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Appropriation / Collaboration: Christian Marclay / Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July at the University of Michigan Museum of Art

2014

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15163>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Hu, Tung-Hui: Appropriation / Collaboration: Christian Marclay / Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July at the University of Michigan Museum of Art. In: *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*, Jg. 3 (2014), Nr. 2, S. 239–244. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/15163>.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/10.5117/NECSUS2014.2.TUNG>

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Exhibition reviews

edited by Miriam De Rosa and Malin Wahlberg (NECS Publication Committee)

Appropriation / Collaboration: Christian Marclay / Harrell Fletcher & Miranda July at the University of Michigan Museum of Art

Tung-Hui Hu

On the University of Michigan Museum of Art's (UMMA) website students have been spotted hugging a sculpture, conversing with a lifelike piece of clothing, or holding an inspirational banner encouraging others to love art. These uploads came out of a participatory art project the museum launched to promote and mirror its recent exhibition on new media titled *Appropriation / Collaboration* (3 May – 20 July 2014). As if to underscore the sense that this exhibition is more at home in a digital space than in a physical space, actually finding *Appropriation / Collaboration* takes a little detective work. The two artworks that comprise the exhibition, Christian Marclay's *Telephones* (1995) and Harrell Fletcher & Miranda July's *Learning to Love You More* (2002-2009), are housed on opposite sides of the museum. You are as likely to stumble into a room of American portraiture as the black box showing Marclay's video.

UMMA has welcomed such unusual juxtapositions since it began inviting guest curators each year to direct programming for its New Media Gallery, which opened in 2011. This year Rudolf Frieling, media arts curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, has used his museum's collection (available because the San Francisco museum is closed for expansion until 2016) to organise a three-part series on medium and performativity in time-based art. *Appropriation / Collaboration* is the final part of this series.¹ The UMMA space allowed Frieling to situate new media artworks outside of their typical locations within the contemporary art museum by placing works within a 19th century apse and by using a second space fronted by a glass-and-steel curtain wall to expose interior artworks to curious passers-by.

Appropriation / Collaboration attempts to represent the two main 'movements', in Frieling's words, driving today's visual culture: YouTube and video

mashups. The former movement is exemplified by Christian Marclay, who received the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for *The Clock* (2010) and whose eclectic body of work has included turntable performances, cut and reassembled vinyl records, appropriated films, and other videos. For Marclay appropriation spans traditional visual mediums as well as DJ remixes and even record sleeves. Social practice artists Harrell Fletcher & Miranda July, musicians, directors, and writers of the independent films *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005) and *The Future* (2011), serve as the exhibition's example of collaborative art-making. Both Fletcher and July have positioned their artistic practices outside the solo-artist and commercial gallery models that typically characterise the contemporary market in art. For example, with *The American War* (2005) Fletcher organised public discussions and film screenings on the Vietnam War in addition to the exhibition itself. He cites his background in community farming as an example of a social practice that can draw different audiences to art.

The exhibition's separation of appropriation from collaboration manifests itself in the minute or so it takes to walk between the two wings of UMMA which hold *Telephones* and *Learning to Love You More*. However, the artworks themselves trouble this separation. *Telephones* is a brilliant visual essay on cutting that stitches together shots of telephones from the history of cinema into a single stuttering, melancholic conversation – but this stuttering means that *Telephones*, intended to epitomise appropriation, may be better described as 'the most frustrated collaboration ever', in artist Lily Cox-Richard's words. Meanwhile, July & Fletcher's contribution, an archive of crowdsourced content collected at learning-to-loveyoumore.com, is arguably less collaborative (in the curator's sense of the word) than an art-world appropriation of affective labor.² The artists themselves describe their role as 'co-producers', a more fitting description of their status as managers and commissioners of artwork.

If, as Frieling argues, the pieces anticipate the collaborative platforms of Web 2.0 and the techniques of appropriation in YouTube and remix culture, this comparison only entwines the artworks in a sticky new set of problems.³ Web 2.0 functions by continually recapturing and channeling user affect into more content: 'content farms' mimic the desire for self-improvement through webpages written entirely to capture search engine traffic on 'how to tie shoelaces' or 'how to be a side woman'. Compared to Fletcher & July's crowdsourced content – 'how to get over a cold', 'how to recover from a breakup' – the similarity is striking, even awkward. Appropriation is now less a subversive technique of the avant-garde than the goal of social media marketers ('share this video', 'retweet me', the companies demand). To Marclay's dismay *Telephones* was itself appropriated by the world's wealthiest corporation, Apple, in a 2007 remake that spliced shots of film and television actors saying 'hello' to sell iPhones.⁴



Fig. 1a: Still from 'Telephones' (Marclay, 1995). Video, color, sound, 7:30, loop. Collection of the San Francisco Museum of Art.



Fig. 1b: Still from Apple Corporation iPhone ad, 'Hello' (2007). Video and television, 30 sec.

This is not a critique of Marclay, July, or Fletcher. Rather, it is to suggest that their works suffer if we only understand them as forward-looking premonitions of digital culture. If digital culture structures itself around an obsession with futurity – with future technology, but also with the update that is just to come, the self that

you could be – these works call that temporal logic into question. There is, most obviously, a palpable sense of belatedness in viewing Marclay's telephone conversation at a moment when millennials prefer to use iPhones not to talk but to communicate via SnapChat and WhatsApp; or in experiencing *Learning to Love You More* solely as an archive, five years after Fletcher & July's 2002-2009 website closed to new submissions. More subtly, that belatedness is arguably already present inside the structure of each work.

Take the cinephilia of *Telephones*, for example. Marclay's seven-minute video loop uses hundreds of shots of telephone calls made by actors from Jimmy Stewart to Whoopi Goldberg to form what might be technically considered a conversation – it has a beginning ('Hello? Hello?'), middle, and end ('Goodbye'). Despite the piece's seeming association with cinema, the medium that *Telephones* most strongly evokes is video – specifically, what Lucas Hilderbrand calls the 'inherent vice' of video's bootleg aesthetic.⁵ Illicit copies on videotape accumulated various marks of degradation, whether from tape fade, color shift, or intergenerational fuzziness; though *Telephones* itself is a clean copy, part of its effect is to play off the differences of its source material's image quality (cutting from black-and-white film stock to color video, for example). Marclay commented that "[w]ith the poor technologies we're using, there's a sense of loss that's audible."⁶ In its contemporary context Marclay's piece works through a viewer's impulse to recall cinema history, knowing that that impulse is already shot through with forgetting. It is less a digital database than a VCR recording written and overwritten, each recording meant simply to prolong an airing for a few more days. This is how we will remember Barbara Stanwyck: fallibly, myopically, not for a grand plot but for a certain gesture of her wrist as she hangs up the telephone.

The result is a phone call stripped of content or character. Instead, we have the structure of talking without much talking itself, a demonstration of how phatic conventions sustain dialogue and even allow meaning to be decoded through gesture, tone, and context. It is for this reason that the piece's most stunning part occurs with barely any speech at all: one sequence that shows conversants listening to the other end of the telephone call is only rarely punctuated by an interjection ('No'; 'I'm sorry'). Here is a Dreyer-like symphony of faces; acting – and thereby, cinephilia – in its purest form. The silence is wholly surprising in an age where we expect constant communication and interaction.



Fig. 2: Harrell Fletcher & Miranda July, 'Learning to Love You More', 2002-2009; Collection SFMOMA, Accessions Committee Fund Purchase; Installation view, University of Michigan Museum of Art, 3 May – 20 July 2014 (photograph by Charles Edwards, 2014).

Fletcher & July's piece redoubles this expectation by offering users their own chance to be included in the *learningtoloveyoumore.com* database of images, scripts, and faces. Rotating daily between a pair of new assignments and the user submissions created in response, the exhibition moves chronologically through the archive from start to finish: *Assignment #27. Take a picture of the sun. Assignment #32. Draw a scene from a movie that made you cry.* The effect of viewing what was once a website in serial is to create a stuttering, anaphoric effect not unlike *Telephones*: 'Step 1: ...' 'Step 2: ...' Unable to rewind or click at random, one notices the ubiquity of topics and narrative constraints that adhere to the confessional form (love stories, loss of virginity, coming out, family tension). These constraints are productive ones; as the collaborators write in their opening statement, '[s]ometimes it is a relief to be told what to do ... our most joyful and profound experiences often come when we are following other people's instructions.'

Not everyone can participate; this is not a YouTube repository that is open to all comers. *Learning to Love You More* is forthright about its aesthetic values and expectations. Specifically, it exhorts its contributors to work seriously and to the best of their abilities while also remaining 'amateurs' toward certain narrative forms and certain modes of affect (love, encouragement, 'feeling') and against thinking too hard or being too artistic: 'Do not "ham it up".' 'Do not bother making a plaque that is witty.' 'Do not make a spoof version.' 'Don't make "art" from the artist's work.' 'Do not dress up and use elaborate props.' 'Stay within the parameters of the website: assignments that bring people together and give them a new way to feel something.' Yet there is something even more interesting now that the installation is no longer

participatory: *Learning to Love You More* can be watched and enjoyed as pure affect, as purposeless but singular gestures that, like the Marclay installation it is paired with, simply ask viewers to watch, to heal, to learn, and to be instructed.

Assignment 44: Write the phone call you wish you could have. Translating the 8,000 contributions of *Learning to Love You More* into physical space is necessarily a fragmentary experience; the next phone call is just out of reach. Perhaps it is reassuring that the conversations in this exhibition, across contributors, digital images, shots of film, and rooms at the museum, are always, in Marclay's words, 'poor technologies'. Rather than packaging a narrative of epiphany for marketing or self-help purposes, the viewer addressed by these pieces is always incomplete. That addressee may have once seemed to be the interactive 'you' of YouTube, the subject that the Internet tries so hard to personalise itself around and therefore capture. Instead, with the passage of time, it is more like the vocative, fictional, unstable addressee of apostrophe. Not 'you', then, but 'O', the subject poets use to address entities who are not expected to respond.

Notes

1. Preceding exhibitions in the UMMA 2013-2014 series paired Daniel Claerbout and Matthew Buckingham's still images with three performative environments by Anthony Discenza, Aurélien Froment, and Dora García.
2. Personal communication, 14 July 2014.
3. User participation is, after all, one of the central issues in *Appropriation / Collaboration*; it references Frieling's previous exhibition on participatory art at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. See Frieling 2008.
4. Bercovici 2007.
5. Hilderbrand 2009.
6. Marclay & Hill 2000.

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