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John Armleder and Christian Marclay on the Art of Disruption

The two artists and long-time collaborators speak to Evan Moffitt about the influence of Fluxus, the importance of improvisation and the challenge of reckoning with art history

By Evan Moffitt, John Armleder, Christian Marclay | August 7, 2019



John Armleder and Christian Marclay, *Simultaneous Duo Version*, 2014, exhibition view. École Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne. © 2017 ProLitteris, Zurich, Switzerland; photograph: Catherine Ceresole

EM: How did you first begin working together?

CM: We met in Geneva where John had a space called Ecart that I used to frequent as a student at the École des Beaux Arts [now the École supérieure d'art visuel]. John was organizing exhibitions and there was always good tea and good conversation. As a young student, I was very curious – though as John said to me once, I was extremely shy, and probably didn't say much. When I moved to the US, John kindly wrote me a letter of recommendation – a very old-fashioned 'To Whom it May Concern' – and it was very useful for me to get a job in New York. A few years later, John said to me that he never thought I would survive more than three weeks in New York! That letter gave me a lot of confidence; John was very generous in that way. He was a very good example of an artist from Switzerland who had made it on an international level.

JA: I suppose if I wrote the same letter for someone today, they'd be finished – they'd have no chance of doing anything anymore! [Laughs.] Now they know.

CM: You've been supportive of so many artists. Exhibiting contemporary artists and bringing them to Geneva to engage with the art community there and offer a wider context to the local scene. When we met, it was the early 1970s, and Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik came through town – a lot of Fluxus artists.

JA: We also did shows with John Cage, George Maciunas.

CM: That was really my first introduction to Fluxus. Then you did this performance at Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève that involved re-enactments of recent pieces, mostly from the late 1960s, which led me to discover Fluxus's humorous relationship to music, the way it made fun of the rituals of classical music. There was also a bookstore on the site, and a printing press that was producing artist publications. It was all really interesting and influential.

JA: These were also the days when there were all kinds of small, artist-run spaces and bookstores – such as Other Books and So in Amsterdam – so we belonged to a network through which information was ex-

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John Armleder and Lionel Bovier, *Ecart à Art Basel*, 2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: MAMCO Genève, Switzerland; photograph: Julien Gremaud

changed. It was often the only way to discover new things. Today, as soon as you think of something, it's already circulating on the internet.

EM: Those networks you mention were integral to Fluxus – not just as a method of exchange but often as the work itself. Mail art is a perfect example of this.

JA: One of the nice things about Fluxus artists is that they didn't care about the fetish of the original. Maciunas would present a box under the name of other artists, some of whom didn't even know he was 'producing' that artwork. I always liked that idea. And I always liked the idea of people installing works 'by' me that I never actually made.

EM: Christian, you mentioned the way Fluxus pilloried the traditions of classical music. Is that irreverent attitude something you have both tried to channel in your own work, with respect not just to music but also to art institutions?

JA: It's about providing a platform for people to see things in a different way – not to pillory. That's what Fluxus did so well, using the classical grammar of frontal concerts and experimenting freely with it. It was a very good dynamic, which today is slightly more difficult to re-create because people don't have the same kind of culturally rigid upbringing. We already can't agree on grammar.

CM: Things are definitely more fluid. But showing the structure of traditional art, performance art, classical music – when you see the box or frame that encases it, you can break out of it that much more easily. I still

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John Armleder, *Sh/Ash/Lash/Splash*, 2019, exhibition view. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles; photograph: Jeff McLane

do carry this attitude that I learned from Fluxus, and ultimately from John, about keeping a certain distance from the art world. Because everything becomes academic very quickly. You always have to be aware of that, so you can disrupt it.

JA: The disruption is more for our own satisfaction. I don't think it's usually read that way, though. The biggest disruption we're currently living through is the fact that there is so much more of everything, which complicates the reading of art, of culture. With classical music, we had a specific format to deconstruct; with jazz, we could invent free jazz; dance and performance could leave the theatre and move into the streets. Those were all oppositions to a given traditional format. Today, that dichotomy doesn't exist at all because everything is available and everything is happening simultaneously and everything has already been done. I think that presents a fantastically exciting challenge for artists.

EM: That endless stream of different content, especially online – and the points where it fleetingly intersects – is a hallmark quality of your video works, Christian. I'm thinking in particular of *48 War Movies* (2019), your commission currently on view at the Venice Biennale, which taps that frenetic quality of contemporary life.

CM: Speaking generally, something I learned from Marcel Duchamp, from John Cage and from John is the importance of the accident: what you can't control. It's a lesson I continue to apply to the way I work. Randomness seems to occur more often now because there's more communication. So, we take these discoveries of Duchamp and Cage for granted – but when the art market places such a high demand on quality products, it's very refreshing to think back to Fluxus, which was critical of the relationship between commerce and art. I think we need to revisit those principles – there's still a lot we can learn from them.

Right now, I have a show at LACMA I did with Snapchat and, even though it involves a very contemporary form of communication, I used all the same elements of chance improvisation and interaction that I used



Christian Marclay, *The Organ* (detail), 2018. Christian Marclay x Snap: Sound Stories at Le Centre d'art La Malmaison, Cannes, France, © 2019; photograph: © Benoit Florençon

40 years ago with my music. It's nice to be able to apply some of these early ideas and influences to a medium or material that is ephemeral, such as social media interactions – these little videos that teenagers send each other. It's sound work, but using moving images. But then I'm not a user of social media. Are you John?

JA: What are you talking about?

CM: Instagram, Snapchat ...

JA: Who's that? [Both laugh.]

EM: You both performed a repertoire of Fluxus performances, side-by-side, at Museum Tinguely last year. What was it like re-enacting work by other artists together again after all this time?

CM: I was surprised how fresh it felt. The audience seemed to like it, especially the younger generation. I think live performance, something that's not mediated through the internet or our phones, is an experience that younger artists have less and less frequently, and some of these performances deal with the same issues that we're dealing with now.

JA: I think most things feel fresh. Fra Angelico feels fresh. I don't think there are 'times' for things, but rather that we must always choose what to pay attention to or what to be inspired by. Things aren't really lost unless you let them be forgotten. What has always been a challenge is interpretation, making meaning out of these experiences. Today, when you look at a Fluxus performance, it's not a Fluxus piece that was made in the 1970s, but a Fluxus piece that was made in 2019.



John Armleder and Christian Marclay, *Simultaneous Duo Versions*, 2018, exhibition view. © 2019 Museum Tinguely, Basel, Switzerland; photograph: Daniel Spehr

CM: The audience at Tinguely got to see the same score interpreted by two people side by side, using the same or similar props. It added an element of comedy, I think – there was always this comparison, a kind of Laurel and Hardy dynamic.

JA: Basically, they saw Christian taking it more seriously than I did.

CM: No, no ... I was just trying to follow you! That doubling, though, is interesting, because it's never going to be the same. Improvisation is part of it, something that I've embraced in music, which is harder to apply when you make art. John has been a master at that. I'm always learning, being around him, allowing myself to loosen up a bit and accept whatever happens in the studio or on the stage. I enjoy those performances because I'm still learning from them.

JA: Someone has to learn!

CM: [Laughs.] I hope you're learning something.

EM: I certainly am!

CM: What also changes during a performance is the eye of the viewer. Every person in a theatre is going to think something different in that moment. A variety of perspectives and interpretation is crucial to the work. A lot of Fluxus pieces acknowledge that.

JA: Throughout the history of art and the history of ideas, artists have set traps without knowing what they're trying to catch. This is part of the essence of art: that, whatever you do, nothing can confine you.

John Armleder, 'Sh/Ash/Lash/Splash' runs at David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, USA, until 24 August 2019. 'CA.CA.' continues at the Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Germany, through 1 September 2019. 'Quicksand 2' is on view at MAMCO, Geneva, Switzerland, until 8 September. 'John Armleder: Spoons, moons and masks' runs at the Aspen Art Museum, Aspen, USA, until 27 October.

Christian Marclay's 48 War Stories is on view at the Central Pavilion of the 58th Venice Biennale until 5 October 2019. 'Christian Marclay: Sound Stories' runs at LACMA, Los Angeles, USA, through 14 October 2019.