy.*

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