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Art In Conversation

## Christian Marclay with Charlotte Kent

**“I often think of a new work while I’m in the process of making another work. When you’re so involved in the making of something, it somehow frees your mind and allows other ideas to surface.”**

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Portrait of Christian Marclay, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

On View

### Centre Pompidou

*Christian Marclay*

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Paris

On the occasion of Christian Marclay’s exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, the artist sat down with Charlotte Kent for a wide ranging conversation on the various entry points to his work. In the edited version below, they discuss Marclay’s long-standing fascination with doors and transitions—obscure, improvised, and ongoing. From his interest in music and performance scores, his life in the East Village and global inspirations, to the collages produced during the COVID lockdown and emergent social technologies adopted critically, Marclay transforms the media and mediations of our lives for a more creative encounter. What we see reflects how we move to the tones and tunes of our times.

**Charlotte Kent (Rail):** The Centre Pompidou survey exhibition includes a new work, *Doors* (2022). It’s a collage of film excerpts showing doors opening and closing. Its fluid motion is astonishing, since doors can be quite jarring. I highlighted an arc of doors in your work. Most recently, “The Electric Chair” series from 2006, which were silkscreen prints on canvas, opaque images of a door and a “Silence” sign. And then the exhibition catalog introduced me to your 1988 work *Door* with f-holes carved into them. What’s with doors?

**Christian Marclay:** You forgot some. The last shot, the last sound you hear in *Video Quartet* (2002) is a door slamming shut. The first image you see on *Manga Scroll* (2010), which is a 20-meter-long scroll, is of a hand opening a door. I think doors are interesting because they’re full of potential. You don’t know what’s behind that door and where you’re going to end up. There’s fear and uncertainty, definitely. But there’s potential.

I often think of a new work while I’m in the process of making another work. When you’re so involved in the making of something, it somehow frees your mind and allows other ideas to surface. While editing *The Clock* (2010), my 24-hour video, I was

always looking for ways to transition from one film to another. And I used doors a few times, because very often it is already an edit point in the film. When I made the video *Telephones* (1995)—we're very familiar with how a phone conversation is edited, they're jump-cuts from one person to the other. If you suddenly change the period of the film, you jump into another film, and that jump in space becomes a jump in time. That was a very easy collage, my first with found film. *Doors* was the most difficult one so far. After I edited *The Clock*, I needed a break. But I kept accumulating door scenes. I started editing but it felt impossible. I couldn't make the passage through the doors fluid. There are a lot of doors in films, but they're being pulled or pushed fast or slowly. The hinge is on the right, or the left. All these things are very important when you want to create the illusion of continuity. And I didn't have an extra frame. I can cut away frames, but I can't add any. So I'm really dependent on what I find. I gave up the project a couple of times. But I had all this accumulated material. Eventually, I found ways to do it. Then I spent this last year just focusing on editing, while working on the Pompidou exhibition, and managed to finish it in time for the opening.

Christian Marclay, *Doors*, 2002, Installation color video. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Christian Marclay Studio.

**Rail:** I'm really glad that you brought up *The Clock* and *Telephones*. These three seem like a trilogy on space and time and how those are experienced or produced by sound. Do the pieces feel related, or are they—

**Marclay:** The process is similar, but I've done more than three video collages. For *Crossfire* (2007) I used guns, found mostly in Hollywood movies. And I did another with Bollywood films—a very site specific piece for a group show in Gstaad, a ski resort in Switzerland. It turned out that a lot of Bollywood films in the eighties and nineties were shot in Gstaad. There are often fantasy scenes in Bollywood films when the

lovers are beamed to a mountaintop to sing and dance. These scenes used to be filmed in the mountains of Kashmir, but because of regional wars with Pakistan the Indian crews had to find another place to film, and this region of Switzerland became the new set for these fantasy scenes. The video was then shown in the cable car gondola that brings you to the summit.

These videos are related in some way, but all very different. *The Clock* was made as a perfect loop. It was synced with real time. So it didn't matter when you went to see it, and when you left, every option was good. When you enter a black box in a gallery or museum, you always experience a sort of anxiety, thinking, "Did I enter at the right moment? How long will it last? Am I going to be stuck in here for much longer?" These are questions you ask yourself, even before you get into whatever it is you're watching. With *Doors*, I wanted to play with these questions and confuse the audience. If you've already seen something, you might think, "oh, I've seen the whole loop, I can leave now." So I used repetition of the same scenes, but with diversions. And I played with this idea that behind every door there's potentially a different story, a different room, a different space. It's a mental labyrinth. And it also plays with memory. So you're taken on this ride or journey within this enclosed architecture. Because it all happens inside.

**Rail:** That's a limitation in the doors you selected. They always had to be interior doors?

**Marclay:** There are some exterior doors, but the action is indoors. So it has a claustrophobic quality, which for me was important. But also, not knowing for sure where you were going to be taken. Sometimes it's the same space. Other times it's different. The door is a transitional space—it's a cut if you think of it as film, but if you think of it as architecture, it becomes extremely sculptural. And it's all about the body. The dynamic of the piece is all given by the actors moving through space. In order to make the action flow, make the characters in the movies flow, I have to find the right dynamic. Sometimes I think of it as a choreography. But then it's not just movement. Every door that you open leads to another sound space. That can sometimes be a real challenge for the edit. Finessing the sound was very important; it can sometimes be the glue that holds everything together. How do you make an edit from a small intimate space into a big boomy hall? You have to make the edit work visually, but also sonically.

**Rail:** *Telephones* was the first time I thought of the choreography in your work, because it's the movement of the actors as they're answering the phones, moving across the room to get the phone. I was struck by how we rarely make those motions anymore. And those sounds are so period specific!

**Marclay:** Yes, well, now we don't answer the phone.

**Rail:** Speaking of phones, you've got this virtual augmented reality projection at the Pompidou using Snapchat, and the show also includes a prior work you showed at LACMA. What got you into Snapchat?

**Marclay:** I didn't know anything about Snapchat when they approached me in 2018 for some collaborations they were doing with artists. I don't do social media at all. It's a really important way to communicate, but I don't have time, it's not my tool. But then when they approached me, they explained that nearly three billion people a day were using their app. And I'm thinking, okay, how can I ignore this? I've been thinking about these smartphones for a long time, how they affect the way we communicate and do everything. It's all-in-one: a phone, a camera, a computer. It's even recording this interview now. So I felt compelled. And it turned out to be a really fun ride. I got

to collaborate with these very young engineers, super smart, who understand the technology, but have no understanding of the art world, or even art. I found their visual knowledge to be very poor, maybe because it has been experienced through, or limited to, such small screens.

I made a proposal that was not what they were expecting, because for me the initial interest had to do with the fact that when you were creating a Snap, it was ephemeral. When they started the app, you would send a photo, someone would look at it, and it would disappear. Like conversation. But then I learned that you can also share your Snaps with your friend and keep them within a group, or share them publicly. They showed me what people did with it, and I thought it was mostly boring stuff, and very silly. But every time they point their camera, they're simultaneously recording sound. The sound is what interested me. And so in the end, I developed five pieces, some of them really complex and interactive that needed algorithms, to go fishing for certain sounds within the publicly available snapchats.

The one shown at Pompidou is called *All Together* and is presented on ten iPhones, side by side, it's a sound composition made from roughly four hundred Snaps publicly posted by the users. I was focusing mostly on the sound of these short videos, but of course the image was as important. It was first presented with the four other pieces as part of the Cannes Lion International Festival of Creativity in 2018. Then it was shown at LACMA in 2019. For the Pompidou show I also made a new piece, but using their augmented reality (AR) process. I turned the facade of the Pompidou into a virtual musical instrument. It's very simple, and minimal. I divided the building, which is basically like a grid, into these eleven vertical keys that you can touch when you direct your phone to the building. Each virtual key plays a loop of sounds that I've recorded inside the building—squeaky doors or an escalator making weird sounds, water pipes, etc. Snap users can create little compositions with these concrete sounds, and share them with their friends. It's a fairly simple project, but it was a way to show people that any noise can be turned into music, and that their phone is not only a camera, but a portal to a virtual world.

**Rail:** It's a recording device of all kinds. Our phones introduce music into a space anywhere, at any time. This is a really modern phenomenon. With the gramophone, you suddenly could augment your reality with a soundscape. That had never been possible before. Now, you can augment the reality with a soundscape that is not inherent to the space itself with all kinds of music. That has even become a naturalized aspect of life.

**Marclay:** Yeah, but that brings the question of choice. We think we make our own choices, but we're often told what we think we should like. And maybe it's always been like that—we had records and our friends said, "Oh, you should listen to this. It's really cool." And, you know, choice doesn't come from nowhere. But when you make your own mixtape, you make choices—you used to make choices that were kind of real and heartfelt. But how real is free choice today? It makes me think of Duchamp's readymades, which were not about making choices. It was about chance and not choosing. I wonder what he would think about today's AI that makes choices for us. I've recently started thinking about Duchamp and Cage in relation to AI, and predictive technology, and choice in relation to chance. Is this a new kind of chance that we're experiencing? Or are we completely unable to make undetermined choices?

**Rail:** I was wondering if you felt that having started in sculpture contributed to this expansiveness in your practice, offering a kind of freedom of choice moving in and out of these different media genres? Or if you feel that's actually coming from avoiding being stuck?

**Marclay:** Yeah, I think it's more the second thought, of not wanting to be confined to one type of art, and I liked that fluidity. It allows me to satisfy different things that I like to do and not be stuck, and do the same thing every day.

**Rail:** After art school studying sculpture, music became this sort of major moment; you performed for Merce Cunningham, played with John Zorn. At what point did you decide to return to art per se?

**Marclay:** I always had an interest in performance. And when I was studying art—first in Switzerland and then in Boston, at Mass Art, before a stint at Cooper Union in New York—I was always interested in live art. And in Boston, I was in a program called Studio for Interrelated Media, SIM, where performance played a big role. I went to SIM after being kicked out of the sculpture department at MassArt because I was making a lot of sound work and performance. I wonder what they would think of *Doors*. I mean, is it sculpture or is it video?

I got very involved in music. It was more practical for me to put energy into that because I didn't have a studio. I lived in a small East Village apartment. We shared a rehearsal space with bands, nobody had their own space and everything was unpredictable.

**Rail:** What kind of sculpture were you making in your East Village studio?

**Marclay:** I was working with newspapers and fiberglass. But fiberglass was really bad health-wise. I was very interested at the time in Joseph Beuys. I was also quite involved with dancers in the East Village. I took classes with Simone Forti, I did contact improvisation with her. I'm not a dancer, and I had no intention of becoming one, but it was a nice kind of thing to do for physical exercise. And I was hanging out with a whole group of people involved in dance, like Karole Armitage, and Yoshiko Chuma. At that time I also saw a lot of No Wave and punk bands. A lot of these people came from art school. All of this felt very connected and natural. Which now maybe doesn't feel like that. Everybody is very career oriented now. They don't—there's less crossover, maybe?

**Rail:** People talk about the fact that in the seventies in particular, the arts were much more supportive of one another. People were artists, were friends with dancers, were friends with musicians, directors... People would go to each other's performances, openings, and readings.

**Marclay:** Everybody was very supportive. The Kitchen, for instance, presented dance, performance, music, and video. It felt normal. I don't know if these categories still mean something for the younger generation. It's maybe not as fluid as it was. And then also, we were all in the East Village because it was dirt cheap, and it was small. It felt really like a village, where everybody sort of knew each other and you couldn't go down the street without running into someone you knew.

**Rail:** Which can be wonderful or claustrophobic, depending on the day.



Christian Marclay, *Graffiti Composition*, 2002. Portfolio with 150 color plates. 13 × 8 ½ inches (each). Published by Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

**Marclay:** Yeah. Some days you didn't want to see anybody.

**Rail:** This kind of fluidity—not only of interaction, but also response to work—it occurs to me may be relevant for the graphic scores that you produce. For *Graffiti Composition* (1996), which is the one you did in Berlin, you put up sheet music and people, the residents, could just mark it up. You then compiled it so musicians could interpret as they see fit.

**Marclay:** *Graffiti Composition* is totally open. Musicians can organize the photographs documenting the posters altered by Berliners—or by accident—or by people posting their own poster on top, you know, this kind of layering or ripping or whatever. I'm creating a structure that is very open-ended and lets the musicians do what they want with it. So I don't see myself as a composer really, because I'm not imposing anything. I'm just giving musicians the hint of something or a set of possibilities.

**Rail:** It's kind of like contact improv.

**Marclay:** I think that's the magic of live music. There's that acceptance of improvisation—in music and in dance. Even if you do very strict Shakespearean theater, every night is going to be a bit different. And actors have to be open to improvisation, meaning they use it as a learning technique. I always prefer a live situation because even as a listener or viewer, you sense the fragility of the performance. So you feel how tenuous it is. And that makes it magical. You're living the moment, knowing that at any point it could fall apart.

**Rail:** What made you conceive that shapes and marks of whatever kind could be interpreted by musicians to make sound?

**Marclay:** I think it comes from my lack of musical knowledge. Because I cannot read or write music, traditional music, and so I have a certain distance to this marking. The notation looks esoteric anyways. Once you see staff lines on sheet music, you know, you expect music. And there's also a tradition of graphic scores—Earle Brown and John Cage and Fluxus. People have done things before with sheet music.

**Rail:** With "Abstract Music" (1989–90), you painted on album covers. Did you make yourself listen to those albums as you were painting on them?

**Marclay:** I only painted on top of the text of the album cover: the title, names, credits, etc. It's a very meticulous kind of erasing, by painting over the words in the style of these abstract paintings that are used as illustrations for the music. I was interested in how Abstract Expressionists had been used to illustrate jazz. Ornette Coleman's album *Free Jazz* had a Jackson Pollock on the cover. I thought that was really interesting. In music, things are abstract. And what does it mean to put on this commodity, this "music for sale," high art? Is it an attempt to give it more weight, cultural weight?

I used to buy so many cheap thrift store records to use in my performances. They would often get damaged, but I would keep the covers. And I did a whole series of works around the packaging. The record in itself is very mysterious, it's just this black

shiny surface. And you don't know what's on there until you put the needle on. Packaged and sealed, all you have—if you're not already familiar with the music—is the cover. It sounds weird to say that today, because now before you buy music, you hear a snippet of it online. But in those days, unless the clerk at the record shop was willing to play a little bit of it for you, it was a mystery. And it was always a mystery for me because I used to buy my records in the thrift stores. There was no turntable there.

Christian Marclay, *Abstract Music*, 1988-1990. Records covers and paint. Private collection. Courtesy White Cube, London.

**Rail:** *Galatea and Pygmalion* (1989) is a particularly humorous work using album covers of Rex Harrison and Julie Andrews's *My Fair Lady* (1957). The album covers and records are strung together to make string figures kind of like the puppets on the album cover. There's squares and circles, there's threading. It has this very minimal motion while also relating to this canonical musical. Then you also have *Echo and Narcissus* (1992), which floors a walkway with CDs, sparkling and reflecting back as people can walk across it. Both of these myths relate back to sculpture. Is mythology something you're interested in?

**Marclay:** No, I'm not particularly interested in mythology; it's used here as a metaphor. They are creation myths, and love stories, infusing life into inanimate objects, like immaterial music becoming a tangible recording, reflecting life back. When I saw the album cover drawing by Al Hirschfeld—



**Rail:** I mean, the linework is so beautiful.

**Marclay:** The reason the *Galatea and Pygmalion* piece exists is because I would always find this album in every thrift store. So I started buying them. My mother had that record. In the fifties and sixties, everybody had that record. Another record I would find everywhere was Herb Alpert's *Whipped Cream & Other Delights*. For some people, they're a very strong visual reference to a time. To me the drawing on the cover of *My Fair Lady* reminded me of Duchamp's large glass, with the bride hanging on the top half and the bachelors at the bottom. The sexual and power dynamics between the figures and the cloud structure above were intriguing.

I was glad to see *Galatea and Pygmalion* again, because it was poorly photographed and therefore rarely reproduced. That's one of the nice things about having a survey is that you get to see your babies again. Sometimes it's sad because you see them come back in a poor state, because the collectors or museums have sometimes not cared for them. So they arrive damaged or framed upside down. I mean, it's unbelievable what people do with art.

**Rail:** I appreciate hearing you say that, given that so often you've made pieces where part of the process was to abuse the work in some way. It's an irony.

**Marclay:** Yeah, it's the absurdity of it all.

**Rail:** For some people you're associated with records and album covers and so forth, but I wanted to draw out the Beatles pillow from 1989, and others using tape cassettes as this other—also now slightly fetishized—music medium conduit. Because you were already working with records, why the jump to cassette tapes?

**Marclay:** My fascination with the records had to do with this metamorphosis of sound into a physical object. Later, in the early eighties, the industry was fearing cassettes because they were going to kill the record industry. Because everybody was making their mixtape and not paying for royalties and stuff. And, actually, *The Beatles* (1989) pillow and the *Net* (1990) are made out of 1/4 inch recording magnetic tape, reel to reel tape. Because I had one of these players and I loved it when the tape unspooled. There's this beautiful motion of the tape unfolding on the floor. I made this piece called *Tape Fall* in 1989. I had this setup with a tape player on top of a ladder, playing the sound of trickling, dripping water. Each tape lasted two hours. So every two hours someone had to go back up and put on a new reel.

It was a sound piece, but it was also performance, and it was a sculpture, because this beautiful mound of tape accumulated in a very predictable manner and created this bell-shaped structure after weeks of playing. For me, that piece was important because it brought together sound, performance, and sculpture. Unfortunately, right now, it's very hard to show it because nobody makes tape anymore. I mean, you can still find it, but it's very expensive. Running that piece used to cost 5 dollars an hour. And now... I don't know, it would be really expensive to run it.

**Rail:** There's such fluidity in your practice but in organizing works for the Centre Pompidou, did you notice some kinds of consistency, anything recurring?

**Marclay:** Yes. Definitely. You mentioned the doors. Sound is one of them. Maybe the approach towards the found material—appropriating things and putting them together and reconfiguring things. It's collage but it's also deconstruction. I became more aware of how that is as important as putting things together. Before you put fragments together, you have to deconstruct. You have to take these fragments from somewhere else. There's two processes.

**Rail:** I wonder if this is a chance to talk about the onomatopoeia works? Because that's a nice example of taking elements—boom, crash, zoom, zip—out of a written context, emphasizing their visuality, but also their sonic quality, sometimes putting them together for new sound works. You know the context from which you pulled them but we, as audiences, likely don't. How important is the decontextualization?

**Marclay:** I find it fascinating that these words exist that are not completely words. They're as much drawings as they are words. If you see a drawing of a door that's shut, and there isn't a slam next to it, it's just a door that's shut. It means something very different when "slam" is next to it. And that word can be drawn in a way that adds even more information about the way it was slammed, or the direction.

It often doesn't really matter where fragments come from, because often I will cut them out, save them in a box and forget where they came from. It was the same with the music; people would come up to me after my DJ performance and say, "I recognized you play this song." And I'm like, "I don't think so." Actually people would recognize things that weren't used. When you work with a found image, it's very hard to hide the source. But the sound effects from comics are pretty generic. They're removed from the action that made the sound, so they can become completely abstract. So the "slam" without the door is just a "slam" and it could be a hand slamming a table or something else.

Christian Marclay, *Manga Scroll*, 2010. Lithography on Gampi/Hiromi paper, 16 1/8 x 787 1/2 inches. Courtesy Christian Marclay Studio.

That's how *Manga Scroll* was made—a vocal score to be interpreted, to be sung or even read. I'm gonna have it performed on February 4 at the Pompidou by a beatboxer named Alex ABH Hackett, who is the British champion of beatboxing. It's just unbelievable, the skill, with no effects, just his mouth on the microphone. I showed him the score and he was really into it. At first I didn't know if he would relate. In the past I've had Shelley Hirsch or Joan La Barbara or Phil Minton, many extreme vocalists. Beatboxing is a very different approach. So I'm very curious to see what's going to happen.

**Rail:** You're making me realize I want to record all of these performances, so that one can hear one after the other.

**Marclay:** When I presented that work at the Whitney we had a few performances with different people. So every time it's different. It's a 20-meter long hand scroll, like a

very long Japanese Emakimono. The onomatopoeias are separated from the actions that generated them. But recently, during lockdown, I did a new vocal score called *No!* (2020) where I left elements of the action; they're more directly vocal sounds or physical body sounds. I want the performer to emulate the emotions that are seen on the faces of the comic book characters. It's a short piece that usually lasts about fifteen minutes, and Elaine Mitchener premiered it. And then in Japan, I worked with Koichi Makigami, a great vocalist there. There are fifteen sheets, fifteen collages that can be interpreted in any order.

**Rail:** There's a room of woodcut prints in the exhibition at the Pompidou, but all these faces with these intense, screaming and fearful expressions on their faces are deeply distressing. And it's really hard not to think about the time period in which they're being produced. That end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Is there a political context for them?

Christian Marclay, *Face (Écorché)*, 2020. Collage of cut paper comics. 30 × 23 inches. Collection of Joachim Bechtle and Nancy Hellman Bechtle. © Christian Marclay. Photo: Christian Marclay Studio.

**Marclay:** Yeah. I mean, I started making these during the Trump years—it was an extremely anxious time, and it still is. And then COVID happened and I continued with

this anxiety filled work. So much of the democratic values that we took for granted are being threatened. That fear and anxiety hasn't lifted. During lockdown, I kept doing these collages, but not the woodcuts because that required collaborating with printers, and we couldn't do that. So I moved to a smaller scale and worked on collage in isolation, in my studio, with whatever comic books I could find.

Everything I do is a product of the context I live in, and sometimes I will be more political than other times, when I feel the message has to be more focused or clear. Like when I did *Guitar Drag* in 1999. Now the reality of racism is more publicly debated, as opposed to when I shot that video in Texas. The murder of James Byrd Jr. didn't trigger the same public outrage as did the killing of George Floyd. And even though there is more of a public debate about racism, I don't think I can show that piece in the US right now.

**Rail:** It's a difficult work. Painful, challenging.

**Marclay:** I was on a residency in Texas and felt I had to do something. This museum survey forced me to look back and find connecting threads. I think in a lot of my works there is a dark connecting thread running through, but there's also an element of humor and lightness and accessibility. I think that is what makes, for me, a strong artwork—when people can read into it in so many different ways.

**Rail:** Or as you were saying earlier, that walking into the black box and letting someone come in at any time, to leave at any time, to not feel like they have to have encountered the work in some right way.

**Marclay:** *Doors* is a seamless loop and can be entered at any time, but *Guitar Drag* is probably best when seen from beginning to end. Jumping in the middle, you don't know at first what you're looking at. With that video in particular, I've seen people, teenagers especially, going in there unknowingly, and get super excited, in a rock-and-roll kind of way, adrenaline rushing, and then other people will walk in and maybe know something about the piece beforehand, and come out in tears. These are extremes I've seen people experience, and to me, both of these reactions are acceptable.

My work is never about one message. Within the journey through the exhibition, we end with *Doors*. And that worked really well in the context of not knowing where all this contemporary uncertainty is going to lead us. You go through these doors and you don't know where you're gonna end up. I want to keep the work as open as possible.

## Contributor

### Charlotte Kent

**Charlotte Kent** is Associate Professor of Visual Culture at Montclair State University, an Editor-at-Large for the *Brooklyn Rail*, and an arts writer.

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