

REVIEWS



CINEMATIC TIME REPLAYED

On two exhibitions: Hubbard and Birchler's *Méliès* at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery and Christian Marclay's *The Clock* at Paula Cooper Gallery

The invention of regulated, global time happened concurrently with the invention of cinema in the late 19th century as time zones were developed in response to the need to sync up both railroad schedules and telegraph transmissions across distances. These three new technologies – railroad, the telegraph, and cinema – were primary engines of modernity, and they significantly altered our sense of space and place as well as time. Initially hailed as a way to capture time, cinema continues to function as a time machine, delivering the past to the present or, as the case may be, insisting upon its existence in the now. Cinematic time, with its incorporation of narrative, image and sound, has developed its own logic, one that is much more fluid than the rational time demanded by its industrial roots. New technologies and yet another new century have pushed this envelope further. This past January, two shows that revisit histories of cinema and reinvigorate our experience of cinema's inherent relationship to time were enjoyed by New Yorkers. Theresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's installation *Méliès* (2011) and accompanying feature-length video *Grand Paris Texas* (2009) unfolded across the street from Christian Marclay's epic, 24-hour film installation *The Clock* (2010).

The slow extinction of analog film and photography has inspired many artists to take up the task of eulogizing cinema. Although there is no going back to obsolescent material processes of filmmaking, cinema clearly continues to have a life through cultural memory. Hubbard and Birchler mine this territory in two video pieces that explore cinema's relationship to landscape and social space. Cinema here is explored as a relic of the past that is also connected to the present, as it lives on in the experiences, environments and memories of people occupying landscapes marked by filmmaking.

In *Méliès*, a two-screen installation, a site in West Texas known as Movie Mountain is revealed to be the site of a silent film made 100 years ago through contemporary interviews with people who live nearby. The story is vague, however, as uncertain fragments are patched together from stories relayed by relatives

ABOVE Theresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler, *Méliès* (2011), FRAME ENLARGMENTS, Courtesy of the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



from previous generations. Maybe it was a Western; maybe the crew came on a train that no longer stops in the town; maybe filmmaker Georges Méliès' less famous brother made the film as he was on his way to Hollywood. No one can be sure, but meanwhile, through vintage-sounding, melancholic music and an array of gorgeous and iconic images – shots of the rugged western landscape backlit by the sunset; a woman in a cowboy hat on horseback; guns on a wall and the lined faces of the interviewees – the viewer is transported into the liminal world between a cinematic fiction and the temporal present. The western images in *Méliès* are so seductively cinematic that they tease us with their promise of a narrative arc or closure. While the incessant vintage piano music and the lyrical vocal reminiscences create a sense of continuity in the

TOP Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler, *Grand Paris Texas* (2009), FRAME ENLARGMENTS.

BOTTOM Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler, *Méliès* (2011), INSTALLATION VIEW.

Courtesy of the artists and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

montage of iconic images, the way that the piece plays out across two projections, one on the wall and the other on a screen hovering several inches more forward, assure us that this fiction is not seamless.

The work begins and ends with an image of a man with a microphone framed by the landscape. Audible testimony of the interviewees is held in contrast to the elusive history of the silent film allegedly made there. What is discernable, however, is the 'trace', and Hubbard and Birchler have organized their experimental narrative around it. The trace, as Yates McKee describes it in an essay on land art by the artist pair Allora and Calzadilla, is "at once a poetic trope and a set of material operations [that] links presence and absence, inscription and erasure, preservation and destruction and appearance and disappearance..." The man with the microphone appears again in an accompanying framed photograph, underscoring the significance of his efforts at inscription.

Grand Paris Texas, a feature-length, single-channel piece, unearths the history of the Grand Theater in the town of Paris, Texas, as it also explores the town's relationship to the film *Paris, Texas* (1984, which wasn't actually shot there). *Paris, Texas*, the film, is described by the small town's film critic as "a puzzlement" and "about estrangement," and references to its slow-moving narrative about a man trying to have a second chance in life mirror the decline of the Grand Theater. Histories are told through interviews with the film critic and a host of other locals whose lives have somehow been touched by this film having almost been made there, such as a Depression-era candy sales girl, a man who was cast in the film as the son when he was nine, and a funeral director who believes that "directing a funeral is like directing a film." Woven throughout are sad, but beautifully shot images of a once-grand but now decaying theater that include glimpses of the camera operators and other crew.

Although at its conclusion a teenager who finally watches a rented VHS copy of *Paris, Texas* misses the end of the story when she discovers that it had been taped over with a silent film Western, we understand that erasure and displacement are integral to the way stories from the past speak to us. Both *Méliès* and *Grand Paris Texas* ultimately reveal that cinema's cultural narratives live on through slippages between film fantasy and everyday life inscribed in the social landscape.

The more spectacular exhibition, Christian Marclay's *The Clock*, is an epic remix of thousands of film clips drawn from all corners of the world of 20th

century cinema. Like Hubbard and Birchler, Marclay reminds us of a cinematic past while even more paradoxically enforcing its existence in the present. Each selected clip makes explicit the marking and passing of time in some way – with a clock, a watch, or some other overt symbolic reference. Representations of time in each clip is synched up to the current time at the place of exhibition and the piece literally lasts 24 hours. Clips feature wall clocks, analog and digital watches, grandfather clocks, cuckoo clocks, clocks in train stations and on bedside tables. Actors are getting in and out of bed, leaving for dinner, making a deadline, waiting for someone to come home or come out of the house, sitting through a meeting, sitting in a car in a traffic jam in the rain, playing chess, planning a caper and dropping off film to be developed. The setting is noir; it is mod; it is military; gangster; school; a boardroom; a bedroom; an airport. The clips are in several languages or even silent. Familiar narrative fragments drawn from sources popular, iconic and obscure have a slightly shifted focus, and we are pressed to pay special attention to the fact that time is passing, whether urgently or anxiously, with boredom, anticipation or melancholy – rarely with apathy.

At first the idea of *The Clock* seems formulaic – as if Marclay is simply executing an algorithm by assembling film clips into a literal clock – but it quickly becomes apparent through experiencing it that the playful, clever and well-executed editing does something more than what we initially expect. An experience of sheer awe is commanded outright when contemplating what must have gone into the production of such an ambitious undertaking – researching, sampling, editing (in fact, according to the BBC, Marclay developed calluses on his fingertips during the editing process). We can also acknowledge the piece as a potent reminder of the inherent appeal of the movies in general as both an entertainment medium and as a shared cultural heritage. But beyond these initial experiences, we find a kaleidoscopic rendering of time as seen through many lenses that confounds the viewer while it also lays bare the mechanisms by which time in film is constructed.

Marclay, known as a pioneer in turntablism as well as a musician and an accomplished visual artist, here applies the logic of sampling and remixing to the found material of the movies. In remixing film, he has taken cues from the classic cinematic editing toolbox, using to maximal effect combinations of the close-up, slow pans and tricks of continuity editing, such as carrying diegetic sound from one film into another, following an exit from one film with an entrance in

another or even carrying on a kind of conversation between characters from different films. In one notable example, Karl Malden calls out “Baby Doll!” and then Marclay cuts to Vincent Price sitting on a bench (is it from *The Fly*?) creating the appearance that Price is listening to and awaiting Malden. The sounds of ticking and tocking and a careful remixing of sound/image relationships set up a keen rhythm that carries the narrative forward, over the gaps left on the editing room floor (so to speak). Marclay’s editing also sets up a compare and contrast structure, as a dizzying array of film genres, settings and shots are paraded before our well-versed eyes. A kind of identify-that-film game emerges that prompted me to mentally reach for my Netflix queue. Through this kaleidoscope of time, the viewer is lost in cinematic reverie, but simultaneously snapped into the present as persistent images of clocks, etc. won’t let us escape our own relentless present. As cinematic time speeds up, slows down, overlaps, jumps and generally creates a psychological space of urgency, *The Clock* insists on the persistence of “real time” spectatorship and presence.

While Hubbard and Birchler’s *Méliès* is organized around the trace, *The Clock* is organized around the cut. During a recent talk at a conference on Media Archeology, Mary Ann Doane reminded the audience that “temporality is produced by the cut,” that ellipsis – the omission of unnecessary action – allows for some of the narrative to happen off screen, in “its own time,” and that film is ultimately “structured by the gap.” *The Clock*, made of thousands of cuts is much more ellipsis than narrative. Whole films come careening back to the viewer only if back-stories are filled in with recollections from earlier viewings or imagined through extrapolation. In a back and forth play of accumulation and omission, it is *The Clock*’s tricky juggling of absent narrative and strict adherence to local time that realigns the viewer’s attention to its proper place in the present moment.

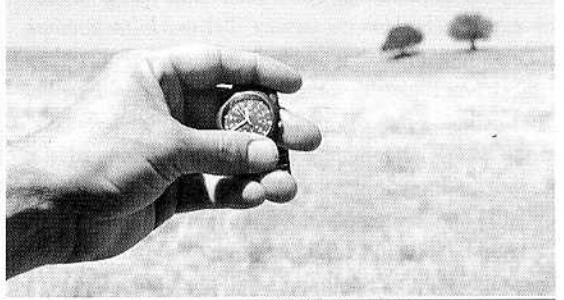
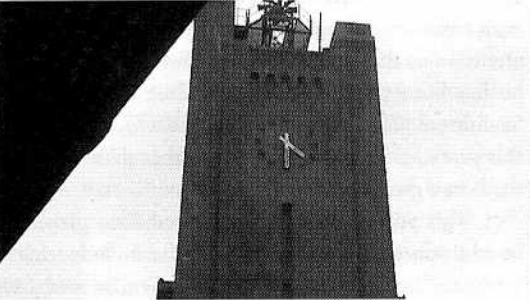
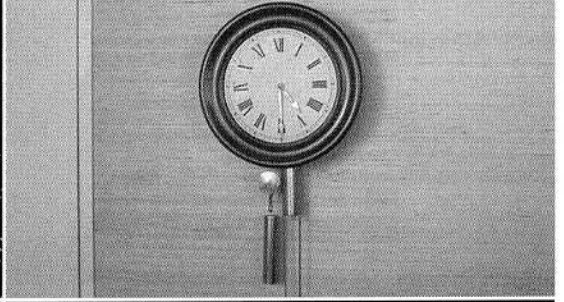
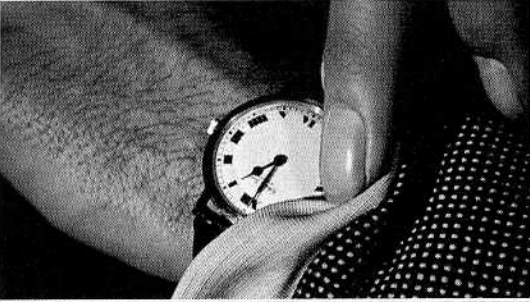
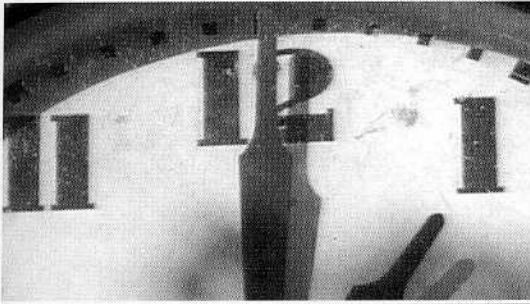
In addition to reconfiguring our experience of cinematic time, *The Clock* also does something very retro – it brings back the theater as the site of collective viewing and cinema as collective experience. In New York the space was organized as a traditional theater, with comfortable couches facing the screen and walls lined with theater curtains. Real time was truly experienced by those waiting in the long lines to get in as spectators already inside comfortably took their time watching the show. On Friday nights Paula

Cooper Gallery stayed open 24 hours, offering the experience of seeing the entire length of *The Clock*, and many spectators were present in the wee hours. With the full 24-hour viewing, *The Clock* is ultimately a loop, one of cinema’s most innovative forms and one of the computer’s most basic. Godard has famously said that in cinema reality happens 24 times a second. In *The Clock*, the present moment happens 24 hours a day.

Though in some ways cinema is due for its eulogy, new technologies (i.e. digitized, networked media and computer enabled nonlinear editing) enable us to breathe life into the archive of cinema by parsing it in new ways. Perhaps *The Clock* is yet another new form of montage that, like Vertov’s *Man With a Movie Camera*, signals a shift in the way that moving image media conveys culture. Or perhaps *The Clock* only narrowly escapes reducing cinema to the algorithmic as each clip is understood as a unit of data. Despite a barrage of ever developing new technologies that render ever more nostalgic perspectives on cinema per se, the terrain of the art world is all-the-richer for this recent work exploring cinema’s new status. While Marclay’s investigations of time are rendered as a fantastical intertextual and algorithmic montage that turns the archive of cinema into a philosophical, temporal kaleidoscope, Hubbard and Birchler consider the memory and experience of cinema as something embedded in space and place that while rooted in the past is continually realized in the present. Both celebrate a collective experience of a shared cinema heritage that endures. According to Foucault, history and therefore the archive, is always constructed and experienced in the present. According to the two installations discussed here, so too is cinema.

RACHEL STEVENS

An earlier version of the review of work by Hubbard and Birchler appeared in the contemporary art e-journal ...*mightbegood* and can be found here: <http://www.fluentcollab.org/mbg/index.php/reviews/review/162/315>.



Christian Marclay, *The Clock* (2010),
Single channel video, Duration: 24
hours, © the artist, Photo: Todd-White
Art Photography, Courtesy White Cube,
London and Paula Cooper Gallery, New
York. Portrait: Dr. J Caldwell.



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