(DIS)EMBODIMENT IN CHRISTIAN MARCLAY'S TELEPHONIC SERIES AND *VIDEO QUARTET*

by

EMELIE FORREST MATTHEWS

(Under the Direction of Isabelle Loring Wallace)

ABSTRACT

This study considers assorted works by the contemporary American artist Christian Marclay (b. 1955). Chapter one focuses on a series that takes the telephone as its nominal subject. I argue that this series is best understood as representing concurrent changes in communication technology. In chapter two, I consider a seemingly unrelated work, *Video Quartet*. This complex video uses appropriated images and sounds to summon the sublime. I suggest that the video marks a shift in how the sublime is conceived. In sum, my thesis conjoins works not previously linked and argues that, however different, these works can be understood through the common theme of embodied experience. Considering how technology allows for disembodied experiences, it will be argued that Marclay's work oscillates between embodied and disembodied experiences. Thus, these works emphasize the importance of physical and sensorial interactions in an age that increasingly relies on disembodiment as a means of experience.

INDEX WORDS: Christian Marclay, Telephones, Cellular Phones, Mobile Devices, *Video Quartet*, Sublime, Technological Sublime

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DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Joseph Andrew Matthews, and in honor of my mother, Susan Stroud Matthews.

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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Christian Marclay (b. 1955), a contemporary American artist based in New York and London, has been creating visual art and music for over thirty years. Trained at art schools in Geneva, Switzerland (1975-1977) and Boston, Massachusetts (1977-1980), Marclay also participated in a year-long exchange program, during which he studied at Cooper Union in New York City in 1978.[1] Upon witnessing and subsequently participating in the vibrant downtown art scene in New York, Marclay began incorporating performance and appropriation into his artistic practice.[2] From this point forward, his art assumed a variety of forms – sculpture, sound recordings, performances, and video – and often incorporated found objects, images, and sounds from various pop-culture sources. Yet, despite this diversity, a common theme links works made over the course of the artist's thirty-year career, namely, the often overlooked *interplay* of sound and image. Indeed, most of his works – even those objects that are effectively silent – have both sonic and visual elements.

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[1] Marclay attended the Ecole Supérieure d'Art Visuel in Geneva, Switzerland and he received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from Boston Massachusetts College of Art.

[2] While in New York, Marclay witnessed performances by Laurie Anderson and Vito Acconci. Marclay credits this period of his life with piquing his interest in performance, appropriation, found objects, and the incorporation of sound into his visual art practice. In addition to finding inspiration in the downtown scene, his work is indebted to Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, as well as aspects of the Fluxus movement. As his career progressed, he began using found vinyl records and multiple turntables to compose music, and through this activity he became connected with improvisational and experimental musicians and bands such as John Zorn, Elliot Sharp and Sonic Youth. This led to Marclay's participation in performances and recordings with these musicians. For more general information regarding Marclay's career see: Russell Ferguson, "The Variety of Din," in *Christian Marclay*, exh. cat., UCLA Hammer Museum (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2003), 21.

Marclay may be most well known for a series of videos derived from hundreds of thematically linked clips from Hollywood films. For example, *Crossfire* (2007) is a collage of scenes from various movies linked by the fact that each involves a gun close-up or is a shoot-out sequence. Directly implicating the viewer in scenes that are typically consumed voyeuristically in the context of a movie theater, Marclay's work is projected on all four walls of the gallery, while the viewer is seated in the middle of the space. Thus, while the video plays, viewers are surrounded by gunfire, and equally, they are caught in a crossfire we might describe as audiovisual. In fact, as we shall see, *Crossfire* is like many of Marclay's works in that it stages a certain confrontation between us and the media – or mediums – we encounter.

Another work that evidences Marclay's interest in the interplay of sound and image is *Up and Out* (1998), a video that uses the soundtrack of one film, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), and images from another, Brian De Palma's *Blow Out* (1981). Leaving the soundtrack and images from each film intact, Marclay has simply placed the soundtrack from *Blow-Up* on top of the images from *Blow Out*. The resulting feature-length video loop has, as one might expect, moments where sounds and images are out of synchronization. However, there are moments when the two elements come together in a meaningful way, such that the narrative that one hears compliments the narrative unfolding on screen. Making matters more interesting is the fact that the films chosen by Marclay, *Blow-Up* and *Blow Out*, both feature characters compelled to investigate the relationship between sound and image.[3] In turn, viewers of Marclay's *Up and Out* must likewise piece together the relationships between convergent sounds and images. At the

[3] See Douglas Kahn, "Surround Sound," in *Christian Marclay*, exh. cat., UCLA Hammer Museum (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2003), 79. The principle players in each film are "…the photographer (David Hemmings in *Blow-Up*) and the sound-effects specialist (John Travolta in *Blow Out*)." These characters' occupations are, like Marclay's film, invested in the interaction between images and sounds. The narrative of *Blow Out* involves a sound effects specialist who accidentally records evidence that proves that a car accident was actually a murder. Consequently, he finds himself in danger. The validity of the sound recording is called into question especially when visual evidence suggests an outcome that is contrary to what has been recorded on tape.

same time, Marclay's extrication and subsequent recombination of sound and image makes the infrastructure of cinema visible as a combination of discrete entities, and reveals that the typically invisible interaction between sound and image is integral to the medium of cinema. *Up and Out* with its focus on the interplay between images and sounds is representative of Marclay's work which is continuously in dialogue with the cinema and the complimentary senses of seeing and listening.

Marclay's earlier works oscillate between the mediums of sculpture, performance and sound-recordings and focus on various sound and recording technologies: magnetic tape, tape players, vinyl records and their covers, compact discs, speakers, and telephones. Here, too, Marclay makes a concerted effort to draw our attention to the way sound and image interact in unexpected or overlooked ways.

A work like *Möbius Loop* (1994), for example, explores the look of sound, through a silent object (fig. 1.1).[4] Using colorful cassette tapes tied together with transparent nylon ties, Marclay constructs an oversized Möbius loop, which references the fact that cassette tapes loop back upon their starting point when played and have the ability to record and replay sounds in an infinite loop. More fundamentally, a work like *Möbius Loop*, which makes use of recording technologies in the context of the *visual* arts, calls attention to the look of sound and recording technologies, and thereby insists that sound *has* a look that informs and delimits its meaning. Sound's aesthetic dimension is an important facet of Marclay's investigation of the relationship between sound and image, and will also be central to this study as it will provide a means of connecting early sculptural works with more recent works in the medium of video.

[4] Image of *Möbius Loop* from: "Monochromatic Axonometric" December 23, 2011. http://monochromatic-axonometric.blogspot.com/2011/12/marclays-time-and-space.html. Accessed March 11, 2012.

Although not comprehensive, this thesis considers several of Marclay's early, sculptural works, as well as two late videos, and in this way I establish points of confluence between seemingly discrete artistic phases. My second chapter analyzes an early series that spans from 1989 and 1995, and includes both three-dimensional works and a late, acclaimed video. Not previously described as a series, these works are thematically linked by their interest in a technology that is itself comprised of visual and sonic elements: the telephone. Taken together, these works, or so I will argue, use the evolving image of the telephone to foreground telecommunication's shortcomings, such as distance, absence, and lack of clarity, while also suggesting the ways in which mobile phones exacerbate rather than resolve telecommunication's limitations.

Marclay's first work to explore telephony in earnest is *Boneyard* (1990), a sculptural installation that consists of up to one-thousand hydrostone plaster casts of telephone receivers scattered across the floor of a gallery.[5] Morbidly titled, this installation points, as I will suggest, to the obsolescence of this "old-style" telephone receiver, while it also signals, in a more abstract sense, the death of reciprocal telephone communication. Following quickly on its heels, *Glasses* (1991) was made by replacing the lenses of a pair of glasses with parts of a telephone receiver, a gesture I read as an interrogation of the telephone's purported ability to enhance or, in the manner of corrective lenses, *perfect* deficient modes of communication. Further manipulating the familiar form of a rotary telephone, *Extended Phone* (1994) includes a telephone of standard dimensions, but the receiver extends to an absurd length of five-hundred feet.[6] Its massive size is imposing and reminds one of how a telephone threatens one's autonomy, even as, more recently, it promises, via the cellular phone, to guarantee it. As I suggest, the altered forms of these

[5] See: Figure 2.8. The number of casts varies. Douglas Kahn's article in *Parachute* puts the number of receivers at one thousand, however, the Hammer Museum catalog lists the number as seven-hundred fifty casts.
[6] See: Figure 2.12, 2.13.

telephones express an ambivalent view of various changes in human communication that are largely the result of advancements in telecommunication technologies.

In contrast, Marclay's video, *Telephones* (1995), leaves *the image* of the telephone intact and instead uses the cinematic technique of montage to lend meaning and significance to this same subject. As we shall see, in this video, Marclay fabricates one-side of a telephone conversation by way of arranging clips from Hollywood films of different eras, each of which features a telephone. The video begins with scenes in which telephones are dialed, then moves to scenes in which several different phones ring, and then proceeds to scenes in which phones are answered by various actors and actresses. At this point in the video, Marclay's editing constructs a loose, if unconventional telephone conversation, the ambiguity of which leads viewers to consider the problems that come with telecommunication, as well as their exacerbation in recent years by the advent of cordless and cellular telephones. Indeed, although none of Marclay's telephonic works makes use of cellular telephones, the emergence of this technology is contemporaneous with Marclay's investigation of telecommunication, and as I contend in my thesis, this technology and its cultural impact are integral to understanding Marclay's telephonic series.

To date, the most comprehensive literature on Marclay's telephonic works is an essay by French musicologist Peter Szendy entitled "Christian Marclay on the phone," which appeared in the catalog for the 2007 Paris exhibition *Christian Marclay: Replay*. Szendy's assessment of the telephonic works is thorough. However, his essay focuses mainly on *Telephones* and connects the aforementioned sculptural works to pieces by Laszlo Maholy-Nagy and Duchamp. Overall, Szendy interprets the works as a reflection of Marclay's own biography and artistic career.[7]

[7] Szendy's discussion of Marclay's telephonic works culminates with a quote from Marclay that summarizes the artist's formative experiences in New York. The experiences described by Marclay in this quote are recognizable as

While convinced that Marclay's work can be placed in dialogue with art history and his biography, my own approach favors the context in which these works were made, reading Marclay's telephonic work in conjunction with contemporaneous developments in the arena of telecommunications.[8]

In my third chapter, I leave the telephone behind and concentrate on a single work and its relation to the sublime as theorized by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Barnett Newman, and Jean-Francois Lyotard. Marclay's masterful composition *Video Quartet* (2002) deploys the montage aesthetic of *Telephones* and is again comprised of clips from Hollywood films. For the purpose of this video, Marclay collected hundreds of film clips that feature music or other forms of noise made by musical instruments, human voices, tap dancing feet, squealing car tires, and zippers; notably, although these clips are divorced from their original cinematic context, each retains its original soundtrack. The artist then arranged these film clips in such a way that they visually and sonically imitate the format of a quartet – a piece of music written for four different instruments that play separately and together.

As with *Crossfire*, the formal aspects of the video's display are important. When *Video Quartet* is shown in a gallery, four different projectors are arranged so that the ten-foot square projected images form a contiguous row spanning forty feet across the wall. In total, the configuration resembles four movie screens that have been lined up end to end, with no visible gap between them. Four separate channels of sound play simultaneously and heighten the overwhelming nature of the massive four-screen projection. As several critics noted in response

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a story he repeatedly tells interviewers. Szendy uses this familiar biographical narrative to draw the conclusion that "Basically *Telephones* might be emblematic of [Marclay's] relationship to history, on a small or large scale." So, rather than relating these works to their context, Szendy makes an attempt to connect them to art history, as well as Marclay's personal biography. See: Szendy, "Christian Marclay on the Phone," 104-105.

[8] Douglas Khan's 1994 article, "Christian Marclay's Lucretian Acoustics" is a good resource, but again, the context in which these works were created is not included in Khan's interpretation.

to the work's debut, the mixing of incongruous images and sounds is at first disorienting. But the work's discordant score eventually settles into something that resembles a traditional quartet pattern. The pattern, once realized by viewers, provides a point of orientation and structure amidst this barrage of sensory stimuli.

Central to the impact of *Video Quartet*, this tension between orientation and disorientation led me to consider Marclay's video in conjunction with several theorizations of the sublime that attend to a similar oscillation. As noted, Kant, Burke, and Lyotard will feature in this chapter, as will Barnett Newman, the mid-century American painter whose 1948 essay, "The Sublime is Now," and monumental painting, *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1950-1951), are I believe compellingly related to *Video Quartet*.

As this chapter ends, the reader may wonder how a work engaged with the sublime relates to a series of pieces that focus on the telephone. At the most basic level, both the telephonic series and *Video Quartet* explore how sound and image interact in subtle but meaningful ways, but, as I will suggest in my conclusion, there is a still more specific way in which these works align.

In my conclusion I will endeavor to say just exactly how the concept of the sublime and the technology of the telephone are connected in Marclay's work and to suggest some of the implications of this unexpected alliance. As I will argue, these works, when taken together, reflect Marclay's overriding preoccupation with the tension between embodiment and disembodiment in a culture that is increasingly dominated by various technologies, many of which promise precisely to transcend the limitations of one's embodied state. Thus, it is the contribution of my thesis not only to analyze these works but to suggest the way in which these

portions of Marclay's career do in fact align for the purpose of reflecting on – and historicizing – man's response to this, his insurmountable predicament.

CHAPTER 2

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?:

CHRISTIAN MARCLAY'S TELEPHONIC SERIES

> Nothing is ever obtained without a loss of something else. What will be gained from electronic information and electronic communication will necessarily result in a loss somewhere else. If we are not aware of this loss, and do not account for it, our gain will be of no value.
>
> -- Paul Virilio[9]

Telephones have been a part of daily life since 1910.[10] But, more recently, the telephone has become increasingly tied to us, making the move from desktops, bedside tables, and street corners into pockets, hands, and even the cavities of ears. Needless to say, many view this as a welcome development – one that has allowed an increase in efficiency, productivity, and connectivity. Yet, for others this progression is a disturbing encroachment into private realms and a hindrance to meaningful communication. Indeed, as the critical theorist Paul Virilio points out, any advancement – especially one made within the realm of information and communication technologies – inevitably results in a loss that must be recognized. Christian Marclay's telephonic series, made between 1989-1995, a time when information and communication technologies were rapidly advancing, is best understood in just these Virilian terms, at once an

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[9] Paul Virilio, "Cyberspace Alarm! Speed and Information," *CTHEORY*, ed. Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, accessed March 28, 2011, http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=72.

[10] In 1910, the first reliable statistics showed that 10 million people world-wide had telephone subscriptions, and seventy percent of those subscribers were in the United States. Gerard Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture*: *Mobile Technology in Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 21.

acknowledgement of progress and an itemization of the losses incurred as a result of such forward momentum.[11]

In 1995, the same year that Virilio published an influential article on the subject of cyberspace's dangerous acceleration of our lived experiences, Marclay made the final piece in his telephone series. In fact, *Telephones* is the very title of this acclaimed, seven and a half minute video, compromised of dozens of diverse film clips in which actors and actresses from different eras can be seen using this familiar, if evolving, device.[12] Marclay's montage begins deliberately with the slowed pace of people dialing rotary phones, which appear in the video alongside other clips in which people punch out phone numbers on touch-tone dial pads in both public and private spaces. Entranced by the repeated, rhythmic sounds of dialing, viewers are then jolted to attention when suddenly, telephones begin to ring. All sorts of telephones flash before the viewer's eyes, ringing in a range of tones. Close-ups of telephones dominate Marclay's video in this passage and create a sense of urgency (fig. 2.1).[13] Soon after, clips are shown of people running, or even throwing themselves toward the telephone in an effort to pick up on the first ring, alongside clips from other films in which individuals are hesitant to approach the telephone, perhaps seeing it as a vehicle for unwanted attention or as the a bearer of bad news (fig. 2.2). Also included in this section of the video are clips in which the ringing telephone seems to be an interruption, since those reaching for the telephone receivers appear bothered, defensive, skeptical, or crestfallen.

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[11] Between 1989 and 1995, Marclay consecutively created six pieces (five sculptures and one video) that featured telephones. Clearly, the telephone was on his mind because each year, except 1992, a new telephonic piece was added to his oeuvre. Marclay often works serially, however his telephone pieces have never been regarded as part of that practice. Douglas Kahn and Peter Szendy have both treated these works as groups, but they do not consider what these six pieces might mean as a series that occurred over time. See Douglas Kahn, "Christian Marclay's Lucretian Acoustics," *Parachute* 74 (1994): 21-22, and Peter Szendy, "Christian Marclay On the Phone," in *Christian Marclay: Replay*, exh. cat. Musée de la musique, (Paris: JRP|Ringier, 2007), 100.

[12] To view the whole video see "Telephones, 1995 – Christian Marclay," Youtube video, 7:17, posted by "loomyaire," October 14, 2011, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yH5HTPjPvyE.

[13] All stills from *Telephones* taken by author from the YouTube video cited above.

"Hello?," "Hello?," "Hello?," "Hello?," "Yeah?," "What?": it is a relief, when these telephones are seemingly answered and their ringing finally abated. However, in keeping with his tendency to show multiple images of the same action as performed by different actors in different films, Marclay, in this next section of the video only shows those who answer, those who heed the telephone's call. Thus, the "hello" heard is always the "hello" of the respondent in isolation. At no time during this section of Marclay's fast paced video is the voice of the respondent preceded or followed by the voice of the one who called. As a result, Marclay provides no confirmation that the dialers who first appeared in the video are now being heard, or that they have been successful in directing their call to the correct party. Having moved from several clips of dialing to a series of clips in which phones ring, to then a variety of scenes in which a phone is answered, the video is to this point disinterested in the communicative potential of the telephone. However, in the video's next section, Marclay presents a series of exchanges that could be cautiously described as a conversation.

On the heels of so many isolated salutations, Marclay at last creates the not-altogether-credible illusion of dialogue. In this section of his work, Marclay strategically sutures approximately thirty scenes together so that an ambiguous connection seems to lie between the callers and the called. There are moments when two or more scenes appear to correlate with one another, but never to a satisfying or conclusive end. For example, in a scene set in the 1960s, a male actor in his mid-forties wearing grey pajamas says to an unseen interlocutor, "The girl is dead" (Figure 2.3). This is immediately followed by a clip which, through Marclay's use of jump-cut editing, appears to respond to the tragic news. Yet the actor is from a different movie. Moreover, he is from a different era, perhaps the 1980s. The man on the phone wears a rumpled shirt and appears under stress. He is framed as a police captain might be, with wood-slat blinds

covering his office window. Responding to the news with incredulity, he asks, “Are you sure you have a positive I.D.?”

Telephones’ next film clip may or may not extend this conversation. Viewers are again transported to a black and white noir-esque film scene in which a man stands in a phone booth wearing a fedora and suit, and his line, “Aah... no not exactly...” seems to be in reply to the so-called “police captain,” perhaps letting him know that he does not have the positive identification. The following scene takes viewers inside to a black and white scene set in a bedroom, where a woman in a 1940s-style dress exclaims over the phone, “I’m so confused!” Her obvious exasperation is appropriate when one considers the pseudo-dialogue that has been mapped out thus far because therein no consensus has been reached as to the identification of the deceased. But, of course, this confusion also functions on another level. So far, viewers of *Telephones* have been shuttled throughout different time periods, listening to phrases that stem from only one side of various conversations – a fact that might lead viewers to proclaim their own confusion as well.

Marclay leads viewers into this confused state through his careful jump-cut editing which mimics the editing used in narrative films. Telephone conversations in film are often conveyed through a split-screen effect, or by making audible what is said on the other line, or through jump-cuts which “jump” from one side of the conversation to the next and then back again, signaling to viewers that each different scene is one part of a two-sided dialogue occurring between two different people in two different places, yet happening at the same time. Here, though, Marclay plays with time – his editing subverts the assumption that the jump-cut implies simultaneity. So, while the dialogue may create the tenuous illusion of a conversation, the visuals are disjunctive and, what’s more, they thematize the issue of uncertainty.

In addition, Marclay has viewers vicariously time-travel as the telephone users featured in his video exist decades and, often, vast distances apart. In effect, this exaggerates the fact that the telephone routinely collapses time and distance. When making a long-distance call, for example, one calls tomorrow when dialing Australia from the United States, and collapses distance when speaking with someone in Los Angeles while in New York. Telephones have the benefit of transporting us over distances and across time zones, but as the edited dialogue of the video begins to suggest – uncertainty and anxiety often accompany telephone use. The mediated information received through this technology must be double-checked for veracity because of the distance that lies between receivers, precisely because tele-communicating typically involves a distance. So it is in *Telephones*: Marclay's montage reveals a dynamic inherent within telephone conversations in which one individual speaks to another from whom he is profoundly removed.[14]

Despite Marclay's suggestion that one cannot intimately connect over the phone, it is this very sense of distance that telephones are thought to overcome. The telephone has long been accepted as a substitute for physical presence. After all, analog land-line phones retained a literal connection between people; the wires acted as a surrogate physical connection (at least until land line phone connections were made by digital signals).[15] Thus, although telephones ushered in an era of disembodied communication, they were accepted as substitutes for face-to-face communication due to their ability to transport the vocalized essence of the caller into the ear, head, and mind's eye of the person called.[16]

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[14] See Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture*, 20. I emphasize the prefix "tele-" in this word which indicates "at a distance." Goggin writes, "The term telecommunications was coined in 1932 to designate voice telephony, but also referred to other sorts of communications *at a distance* over networks." (my emphasis)

[15] "Digitization of networks in the 1980s and 1990s allowed their architecture to be changed, with fewer switching centers and hubs, greater use of computing and software, more network functions, and automated and remote maintenance." Ibid., 31.

[16] The idea that one's physical whole could be transported through the voice, and then again through the phone lines into the ear of the listener relates to the Greek idea of the *pneuma*. In early Greek philosophy, the *pneuma* was regarded as the breath or spirit, and was a means of representing the soul without including the body. See: Frances

Telephonic communication could be thought to convey authenticity through its ability to transmit the voice. Plato referred to the voice as a *technikon*, a technology which reveals truth and is linked to knowledge because of the voice's sonority which – like the analog audio recording – is indexical and carries the trace of that which it represents.[17] It is this belief that allows the voice transported by telephone to stand as an authentic and truthful representation of the absent speaker.[18] It is also this belief that has historically distinguished the idea of vocal and thereby aural communication from the idea of the written word. Within Western culture, speech has been privileged over the written word and has often been associated with presence, truth, and authenticity, all ideas compromised by writing's association with absence. (The written word, in the moment of its inscription, is intended to function as communication in the absence of the author.)

It is just this distinction between speech and writing that Jacques Derrida takes up and deconstructs in his seminal 1971 essay "Signature Event Context."[19] Derrida departs from Plato's ideas by complicating the spoken word's association with immediate presence. Derrida doesn't address telephones in his essay, but on the basis of what he does say, we might surmise that for him, the telephone only makes clear the falsity of the speech/writing distinction. Whether spoken via telephone wires or not, speech is like writing and all forms of language: operable in the face of absence. Thus, while the telephone did not invent this complication, it does call it dramatically to one's attention. The telephone demonstrates, at a technological level, that speech and absence are compatible, thus proving Derrida's point and directly opposing Plato's opinions

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Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 20.
[17] Ibid., 21.
[18] Ibid., 18-19.
[19] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Limited INC*, Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1-23.

about the spoken word. However, from the point of view of those who market telephones, Plato's ideas still hold sway as they legitimate the telephone as a means of making intimacy and authenticity possible despite (and across) distance.

Contemporaneously, Virilio notes, in the very year of *Telephones*' execution, these advantages must be understood in conjunction with the idea of loss, a concept also thematized by Marclay in his work's minimal dialogue. Through Marclay's selection of scenes and his careful editing, the problems of telephony are thrown into high relief. Indeed, in the video's makeshift narrative people are conversing but their understanding is severely limited, in part because these people can neither hear nor see the person on the other end of the phone line. Again, decontexualization and disembodiment are always issues in telephone conversations, but it is the achievement of Marclay's video that it calls attention to the downside of these often-repressed facts.

Returning to *Telephones*, one might say that the telephone's paradoxical ability to connect and simultaneously disconnect people is nowhere more apparent than when, towards the middle of the video, the actress Jessica Walter says, "If I could just see you, just talk to you!" In this scene Walter closes her eyes as she wishes for the ability to see, as if she is trying to visualize or imagine this absent presence (Fig. 2.4). Read in conjunction with her comments, this reflexive gesture calls attention to the blindness inherent in telephonic communication. Her remarks imply that if she could see the person – as speech formerly necessitated – then she would be able to talk and genuinely communicate in ways that would be more effective. Speech is, in the aftermath of the telephone, an inadequate conveyor of presence. Worse, it is an affective reminder of the very absence it works to overcome.

Since Walter's desire to be in the presence of the person on the other line cannot be fulfilled, the telephone offers a compromise – it mitigates absence by providing the ability to "talk" with another person in another place. However, because the telephone offers only talk, and not vision as well, it makes the fact of absence and distance all the more palpable. Marclay's video points to this tension in the sequence that follows Walter's complaint.

The next clip, which functions as if in reply to Walter, shows an actor from another decade saying, "You certainly can." This is a frustrating statement because, as a point of fact, it is impossible for Walter to see her interlocutor. Despite this impossibility, the next clip uttered by yet another party from yet another film insists, "I see."[20] This line is repeated often in *Telephones,* as it is in reality. It is used on the telephone to convey understanding, since vision is generally equated with knowledge. But, as media theorist Marshall McLuhan has observed, "[one] will find that [one] simply can't visualize while phoning ...people try to do so and, therefore believe they are succeeding."[21] Thus Marclay's video, through its frequent repetition of the phrase "I see" ironically emphasizes the blindness and disorientation resulting from telecommunication.

If this portion of the video can be said to call attention to a certain tension between seeing and knowing, Marclay's work subsequently pursues the tension between seeing and listening. It begins when an actor complains, "You don't listen do you?" (fig. 2.5). The reply, "No!," is defensive in tone and ambiguous in meaning – either "no," as in "No, I don't listen," or "No" as a form of protest, in which the listener seemingly insists on the fact that she does indeed listen to speech of her counterpart. Her negative and almost combative response to the question is

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[20] Russell Ferguson, "The Variety of Din," in *Christian Marclay*, exh. cat., UCLA Hammer Museum, 21 (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2003). Ferguson discusses this passage as well, stating that it reflects our culture "in which the visual habitually trumps the audible."

[21] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1966), 234.

seemingly rebutted by another actress who utters a series of positive words, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" but the tone of these affirmations suggests that the actress is trying to convince someone of something, perhaps trying to alleviate uncertainty. Moving from the topic of listening, Marclay returns to the topic of sight. Angrily, a man wearing a tuxedo appears to be arguing, "Yeah- No! No! No! Now look!" Collectively, his words are in and of themselves contradictory *and* a direct inversion of what has been said so far in this section, making it difficult to follow the dialogue's trajectory. His final demand to "look" is countered by a woman who wears an orange visor and speaks from a public pay-phone booth, "No! No! That's the worst thing you can possibly do." The demand to look is perhaps refused so vehemently because it is impossible or because telecommunication requires a lack of vision, and to look would be a distraction from – even an eradication of – the conversation at hand. And yet, in spite of this the next actor stubbornly says, "I see."

Marclay's editing immediately returns viewers to the issue of listening in the following section when an actor commands both the person to whom he is speaking and Marclay's audience to "Now listen carefully..." as if he is offering an alternative to vision. But, rather than listening, the next actor seemingly interrupts him, saying: "But she doesn't know… do you understand that? She doesn't know what happened." Again, Marclay has made use of dialogue that resonates with viewers, who, like the subject of this actor's conversation, are in a similar state of ignorance. The tension between listening and seeing continues into the next segment, which focuses on the silent act of listening on the phone.

Marclay's video presents viewers with several discrete moments of listening as actors are shown silently holding receivers to their ears. For the majority of this segment the actors' mouths do not move, but instead we see their eyes become quite active (fig. 2.6). Some people stare into

space as they process the words being transmitted to them. They appear to be looking at everything, all the while not really *seeing* anything. Neither can they visualize what is being told to them, nor can they truly see what is in front of them. Indeed, in many instances their eyes appear to move about aimlessly, as if those of a blind person. In this same passage other actors are shown listening *less* intently; they appear distracted and have expressions of annoyance and impatience, as if they cannot wait for the other person to stop talking (fig. 2.7). Over the course of this section dedicated to listening, sometimes the voice on the other line can be heard, but what is discernible does not make sense. As a listener, one is unable to clearly hear the voices on the other line, and like the actors on screen one is engaged in the act of listening to a voice on the phone, while looking at something that does not correspond to what is heard. One must strain one's ears to hear the muffled voices, and as a result one desires to see the other person. In a conventional film, a moment of listening on the telephone is typically followed by a jump-cut edit to visually and audibly illustrate for viewers who is speaking on the other line. However, in *Telephones*, Marclay's editing, like the telephone itself, keeps viewers at a distance.

In this passage that focuses on listening, it would seem that Marclay privileges listening as a necessary part of the telephonic ritual, as if to demonstrate that telecommunication can only be effective if there is reciprocity between speaking and listening. On the phone, one cannot see or know the gestures and facial expressions of the person on the other line, so one must rely on hearing the cadence and inflections of the other's voice. Therefore, listening is fundamental to telephone conversations. Thus, although splicing and montage allow Marclay to foreground the rituals that are typically engaged in when using the telephone, these techniques also allow him to hint at the difficulties and complexities of telecommunication, even when the telephonic ritual seems to be correctly performed. As I have argued, his video makes one aware of the losses and

drawbacks that come with the ability to collapse space and time and be tele-present.[22] Taken as a whole, *Telephones* appears to be skeptical of telecommunication; it persuades viewers to see it as flawed and ineffective, a technology that is at once full of promise and drawbacks that continue to be, and were in 1995, largely unitemized.

Telephones was executed at the end of a six-year period in which Marclay focused on the telephone. The aforementioned anxieties expressed in the video are also recognizable in the sculptural works that preceded this provocative work. The earlier objects in the telephonic series form the foundation on which *Telephones* was built.

In 1989, when Marclay made the first of several works devoted to the subject of telecommunication, perceptions of connectivity and relations to space, time, and the telephone had begun to change. Virilio, citing a cellular phone advertisement which reads "Planet Earth has never been this small," claims it was "a very dramatic moment in our relation with the world and for our vision of the world."[23] With new telephonic and computer technology – and the inevitable convergence of the two – the world had the potential to become virtually and *instantaneously* connected. The advancements promised greater efficiency, increased communication, and more productivity. Communities, families, and friends were to become more tightly knit, and the world-wide-web was to connect communities and friends across the globe. Seen against this backdrop, however, Marclay's sculptures *Boneyard* (1990), *Extended Phone* (1994), and *Glasses* (1991), each of which dwell upon telecommunication, reveal, in veiled terms, what is lost due to the merging of telephonic and information technologies.

[22] I am using "tele-presence" to refer to being present at a distance. Virilio uses this term in his book *The Information Bomb*, but in a different sense. See Virilio *The Information Bomb* (New York: Verso, 2000), 13.
[23] See Virilio, "Speed and Information," 1.

Boneyard (1990) was one of Marclay's first works to take up the nascent telecommunication revolution (fig. 2.8).[24] Across a gallery floor, seven hundred and fifty white telephone receivers are carelessly scattered, strewn about as if bones bleached by the sun. Detached and removed from any practical purpose, these receivers have no cords or bases, yet they remain recognizable as the iconic, albeit generic, telephone handle. When Marclay created this piece it had been nearly 115 year since the telephone's invention in 1877. Over the course of those many years, the telephone was integrated into society and culture, ever-present and yet almost invisible, blending in with the rest of our appliance-filled lives. [25] Yet, at the time of Marclay's *Boneyard*, telephones were again visible as sites of innovation, evolution, and change.

Boneyard was contemporaneous with cordless phone technology, which likely placed telephone users in the mobile mindset. With the advent of cordless telephones, one could take a call in any room of the house, and even outside the house. While one was required to stay within range of the telephone's base to ensure good reception, it was liberating to be rid of the long spiral cord that was often a source of annoyance. Cellular phones took this liberty and amplified it by making one's location a non-issue. When one calls a cellular phone, one no longer calls a place, but instead calls an autonomous person wherever he or she may be.

Progress in the digitization of telecommunications ushered in the mobile telephone – no longer was the telephone a banal appliance tethered to walls or restricted to the boundaries of its base. Once confined to the private realms of the home or the office, or even the semi-private space of a phone booth, the mobile telephone existed publicly as a visible accessory. Perhaps

[24] There is one work that deals with a telephone before 1990. This untitled work is from 1989 and it appears on the cover for a CD. The receiver is broken in half with the earpiece flipped around to face the outside. It is held together with masking tape. I believe that *Boneyard* is a more significant piece because of its scale and prominent placement in an exhibition. Image from: Russell Ferguson, ed., *Christian Marclay*, exh. cat., UCLA Hammer Museum (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2003), 57.
[25] Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture*, 2.

most radically, the cellular phone promised total accessibility and contact, no matter the location.[26]

In the United States the cellular phone became popular and widely used after its initial introduction to the market. At first, in the 1980s, cellular phones, large and unwieldy by contemporary standards, were only used by those wealthy enough to afford them.[27] In 1984, there were 25,000 subscribers to cellular phone service. Yet, by 1992, in conjunction with a dramatic decrease in price, subscribers had increased to ten million. By the turn of the 21st century, cellular phones were widely used and home landline phones were nearly obsolete.

Boneyard brings into view how impetuously society did away with analog phones in favor of a new technology that promised more control and efficiency. With his title, Marclay registers the fact that the land-line telephone has died. But more significantly, it is the death of a certain brand of communication that is suggested by this evocative field of bones. In light of the themes eventually considered by Marclay in *Telephones*, it is worth noting that the receivers cast for *Boneyard* are the kinds that feature a conjoined mouthpiece and earpiece, so that the acts of speaking and listening are united.[28] The gently curving handle of the receiver unifies these two distinctly separate spaces (as does the human skull) for receiving sounds and transmitting sounds, and the perforated openings on both ends imply a certain fluidity between listening and

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[26] Of course this accessibility was limited to where cellular phone signals reached. But advertisements for cellular phones in the late 1980s and 1990s made sure to promise that one could be carrying on with their lives, and go anywhere, without cutting themselves off from important communication transmissions. See: "1989 Radio Shack Cellular Phone Commercial" YouTube Video, 0:31, an advertisement for Radio Shack's lower priced cellular phones which originally aired in 1989, posted by "Crommy5," February 14, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXcImcc3RDw

[27] For example, in 1987, cellular phones cost two thousand dollars, and seventy percent of those who used cellular phones in the United States made upwards of fifty-thousand dollars per year, at a time when the average yearly income for the nation was $18,426. See: Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture*, 34. During the 1990s cellular phones came down in price, making them accessible to more people. By 1992 the price had decreased to two hundred dollars. See Gail M. Robinson, "Behind the boom in cellular phones." *Design News*, (April 6, 1992), 72-79.

[27] Robinson, "Behind the Boom in cellular phones," 72.

[28] For more on this unification see McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 233. These acts of telecommunication which were once inextricably linked have now become alienated from one another in our mobile culture.

speaking. One can easily imagine the path one's voice takes as it is transmitted through the concentric holes, through the spiral of bundled wires and onwards towards its final destination into your friend's phone and ear. Likewise, one can imagine the inversion of this process when one listens. Indeed, the very appearance of these now obsolete phones suggests that these two activities must take place in a reciprocal manner for effective communication to occur. In turn, the morbid aesthetics of *Boneyard* can be seen to signify the end of communication that is reciprocal, personal, and comparatively *embodied*. For although telecommunication is defined by disembodiment, the kind of phones featured in *Boneyard* were made with the human form in mind.[29] The handle is ergonomically designed, molded to the form of the hand, and the distance between the earpiece and mouthpiece are proportionate to the human body's form. Telephones of this sort were often held intimately close to the body – as if embraced, cradled between one's head and shoulder – in order to free one's hands. Indeed, as Marclay's title implies, telephones could be considered a familiar extension of the human body. And here they lay disassembled, amputated, and obsolete, the skeletal remains of a body long gone.

Land-line phones of the sort featured in *Boneyard* retain, because of their organic appearance and insistence on vocal communication, a level of human connection that is lost with the turn to cordless and then cellular phones. Cordless home phones made consumers accustomed to multi-tasking while on the phone. Being able to move around the house and accomplish tasks while talking likely allowed one to feel more efficient and productive. However, this "efficiency" would make made sitting down to chat on the phone with a friend or catch-up with a family member seem like poor time management. The very act of

[29]McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 237. "On the advice of a Boston surgeon, Dr. C.J. Blake, the receiver of the phone was directly modeled on the bone and diaphragm structure of the human ear."

communication would be unproductive.[30] In turn, cellular phone technology could respond to consumers' desires to do more while on and with their phones.

Cellular technology began changing the very conception of what a telephone was, and likely motivated a work like *Boneyard* that is suggestive of loss. Previously, land-line phones offered one means of connection: reciprocal vocal communication. As technology advanced, cellular phones introduced a small screen which assisted in offering two options: SMS messaging and talk.[31] By comparison, the telephone's ability to transmit the sound of a human voice is regarded as outmoded. Furthermore, cellular phone companies push for consumers to use their mobile phones as wireless computers rather than telephones, and this push has resulted in a devaluation of vocal, and some would have it, *human* communication.[32] What results is a preference for communication that is silent, that is controllable – premeditated and mediated – and at a distance from others. The unmediated immediacy of vocal or human communication is shied away from because it is unpredictable. Silent, mediated forms of communication have become preferable because one is not required to have an immediate response. Accordingly, cellular phones, over the course of their evolution, have become increasingly inhuman in their appearance – a fact that is perhaps anticipated by *Boneyard's* morbid and increasingly antiquated imagery.

The first cell phones were not entirely dissimilar in appearance from the receivers replicated in *Boneyard* (fig. 2.9). Each came with clearly marked, visible portals for speaking and listening. These early cell phones were differentiated from their land-line counterparts by their harsh, angular lines, while land-line phones from the same era seemed to retain an organic design, a design suited to the human body. Throughout the 1990s, as cellular phones became

[30] George Myerson, *Heidegger, Habermas, and the Mobile Phone* (Cambridge: Totem Books, 2001), 9.
[31] Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture*, 67-69.
[32] Myerson, *The Mobile Phone*, 28-36.

smaller, the portals for speaking and listening became less prominent (fig. 2.9).[33] Of course, this was partially due to a decrease in the size of the phone's hardware and an increase in mobile phone technology, but these factors in tandem with the manner in which consumers were using their phones – more texting, less talking – also required an increased screen size and a reduction in the size of the reciprocal ports.[34] These screens enabled users to communicate on their own terms in a unilateral manner. They were not required to engage in a reciprocal or bilateral conversation with another human, but could use information technology (specifically keyboards and screens) to mediate their interactions. Within *Boneyard*, the remains of an obsolete technology as well as, I argue, the bones of the humanistic qualities that once resided within telecommunication are laid out and put on display.[35]

The loss of a human element in telecommunications and the loss of effective communication are primary topics within George Myerson's book *Heidegger, Habermas, and the Mobile Phone* (2000). Myerson explains how mobile phones have been strategically and seamlessly woven into people's daily lives, and how this technological infiltration has infected communication rituals and culture. In a play on the word "mobile," a preferred synonym for cell phone in Europe, Myerson calls this infiltration process "mobilization."[36]

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[33] See: Sue Shellenbarger, "The '80s Called, and They Want Their Cellphones Back," *Wall Street Journal*, March 28, 2012, D1, D5. The cellular phones shown in the *Wall Street Journal* timeline (fig. 2.9) display this progression. The Dynatac 8000x's form is angular, but it retains the curve of a landline receiver. Comparatively, this curve drops away with the 1987 Mobira Cityman model, and 1992's popular Nokia 1011. Flip-phones have a slight angular curve that is reminiscent of landline phones, but the "flipping-action" of the phone is what removes it tactually from the landline. From these early phones, screens become larger, and the listening and speaking portals shrink to a size that is barely visible. This article is also relevant in that it features consumers who have chosen to keep old, outdated, and in some cases damaged or barely functioning cellular phones because they believe, for various reasons, that they are better able to remain in the here and now since they are not using smart phones with internet connectivity.

[34] Goggin, *Cell Phone Culture*, 33. "The widespread adoption of text messaging from the early 1990s onwards was roughly contemporaneous with the explosion in another form of writing and text, namely electronic mail over the Internet."

[35] This is further confirmed by some of the newest cell phones on the market which are named "Droid Bionic" and "Android"

[36] Myerson, *The Mobile Phone*, 7.

Drawing on contemporary press releases and advertisements, Myerson observes how mobilization is "redefining the nature of communication itself." He notes that cellular communication companies, for the purpose of setting their prices, regarded data services such as texting, multimedia messaging, and internet use as their main source of profit. In other words, they primarily charged users for the communication that occurred between inanimate objects, while these companies considered profit from vocal communication to be secondary.[37] Indeed, cellular devices are, as Sadie Plant describes them, "intelligent machines that are in perpetual communication."[38] In effect, cellular phones are the entities that are communicating back and forth, transferring digital data to and from various phones and websites. Users input information and data into their cellular phones and then the phone is left to do the communicating with another device. Users now act as conduits between cellular devices rather than the telephone being a conduit to connect two people. Accordingly, Myerson observes that in mobile culture "voices" have become synonymous with "data." These are all changes that began fomenting in the early 1990s while Marclay was creating his telephonic series. Thus, with both *Telephones* and *Boneyard*, we see Marclay contextualizing and lamenting losses incurred by these shifts within the once reciprocal nature of communication between humans.

Of course loss and impotence are not terms that feature in the *marketing* of cell phones and by way of transition to a second telephonic work, I now consider a recent advertising campaign that stresses power, autonomy, and efficacy, while it also prioritizes vision as the sense ultimately most at issue in telephony. In the realm of Mobilization, one's voice is a beacon, a digital signal. Verizon Wireless explicitly sells this idea in a 2011 campaign called "Rule the

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[37] Myerson, *The Mobile Phone*, 28-29.
[38] Sadie Plant, "On the Mobile: The effects of Mobile Telephones on Social and Individual Life", (Motorola, 2001), 22. Plant's report, commissioned by Motorola, is available for download at: http://classes.dma.ucla.edu/Winter03/104/docs/splant.pdf

Air" (fig. 2.10). Two advertisements from the company's website use hyperbolic language and romanticize the idea that their cell phone signals give one the most efficacious way to express innermost desires, thoughts, and "revolutionary" ideas.[39] One version of the ad states:

> We each have a signal. A stream of raw energy that flows with us. A power. A superpower. A super communication power. To wield with mighty force. Feel your power with products, technology and innovation from Verizon.

The left side of this ad features a male with his eyes focused on the sky, his head tilted back as halo-like rings emanate from his head signifying the origin of his signal and power. The word "signal" replaces "voice" in this advertisement. The devices are marketed as if they possess the ability to give the individual a stronger "voice" with which they can distinguish themselves from society. People are able to send out their "signals" over the network whenever and wherever they want, and it is largely inconsequential if any of their signals are received or responded to because communication today is geared towards stating desires and getting what one wants, rather than towards consensus-building dialogue between people.[40] This emphasis on the individual, rather than on a group or a community, is an indication of the increasingly isolated and mediated nature of telecommunication. Each of the Verizon advertisements features a lone person who is autonomous and isolated. Indeed, the emphasis of the ads is not, as in the well-known "reach out and touch someone" campaign from the 1970s, a matter of connection, presence and communion, but rather one of individuation, and broadcasting thoughts rather than discussing them (fig. 2.11).[41]

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[39] Playing on gender stereotypes, the second Verizon ad features a woman holding a phone against her chin, while looking demurely at the camera. The advertisement's copy reads in part: "This is your signal. Signal is how you dispatch your ideas, daydreams, and wild mood swings into the great wide world. It's your voice shining out. As big as you can imagine. And as poignant as a poem." Images taken by author from www.verizonwireless.com, April 2011. They are no longer available on the website.

[40] Myerson, *The Mobile Phone*, 19-21.

[41] The print advertisement and a television commercial both place emphasis on family and friends and connections between them that are both physical and vocal. See "Bell System 'Reach out and touch someone'" Commercial (April 2, 1979)" YouTube video, 0:31, a television commercial for AT&T, posted by "darianglover," May 14, 2009,

Many years later, the widespread adoption of the cellular phone fueled a collective desire to be productive and efficient. Mobiles allowed people to conduct business or deal with personal matters in the car, on the street, or even on vacation. One was able to exist in two places at once.[42] When internet technologies were subsequently integrated into mobile phone technology, voicemail, email, text messaging, and access to social networking sites granted users the ability to communicate *in absentia*. Additionally, these new technologies promised to provide the user an unprecedented amount of control and information at their finger tips. Text messages and web-based forms of "talking" have become favored over vocal communication because they are, as Sadie Plant observes "somewhere between making a call, sending an email, and making no contact at all."[43] Text messages allow conversations to be "effortless, and non-committal" because the mobile "allows for ways of avoiding more immediate and forthcoming kinds of interaction."[44] Today, instead of discussing individual desires and intentions, cellular phone users disclose them over texts, emails, tweets, and status updates. Typically, these desires are disclosed without the intention of engaging or communicating with another person.[45] In his 1988 essay "The Ecstasy of Communication" Jean Baudrillard presciently observed, "Speech is free perhaps, but I am less free than before: I no longer succeed in knowing what I want, the space is so saturated, the pressure so great from all who want to make themselves heard."[46] This

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HO17B-ACRn0. Print Advertisement from: "Bell System Memorial Page," Porticus Center. Accessed February 15, 2012. http://www.porticus.org/bell/images/ads/reachout-2.jpg.

[42] Furthermore, as Plant points out, "This psychological mobility makes 'Where are you?' far more than a practical question. 'Where are you?' is an attempt to locate and contextualize what would other be a displaced voice, and also a recognition of the fact that mobile users operate in a dislocated, slightly schizophrenic world." See Plant, "On the Mobile," 61.

[43] Ibid., 80.

[44] Text messaging also poses a new set of problems for socialization. As Plant explains, "Loose arrangements can be made in the knowledge that they can be firmed up at a later stage… But this kind of flexibility – we can call it approximeeting – can also engender a new sense of insecurity. Everything is virtual until the parties, the places and the moments come together to make it real." Ibid., 56-57, 61.

[45] Myerson, *The Mobile Phone*, 25.

[46] Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster. (New York: New Press, 1998), 152.

sentiment encapsulates the paradoxical nature of communicating through today's technologies. One desires to be an individual, to express oneself freely and be heard in a public forum. Yet simultaneously billions of other people are seeking that same goal. The multitude of desirous chatter uploaded via computers and mobile devices on the internet makes it difficult, if not impossible, for one to individuate oneself from the masses. To participate in this global forum one does not need a reciprocal handset, all that is necessary for communication is a transmitting device that is receptive to the user's individual output and can then export, or upload, the seemingly unique product to the larger network. Clearly, as time has progressed there has been a movement away from reciprocal communication and a shift towards seemingly more efficient, more controllable forms of silent, visual communication.

In response to the prevalence of visual communication modes, engineers began designing phones with vision in mind. The sizes of screens increased until mobile phones became "all-screen" with keyboards and dial-pads either hidden beneath the screen, or embedded in the screen as an image that users interacted with through touch. The dominance of screens on cellular phones coupled with internet capabilities have made using the telephone like the experience of using the internet – indeed the two activities are now hardly discernible. The internet is a virtual reality which one navigates with one's eyes and information is obtainable without the use of one's ears. One's perception of space in this virtual reality is dependent upon technologically mediated and digitized imagery. Telecommunication is no longer a matter of speaking and listening, but rather of seeing.

Marclay's 1991 sculpture entitled *Glasses* addresses these changes just as home computers and cellular phones were becoming widespread (fig. 2.12).[47] The sculpture, *Glasses*,

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[47] Image from: Russell Ferguson, ed., *Christian Marclay*, exh. cat., UCLA Hammer Museum (Los Angeles: Hammer

is a generic looking pair of black glasses modified by the artist. Marclay replaced the lenses in these glasses with the mouthpiece and earpiece from a telephone receiver.[48] Rather than the magnifying lenses that would normally aid one's impaired sight, however, these telephonic "lenses" greatly reduce and impair one's vision. Marclay's *Glasses* seems to purposefully couple these two seemingly oppositional objects in an effort to emphasize the benefits of possessing vision that is supplemented by and screened through speech and sound. Today, what we see is often not believable because digital technologies lack any indexical trace. Digital images and texts often carry little to no guarantee of authenticity. Now, vision – no longer trustworthy as a judge of authenticity – is improved if it can be supplemented by sensory input that is traceable and more authentic. Because of the increased use of silent communication methods, the sound of the voice is becoming increasingly rarified. Typically regarded as being between presence and absence, the sound of a voice on a telephone is, in contemporary society perhaps gaining more value as a transmitter of presence and meaning. The sound of a person's voice in contrast to text messages and emails is thought to aid in interpreting meaning as opposed to the confusion one experiences when trying to interpret the tone and intent of another person's written message. Whereas *Telephones* seems to suggest the desire for vision when one has access only to the voice, *Glasses* suggests the need for a voice when one's information is limited to visual apperception. As Virilio says, "it is the spoken word which is logically withering away before the instantaneity of the real-time image.[49] Speaking and listening are endangered in this era of what Virilio calls "technological acceleration."[50] Theoretically, Marclay's telephonic glasses provide a means of bringing what is heard closer to one's eyes, thereby enhancing the veracity of sound

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Museum, 2003), 113.

[48] Based on a visual comparison it appears that Marclay is likely appropriating Jasper Johns' *The Critic Sees* (1964) which also features a pair of glasses that have an ear and a mouth in place of lenses.

[49] Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, 72.

[50] Ibid.

that, in turn, authenticates what is seen. By placing an aural filter on vision, Marclay's glasses act as corrective lenses for a vision that is faltering under an increasingly digitized, virtual reality.

If in *Telephones*, *Boneyard*, and *Glasses*, Marclay engages with telecommunication's ability to obfuscate our senses, in *Extended Phone* (1994) he takes up telecommunication's ability to impede users from engaging, both physically and mentally, with their environments (fig. 2.13).[51] The work consists of a generic telephone base and cord. However, this seemingly normal phone is dwarfed by its receiver which has been extended by five hundred feet of plastic tubing placed between the mouthpiece and earpiece. When installed in an exhibition space the receiver alone occupies the majority of one room and even spills into the next. The receiver tends to cover the threshold of the entry way and forms an obstacle for viewers. Furthermore, picking up this receiver to place or answer a call is made impossible. The receiver, the main component used in telecommunication, is here a burdensome, awkward, and absurd object. As installation photographs reveal, the excessive loops and the sculpture's serpentine appearance make this piece feel daunting. In fact, at one point along its circuitous path the coils rise up, confronting viewers, threatening their personal space. McLuhan observes that "the telephone is an irresistible intruder in time or place, so that high executives attain immunity to its call only when dining at head tables."[52] Describing the phone as an "intruder," McLuhan portrays it as something from which one needs to get away. As he puts it, the phone is imposing and infectious because it takes all of one's attention "unlike the written and printed page." He continues, "Any literate man resents such a heavy demand for his total attention, because he has long been accustomed to fragmentary attention."[53]

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[51] Image from: Russell Ferguson, ed., *Christian Marclay*, exh. cat., UCLA Hammer Museum (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2003), 54-55.
[52] McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 238.
[53] Ibid., 234.

There is little doubt that Marclay's *Extended Phone* takes on the form of just such an imposing object. The sculpture translates into three-dimensions the demanding nature of telephones which ring and beep incessantly, beckoning users to their call. And depending on who is on the other line, a phone call could result in a waste of time, of being tied to the phone unable to accomplish tasks one had intended to complete before the phone interrupted. The purveyors of mobilization are aware that telephone conversations can be time and attention consuming. They, therefore, attach a connotation of slowness to the retrograde concept of "talk" and sell their brand of telephony as the faster, seemingly more efficient mode of "communication."[54] After all, the Computer Age is often billed as the era of speed, energy, and interconnection.[55]

Because mobilization frames the act of talking on the phone in terms of slowness, consumers are meant to understand alternative – i.e., silent – means of communication as faster and more efficient. With these faster options, cellular phone users are better able to control when and how they want to communicate, precisely because an audience is no longer required.[56] They are no longer at the mercy of a ringing phone. If they do not want to actively speak with someone, they can passively communicate over a text message or an email. No longer does the receiver threaten to entangle us in protracted conversations. In effect, the increased control and diverse options for communicating, as offered to consumers by mobilization, functions as a form of immunization against the implicit and infectious slowness that is "talk." Instead, cellular

[54] Myerson, *The Mobile Phone*, 9-11. Myerson elaborates by writing, "Now talk is part of a web of uses – and here [with mobilization] the phone is being redefined, and with it human communication. ... 'Talk' stands for an old sense of person-to-person presence and contact. The new phone mobilisers show you they aren't against such traditions, on the contrary. At the same time, you can see how this old sense of contact is being surrounded, new meanings pushing it aside."
[55] Ibid., 9.
[56] Indeed, communication has been possible without presence since the popular adoption of answering machines in 1984. See "The History of the Telephone Answering Machine" http://www.recording-history.org/HTML/answertech1.php, Accessed March 11, 2012.

phones can act as a screen that guards us from the commitment that comes with actually talking and carrying on a conversation.[57]

Seen one way, the threat of entanglement as posed by *Extended Phone* is no longer a worry because cellular phones are designed to provide users with more mobility and control. Increased control features allow each user to stay isolated and encapsulated. No longer is one forced to oscillate between the roles of speaker and listener; one is always in the role of the user. Mobilization presents consumers with what Baudrillard identifies as "potentialities linked to usage: mastery, control, and command." He continues, "each person sees himself at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty."

Yet, as *Extended Phone* might also suggest, this putative sovereignty only obscures the fact that mobile phones can actually reign supreme over the user's life. Marclay's *Extended Phone*, was made at a moment when advanced technologies were likewise extending the phone's reach. By perverting the appearance of a standard phone, Marclay is able to make a jarring object that confronts viewers by usurping a human's command over space. With mobile phones, calls can come at any time, or any place. In Sadie Plant's words, they "siphon concentration, demanding attention even when not in use; for many couples, its presence can be as powerful and distracting as that of third person."[58] When read in retrospect, *Extended Phone* can be seen to contain a double meaning – not only does it speak to the burdensome nature of old telephonic technology, slain, like a giant on the floor, it also emblematizes for later audiences the difficulty of getting away from one's phone.[59] Today, mobile phones are controlling users; they have

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[57] Sadie Plant notes that the users can implement the phone as a shield – protecting users from unwanted interactions in the real world. Users wishing to dodge face-to-face communication can dive into the virtual reality that their devices provide them. The cellular phone extends one's personal space. See Plant, "On the Mobile," 60.
[58] Ibid., 30.
[59] A recent article describes the increasing control cellular phones exert over our lives. See: Andrew Keen, "How our Mobiles became Frankenstein's Monster," CNN. Last modified February 28, 2012, accessed February 28, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/28/opinion/mobile-frankenstein-keen/index.html?hpt=hp_c1

latched on, and are the architecture of users' lives. More recently, names given to cellular phones reflect the extent to which the cellular phone is grafted onto the user. Names such as "Droid Bionic" imply that the phone has been integrated into the user's body and has created a hybrid, while the name "iPhone" suggests that the phone is now an extension of one's subjectivity.

Inarguably, mobile devices like the iPhone – a revolutionary device which resulted from the convergence of an "iPod, a mobile phone, and an internet communications device" – have greatly altered the ways in which we interact with one another, and the ways in which users perceive themselves.[60] The combination of these three devices certainly reinvented the mobile and revolutionized preexisting notions of what it means to telecommunicate. The iPhone is primarily a tiny personal computer, and secondarily, it is a device capable of making telephone calls.

Provocatively, Apple introduced the iPhone to the world through an advertisement that was an unauthorized, if direct appropriation of Marclay's *Telephones*. [61] Their advertisement, a montage of film and video, makes use of the same quick jump-cut aesthetic and adopts the same basic conceit, to slip from one movie clip to another in a fashion that is and is not seamless. Following a lone black and white shot of a rotary phone ringing, viewers see a host of recognizable, and in some cases very contemporary actors and actresses picking up their phone receivers, or cellular phones and uttering variations of "Hello?" (fig. 2.14).[62] The greetings

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[60] Here I am referencing Steve Jobs' keynote address in which he introduces the iPhone. See: Apple-iPhone Keynote 2007 (HD) Part 1 of 6," YouTube video, 14:24, an introduction to the iPhone by Apple CEO Steve Jobs, posted by "iKeynotes," March 6, 2011"http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lyx_va6f10s

[61] See: "First Official iPhone Ad," YouTube video, 0:30, the first official iPhone commercial aired February 25, 2007 during the Academy Awards, posted by "danackermangreenberg," February 26, 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bvfs4ai5XU Apple contacted Marclay to get permission to use his concept, but when he refused, they took the idea anyway. See: Paul Schmelzer, "Christian Marclay's new iPhone ad?"*Off Center*, March 29, 2007, http://blogs.walkerart.org/offcenter/2007/03/29/christian-marclays-new-iphone-ad/

[62] All stills taken by author from "First Official iPhone Ad," YouTube video, 0:30, the first official iPhone commercial aired February 25, 2007 during the Academy Awards, posted by "danackermangreenberg," February 26, 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bvfs4ai5XU.

receive no human response, which again indicates the isolation of the caller. In the end, at the commercial's conclusion, what does respond to them is the iPhone itself. It greets the caller (and thus the viewer of the commercial) with a simple text that appears in white letters across a black screen: "Hello."

In light of the arguments made above, it seems significant that Apple's imitation of *Telephones* excludes the acts of listening and conversing. Instead, technology is the sole respondent to the many single individuals who utter greetings. According to Apple, not only does the telephonic ritual no longer include listening, it no longer necessitates any oral expression. In this way, the iPhone eliminates the pesky business of verbal dialogue and listening. Moreover, it contextualizes this fact as a happy triumph of telephonic evolution.

Whereas the content of Marclay's video is taken from the past when cellular phones were not making regular appearances in Hollywood films, Apple's commercial contains content that is more contemporary.[63] The commercial implies progressive technological improvement as it moves past the old landlines, and past the old cell phones to the advanced wireless device that is more akin to a computer than a telephone. The textual greeting with which the iPhone replies is indicative of twenty-first century communication, which seems to be increasingly defined by silent digital texts in the form of SMS messages or emails. In fact, it seems that even the vocal "Hello" is maligned as obsolete along with the land-line. Apple wanted to ensure that the iPhone was framed as completely new. Sleek and silent, this device is not like other cellular devices or telephones that we have seen.

Creating hand-held access to a virtual reality, the iPhone is more oriented toward wish fulfillment than it is toward communication. The iPhone can provide the user with a sense of

[63] At the time of *Telephones* creation, cellular phones were featured in movies, so their absence in *Telephones* points to a conscious choice made by Marclay.

self, place, and orientation. Like Narcissus bent at the water's edge, the iPhone user is often transfixed by the device's highly polished, mirror-like screen. Because the iPhone is so user-centric, it is possible for one to forget how invasive and dominating it is over one's life. One can become lost in a customized virtual reality – the narcissistic loop – that is ever-accessible through the iPhone's wireless internet capabilities. One is able to be in two places at once, socializing with friends over dinner, while silently communicating in a virtual reality.[64] One must then straddle a paradoxical situation in which one is always connected to what goes on in this virtual reality, yet by communicating in and participating in this removed reality, the user is simultaneously isolated. But, this isolation is of no matter because the iPhone acts as a surrogate companion. One only needs to observe fellow passengers on a city bus to see evidence of this. The iPhone is capable of fulfilling the user's desire for self-confirmation – it is no wonder, then, that it is called an "I-Phone." Apple's product satiates the user's desire for instant wish-fulfillment and self-confirmation in the midst of a vast telecommunication network.

While no cellular phone appears in Marclay's video, the land line phones, analog ringtones, and disparate contexts prompt us to consider exactly what has changed about telephonic rituals and reassess how we relate to one another based on these changes. As Marclay's video winds down, the confused conversation ends and the video moves to a sequence of actors hanging up the phone (fig. 2.15). This act signifies the end of a conversation and is often imbued with the emotions of the person who performs the act. Slamming down the receiver is indicative of anger or frustration, whereas a purposeful, careful, or gentle hang-up may reflect a sadness or contemplation. Marclay does not include many examples of this act that reflect

[64] It should be noted that this sort of behavior can, by some people be seen as rude and disruptive. This is not an ideal form of socialization, but it is a fact that many people will split their attention between virtual and actual socializations, as that is the nature of communication today. Sadie Plant's study on the mobile phone provides a multi-cultural perspective on cellular phone etiquette.

neutral emotions. The last words uttered in *Telephones* are angry – "Get lost!" – and several seconds later, forlorn, "Hello? Hello?" Spliced in between these last words are several more wordless clips of people hanging up the phone. If the video is read as a narrative, it would appear that these people are hanging up in response to a woman's angry command to "Get lost!" (fig. 2.16). Hence, in the scenes that follow this clip, the actors appear to be quickly and aggressively ending their conversations with her, leaving her to be alone. She makes it clear that she wants the person on the other end to lose his or her sense of location in relation to her. She wants to be isolated and at a distance from those around her. The very end of the video perhaps shows the consequences of the desire to tele-communicate and abandon one's sense of place as culture turns to more mobile and non-reciprocal means of communicating.

Just as the very first clip of *Telephones* features a lone man who enters a phone booth hoping to make a connection with someone, so the last clip which features a woman in a phone booth who is alone and hoping, in this instance, to *maintain* her telephonic connection (fig. 2.17). We first see a close up of this woman while she talks on the phone in a public phone booth, saying in a tone of sad frustration, "Hello? Hello?" (fig. 2.17). Her tone implies that her conversation was unexpectedly disconnected, that her contact with the person on the other line has been lost. In a manner of defeat, she hangs up the receiver and looks out of the booth. Staying within its confines, she appears stunned, unable to move and unaware of her environment. The camera then zooms out revealing to viewers that she is surrounded by a bustling city in which, car horns honk and people walk down the sun-lit sidewalks. Still, she does not leave the booth to join the rest of the world. She remains in the glass and metal structure of the phone booth, as if caught there by some invisible force.[65] It seems the end of her phone call

[65] Here one is able to see a connection to Marclay's *Cage* (1993) which features a telephone that is tightly fitted into a birdcage. The telephone, like the woman in the phone booth, is trapped and isolated. It is inaccessible, unable to be

has brought her to the realization that her telephonic connection had come at the expense of several other connections to the here and now.

Telephones have allowed us to vocally connect despite the laws of time and space. However, at the same time they have also isolated us from each other, creating virtual realities in which we can "get lost." It is the mobile phone and information technologies that have allowed us not just telecommunication but tele-presence. Tele-presence does not even require a vocal component to make one's presence felt. One's tele-presence is marked by ephemeral traces of one's self. In a tele-present state, it is possible for one to "get lost" amidst the flow of activity on the network. This is similar to Marclay's final protagonist, who, amidst all of the city's activity, is isolated in the cage-like telephone booth. She is cut off from her telephonic communication, and distanced from reality. This woman, despite the busy and populated city that surrounds her, is isolated and alone – the telephone booth cutting her off from the life that surrounds her. As she folds her hands and hangs her head in sadness, the screen goes black. As the video ends, viewers, too, are jolted out of their virtual, cinematic realities and are, like the woman in the phone booth, left in a similar state of disconnectedness and must reconnect with the present.

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reached.

CHAPTER 3:

VIDEO QUARTET: AN ORCHESTRATED EXPERIENCE OF THE SUBLIME

In a dark room, a viewer sits and watches as a four-channel video projection appears on the wall before her (fig. 3.1).[66] What does she see? Four discrete but contiguous film projections lined up from left to right. Together, these projections stretch across 40 feet of wall space as if a cinematic horizon line.[67] Called *Video Quartet* (2002), the work in question consists of hundreds of clips from Hollywood films, all of which were selected by the artist for their sonic potential: images of pianos, guitars, and horns are heard and seen alongside those of breaking dishes and squealing car tires. Although adjacent to one another, the work's four video projections are otherwise independent. Each projected image is equipped with its own channel of sound through which the film clip's original soundtrack can be heard, and each projection is capable of showing a different set of images from the neighboring screen, even though there are some moments in which all four projections show the same image. Additionally, each film sample has a unique duration with some images staying on screen longer than others. These four projections and four soundtracks, each with their own rhythm, create the complex and cacophonous experience that is

[66]*Video Quartet* is shown in galleries where one could potentially see the work alone, but it is more likely to see it alongside other people. Still, the psychology engendered by the work is always that of an individual alone in the dark. Hence, for the purpose of this essay, I will refer to the viewer in the singular. A clip of *Video Quartet* is available on YouTube, however, it was filmed by a patron of the Tate Gallery using a cellular phone. Even still, one is able to get a sense of the piece: "Christian Marclay's *Video Quartet* – Excerpt # 1," YouTube video, 2:49, filmed at the Tate Gallery, posted by "nachmann," October 30, 2006, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VmXoeZir7A See also: "Christian Marclay's *Video Quartet* – Excerpt # 2," YouTube video, 3:20, filmed at the Tate Gallery, posted by "nachmann," October 30, 2006, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaLysfcJibg Image from: Russell Ferguson, ed., *Christian Marclay*, exh. cat., UCLA Hammer Museum (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2003), 82-83.

[67] Each projection is ten feet square.

Christian Marclay's *Video Quartet*, which is as much a matter of listening as it is a matter of viewing.

Marclay's work begins with the simultaneous sounds and images of harps, pianos, and violins being tuned and warming up – similar to the sounds one hears before an orchestra begins. This relatively quiet beginning soon builds in volume and rapidity as other pianos, guitars, and vocal sounds appear on screen. This build up culminates with each screen showing the same image and sound of a woman singing for six seconds (fig. 3.2-3.3).[68] Then, as if to break this sequence, an image of man raking his hand down the strings of a harp appears on the third screen from the left (fig. 3.4). As the harp player's hand is dragged along the strings in a sweeping manner, the sound descends the musical scale, and thus, the sonic pressure built up by the operatic singing is seemingly released, as a cascade of new images and sounds gradually appears across the work's four screens. This then starts another passage within Marclay's composition. The video's dynamism beckons the viewer to continue watching as the sounds and images intermingle, building and playing off one another to create a complex orchestral and cinematic experience.

With four screens and four soundtracks all running simultaneously, the spectator is likely to feel overwhelmed but also challenged, since the asynchronous presentation of sounds and images inspires the viewer to determine which image is generating which sound. At the same time, the viewer is also compelled to identify the filmic sources from which these images and sounds come, such as *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Psycho*, *Some Like It Hot*, and *Back to the Future*, all

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[68]All stills taken by author from: "Christian Marclay's *Video Quartet*- Excerpt #1," YouTube video, 2:49, a portion of Christian Marclay's *Video Quartet*, filmed at the Tate Modern in London. Posted by "nachmann." October, 30, 2006. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VmXoeZir7A

films represented in *Video Quartet*.[69] These recognizable images provide the viewer with something to latch onto, even if only temporarily, before being again swept up within the work's potentially overwhelming flow of images and sounds.

Yet, if Marclay's work can be said to result in anxiety and a certain level of perceptual strain, the enormous popularity of the work suggests that such feelings ultimately give way to pleasure – perhaps because the spectator is able to recognize a disciplined structure within this purposefully overwhelming montage. In fact, careful review of the video reveals that its soundtrack lives up to its title, as the video has four movements like a traditional quartet. From an initial moment of warm-up, in which the viewer takes in the discrete but related images of instruments being tuned, a drop cloth being removed from a drum set, and someone sitting down to a piano and picking out notes, the pace quickens and then crescendos for the first of four times. Violins and drums take over for a moment and then tubas, harps, and whole symphonies join the mix. Jimi Hendrix makes an appearance, his atonal distortion joined by flutes and banjos. Then a passage of furious piano playing builds up to a more calm moment, which in turn sets the stage for yet another crescendo. Again, the momentum builds as both operatic and jazz vocals are integrated with images and sounds of guitars and even the rhythmic sounds of a tap dancer's feet. This layering of disparate sounds and images gives way to a second climactic moment, as soprano vocals are juxtaposed with screams of all sorts. The ebb and flow of chaos and calm continues until the video ends quietly with the sound and image of a door shutting on one screen. Thus, what appears at first to be an unstructured video montage can ultimately be read in terms of the following strategy: Marclay knowingly presents viewers with an overabundance of images and sounds in a way that initially feels overwhelming, only revealing

[69] For a more on the actors and films that appear in *Video Quartet* see Matthew Higgs, "*Video Quartet*," in *Christian Marclay* (London: Phaidon, 2005), 90.

over the course of the video that he has in fact composed a stable pattern that tempers and repeatedly triumphs over the chaos. The repetition is, in part, what makes one able to master the chaos. Marclay makes a pattern that is recognizable for viewers as they perceptually navigate a veritable ocean of sounds and images. Moreover, as I will argue, the work's prescribed scale, sound, and environment can be seen to provide viewers with an experience of the sublime – albeit a highly calculated one – and thereby calls attention to a certain shift in the conception of the sublime.[70] In sum, I will claim that *Video Quartet* evokes not only a modernist notion of the sublime associated with the large-scale abstractions of Barnett Newman, it also engages with the more contemporary notion of the technological sublime, as evidenced in the work's reliance on and display of technology and the limitless flow of information that has come to define the early years of the twenty-first century. This chapter is therefore simultaneously an analysis of Marclay's *Video Quartet* and a continued reflection on Marclay's project of indexing important techno-cultural shifts.

First exhibited in 2002, *Video Quartet* was met with near unanimous praise. Often, reviewers stressed the deep pleasure afforded by Marclay's montage. Critics described how *Video Quartet* "enthrall[s]"[71] over its thirteen minute running-time, and noted that the "spectacularly entertaining work"[72] is such a "popular hit,"[73] that "applause invariably follows" its screenings.[74] While critics were quick to point out the appeal of *Video Quartet*, a more

[70] In a 2003 interview by Ben Neill, Marclay, discusses *Video Quartet*, and states that "... there are certain parameters that have to be respected, like the scale, the sound balance and separation. …The physical display is important in order to appreciate the work, because you need that perceptual space between the four sources of sound and image." See Christian Marclay, interview by Ben Neill, *Bomb* (Summer 2003): 51.
[71] Glen Helfand, "Pop-Pop-Pop-Pop-Culture Video," *Wired Magazine*, May 10, 2002. Accessed, January 25, 2012, http://www.wired.com/print/culture/lifestyle/news/2002/05/52031
[72] Higgs, "*Video Quartet*," 90.
[73] Helfand, "Pop-Pop-Pop-Pop-Culture Video."
[74] Higgs, "*Video Quartet*," 90.

sophisticated view of the work can be gleaned from careful review of these favorable descriptions.

In an *ArtForum* review of 2002, art critic Glen Helfand claimed that *Video Quartet* shows "Marclay at the peak of his powers, converting an overabundance of information into an uncommon pleasure."[75] Signaling a correlation between pleasure and conversion, Helfand seems to imply that the amount of information flashing before the spectator's eyes and bombarding his ears is at first overwhelming and unpleasant. At the same time, he suggests that the pleasure ultimately derived from the work is in some sense predicated upon this initial sense of discord. From chaos to order, from sonic excess to harmonic perfection: what Helfand brings to our attention is Marclay's ability to transform or "convert" an unruly and overwhelming mass of information into a neatly structured and extraordinarily pleasurable work of art.

Other critics are less explicit regarding the role played by conversion in Marclay's work, but the amount of information Marclay processed in the making of *Video Quartet* and how long it took him to complete are often points of discussion in reviews and interviews.[76] The emphasis reviewers place on these facts reveals a fascination with how Marclay was able to make his selections from a seemingly limitless number of choices. Furthermore, Marclay deftly arranges these numerous sounds and images in a manner that effectively guides viewers into an overwhelming experience, and then provides them with sonic and visual cues which allow them to feel masterful relative to this barrage of stimuli. Furthermore, critics' preoccupation with how exactly Marclay managed to create the work implies that the sublime played a role in the work's

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[75] Glen Helfand, "Christian Marclay," *ArtForum International* 41 (2002): 159. (my emphasis)

[76] *Art critic* Brian Boucher says that one thousand films were used, Higgs says seven hundred, and Helfand, in a review for *ArtForum* says simply that hundreds of films make up *Video Quartet*. Helfand, in *Wired*, writes that it took six solid months, whereas Ben Neill, has Marclay on record stating that it took "an enormous amount of time"..."a whole year." Higgs notes that it took more than a year. See: Brian Boucher, "Christian Marclay" *Flash Art*, (March/April 2003), 105; Higgs, "*Video Quartet*," 89; Helfand, "Christian Marclay," 159; Ben Neill, "Christian Marclay," 50.

conception as well, as if Marclay was himself triumphant over a potentially limitless field of data. In short, reviewers imply that the work results from a sublime process and is ultimately also an occasion for a sublime experience on the part of the work's spectators, who find themselves similarly overwhelmed before then gaining a certain mastery over the data before them.

Consider, for example, Brian Boucher's remarks about the experience of seeing *Video Quartet*, which suggest a mix of pleasure and disorientation. As he observes in *FlashArt*, "the work [produces] *ecstatic* results... it yields various *pleasures*...the piece is a *delirious* montage so rich it rewards dozens of viewings."[77] Notably, Boucher classifies the work as one that creates feelings of ecstasy – an overwhelming feeling of happiness or joy. Furthermore, Marclay's editing skills have produced a montage that qualifies as delirious. A provocative word choice, as delirious describes a state of wild excitement or ecstasy and can also describe a state of temporary mental confusion as caused by fever or intoxication. The dual meaning is compelling in light of what I am calling the work's sublime effect. Clearly, the experience of viewing *Video Quartet* is distinctive because its pleasure is intimately linked to a temporary experience of mental confusion. Yet Helfand is the only critic to associate Marclay's masterful work with this concept explicitly. In the context of his article for *Wired* cited above, he compares the experience of viewing the piece to "seeing major waves crashing at the beach." Months later, in a review for *ArtForum*, he goes so far as to state (although without further commentary) that, *Video Quartet* is a "sublime meditation on film as an audiovisual medium."

If used casually by Helfand, the sublime nevertheless has a long and complex history, which I suggest is relevant to Marclay's work in a number of rich and interrelated ways. Of course a complete review of the sublime is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, there are three developments within the history of the sublime that seem of particular relevance to

[77] Brian Boucher, "Christian Marclay," 105 (my emphasis).

Marclay's work: first, the eighteenth-century conception of the sublime as theorized by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant; second, Barnett Newman's mid- twentieth-century appropriation of the sublime within an aesthetic context; and third, Jean-Francois Lyotard's theorization of the technological sublime, as described in his important essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." As we shall see, Marclay's work creates a dialogue with each of these concepts and reveals provocative connections between them.

Edmund Burke's famous essay of 1757, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, focuses on man's experience of the "passion" caused by the sublime entity and on identifying those aspects of both objects and nature that might lead one to experience sublimity.[78] Burke argues a psychological effect occurs because the sublime, residing within nature and man-made objects, takes over one's ability to reason. For Burke, the sublime experience is a mixed sensation of fear and delight. He writes,

> Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. …When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we everyday experience.[79]

Burke's definition of the sublime encapsulates the feelings of terror that arise at the sight of animals large or small whose appearance is a source of fear, or even a "level plain of a vast extent on land…as extensive as a prospect of the ocean."[80] Burke then proceeds in his essay to analyze the ways in which certain characteristics of objects and nature are able to incite the sublime.

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[78] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. J.T. Boulton, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 57.
[79] Ibid., 39-40.
[80] Ibid., 57-58.

Specifically, Burke details characteristics such as "difficulty," "magnificence," or "sound and loudness," all of which are arguably evident in *Video Quartet*.[81] Burke tells readers that when a work appears to have taken "immense force and labor" to create, "the idea is grand."[82] And while Burke focuses on the human achievement of Stonehenge, in a contemporary context a similar idea can be attributed to *Video Quartet*, which has been described by many critics as the result of painstaking, tedious editing.

Burke's thoughts on the sublime effects of "magnificence" are also applicable to Marclay's video.[83] Burke uses the example of a starry sky as something that is magnificent because it incites "an idea of grandeur." However, this idea is prompted not by the stars themselves, but by the sheer number of stars that appear in the night sky.[84] Especially applicable to *Video Quartet* is Burke's observation that: "The apparent disorder augments the grandeur, for the appearance of care is highly contrary to our ideas of magnificence." The clashing sounds that confront viewers from all directions and the busy images that blanket one's vision lend to a sense of magnificence to the experience of *Video Quartet*. Indeed, the "apparent disorder" of Marclay's work initially enhances the feeling of overwhelming grandeur. Notably, Burke warns artists that an excess of this "splendid confusion" may result in simply "disorder without magnificence." Similarly, in the reception of Marclay's work, it is precisely a sense of balance that critics celebrate. Marclay has managed to avoid this pitfall because he produced the appearance of infinity

[81] Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 77-78, 82.
[82] Ibid., 77.
[83] Ibid., 78.
[84] Burke writes that, "[the stars' grandeur] cannot be owing to any thing in the stars themselves, separately considered. The number is certainly the cause." Ibid.

through what at first feels like disorder, thus achieving "apparent disorder" which ultimately only "augments the grandeur."[85]

Interestingly, Burke points out that the eye is not the only means by which one can experience the sublime. Sound also possesses great power and the ability to "overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror," such as the "shouting of multitudes"– a motif that Marclay includes within *Video Quartet* alongside loud and shrill screams that have become infamous over the course of film history.[86] For example, at one point in the video, Janet Leigh's scream from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* is blended with several other screams to create a cacophonous roar that overwhelms the viewer's aural sense. In this way, along with the aforementioned characteristics, *Video Quartet* accords with Burke's definition of the sublime. At the same time it aligns in important ways with Kant's theorization of this concept, at once indebted to Burke's treatise and notably distinct from it.

Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, first published in 1790, investigates the human capacities of judgment and in particular, the judgment of aesthetics. Although indebted to Burke, Kant's account of the sublime departs from that of his predecessor through his insistence that the sublime resides in the perceiving subject and is not inherent to a particular object or vista. Kant states that,

> we express ourselves entirely incorrectly when we call this or that object of nature sublime…because for what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form but concerns only ideas of reason, which though they cannot be exhibited adequately, are aroused and called to mind by this very inadequacy which can be exhibited in sensibility.[87]

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[85] All quotations in the above paragraph come from: Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 78.
[86] Ibid., 82.
[87] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 245.

Thus, the Kantian sublime is best characterized as subjective, as occurring in the mind.[88] Indeed, the sublime does not reside within an object. It should be understood as a state of mind which results from experiencing what one perceives to be magnificent objects or vistas. The subjective nature of the sublime as described by Kant accords with the previously cited reviews of *Video Quartet* which emphasized the subjective experiences of viewing the work. These reviews also focused on certain characteristics of the work that contributed to its sublime effect.

Like Burke, Kant is interested in notions of expansiveness and infinity and sees them as central to the sublime. However, whereas Burke cautions against chaos and stresses the pleasure that comes from the sublime object, Kant sees chaos, and the potential for terror, to be central to the experience. According to Kant, the beautiful in nature pertains to a bounded object and the sublime "can be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*, either in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality."[89] As we have seen, ideas of "unboundedness" and "quantity" are concepts that are applicable to *Video Quartet*. Certainly, the work's numerous images and clashing sounds initially seem to be beyond definition as a comprehensible whole.

Because the Kantian sublime is best understood as a succession of contradictory sensations, the initial feeling of being overwhelmed is followed by a strange pleasure. Kant further describes the sublime to be

> [a feeling of] pleasure that arises only indirectly: it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger. Hence it is an emotion, and so it seems to be seriousness, rather than play, in the imagination's activity.[90]

[88] Simon Morely, ed. *The Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 16.
[89] Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 245. (Emphasis original)
[90] Ibid.

Video Quartet stages a similar experience for the viewer who is initially overwhelmed, feeling mentally and physically overpowered by sights and sounds. Yet, indirectly, a pleasure emerges from the chaos and combats the viewer's feeling of impotence. This pleasure arrives when one becomes attuned to Marclay's compositional patterns, the results of his (and so the spectator might think, his own) imaginations' careful, and even "serious", activity.

However, the comparison between Kant and Marclay is complicated by the fact that Kant grounds his conception of the sublime in nature. Marclay's video does not include images of the natural world. Instead, the film clips he includes foreground the highly contrived and artful creations of man, be they movie sets, instrumental solos, or cinematography. Moreover, and more importantly perhaps, films and the video to which they give rise are themselves cultural products, and while *Video Quartet* artfully manufactures for the spectator a sense of being overwhelmed, the video itself is highly calculated toward that end, and is itself already evidence of the artist's triumph over the chaotic and vast. Thus, while Marclay may seem to reference Kant's and Burke's theories through his invocation of the horizon line – the vast ocean a frequent emblem of the sublime in the eighteenth century – Kant, in particular, did not imagine that the fine arts could be an occasion for the sublime.[91] In the middle years of the twentieth century, the American painter Barnett Newman – whom Marclay also seems to reference – would stridently disagree.

[91] Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction to Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 94-95. Burnham writes, "The starry sky is not experienced as sublime, properly speaking, if we think of it as a myriad of suns, possibly with planets orbiting them and other rational beings on some of those. This is far too bound up with concepts. It must rather be apprehended just 'how we see it'. … On these grounds, Kant thus rules out both human productions (despite his own examples of pyramids and cathedrals) …from being sublime at all because of the clear teleological or taxonomic concepts involved. However, all this is disingenuous on Kant's part. For, as far as we know he spent many hundreds of pages in the *Critique of Pure Reason* trying to demonstrate that experience could never be entirely unrelated to conceptual synthesis."

In his essay 1948 essay, "The Sublime is Now," Newman loosely traced the history of the sublime and focused on the absence of sublimity within Modern European art.[92] Motivated by a desire to differentiate modern American art from abstract European art of the same period, Newman revisits the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. For him this is the essence of the visual arts and its history, which he relays in provocative albeit schematic terms.

Newman believed that the Greek conception of beauty as an aesthetic ideal held an inescapable influence over Roman and European art.

> Man's natural desire in the arts to express his relation to the absolute became identified and confused with the absolutisms of perfect creations—with the fetish of quality—so that the European artist has been continually involved in the moral struggle between notions of beauty and the desire for sublimity.[93]

Here, Newman explains that the pursuit of an absolute in art became misguided when artists began seeking absolute beauty and perfection in their images. The artistic activities of Western Europe then became mired in the question of beauty, and artists were unable to imbue art with a feeling of the sublime as a result. Newman regarded the Renaissance as a period that was so involved in the attempt to revive the ideals of Greek beauty that Christian imagery was beholden to ideals of absolute beauty "as against the original Gothic [and therefore sublime] ecstasy over the legend's evocation of the absolute."[94] For Newman, these religious narratives would have been better represented in a manner that summoned the experience of the sublime so that the imagery is distinctly removed from dependence on the beautiful. On his account, it was only Michelangelo who managed to access the sublime in this period for even modern European

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[92] Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now," in *Barnett Newman Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990), 171-173.
[93] Ibid., 173.
[94] Ibid., 172.

artists are faulted by Newman for their abandonment of beauty "without an adequate substitute for a sublime message."

Like the artists of preceding eras, the Impressionists and subsequent groups of modern European artists were still wrestling with the problem of the beautiful. For Newman, these artists never arrived at a compelling alternative to beauty and instead managed only to reject it or pose various questions about its nature and significance. He believed that even when modern paintings, like those of Picasso, are sublime it is only an unintended consequence of other preoccupations.[95] Mid-twentieth century American artists, on the other hand, unburdened by the history of European painting, are thought by Newman to freely pursue the creation of an art that summons the sublime – they and he are able to "deny that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it."

> We are reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted, for a concern with our relationship to the absolute emotions. ...Instead of making *cathedrals* out of Christ, man or "life," we are making [them] out of ourselves, out of our own feelings.[96]

Newman believes his abstractions are "self-evident, one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at them without the nostalgic glasses of history."[97]

In the late forties and early fifties, Newman's paintings featured minimal line and color and they recalled, in an abstract idiom, the vastness of flat expansive landscapes. Newman worked in a self-reflexive manner that aligned with the Greenbergian ideals of medium specificity and self-referentiality.[98] Yet, he also actively sought to make his canvases sites of sublimity – places where unbounded vistas envelop viewers, making them feel dwarfed as they

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[95] Newman, "The Sublime is Now," 173.
[96] Ibid. (Emphasis original)
[97] Ibid.
[98] For more on medium specificity see: Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" in *The Collected Essays and Criticism: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. John O'Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85-93.

contemplate his painted "environments" (fig. 3.5).[99] Standing at eight feet tall and almost eighteen feet across, Newman's painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* (1950-1951), which the artist insisted needed to be viewed at close range, is, as its title suggests, the artist's most self-conscious meditation on the sublime (fig. 3.6).[100] Its extraordinary size is accentuated by the red-orange hue that is layered uniformly upon the canvas. Massive in size, it is visually organized by stripes, or "zips" as Newman preferred them to be called, that vertically demarcate places within the expansive space.[101] Reflecting on the subject of *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*' size, Newman explains that

> scale is a felt thing. ... I have always been fascinated by the tundra, where the feeling of space involves all four horizons. ...when you are standing on a beach or on a plateau or on the tundra, you get a tangible almost fearsome sense of space. I try to declare the space so it is felt at once.[102]

Recalling Burke, Newman's aim, then, when painting *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* was to evoke the natural world and its limitless, awe-inspiring spaces. As Robert Rosenblum describes it, *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* confronts viewers with "a void as terrifying, if exhilarating, as the arctic emptiness of the tundra."[103]

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[99] Image downloaded by author from: "De retour au Québec" September 28, 2009, http://julien-vergneau-stage.blogspot.com/2009/09/new-york-musees.html Accessed March 11, 2012.

[100] *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* is Latin for "Man Heroic and Sublime." Furthermore, Newman instructed visitors to view *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* by standing immediately in front of it. He explains, "There is a tendency to look at large pictures from a distance. The large pictures in this exhibition are intended to be seen from a short distance." See: John P. O'Neill, ed. *Barnett Newman Selected Writings and Interviews* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990), 178. Figure 3.6 came with the following caption: "Two unidentified viewers in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimus* at the exhibition *Barnett Newman: First Retrospective Exhibition*, Bennington College, Vermont, 1958." Image from: Yves-Alain Bois, "Newman's Laterality," in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, ed. Melissa Ho, (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005), 43.

[101] Barnett Newman states his preference for this term in "A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess" in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990), 278.

[102] Barnett Newman, interview by Andrew Hudson, "The Case for 'Exporting' Nation's Avant-Garde Art," in *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1990), 272.

[103] Robert Rosenblum, "The Abstract Sublime," in *The Sublime*, ed. Simon Morely (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 108-112.

As if to counter this sensation, the expanse of the painting is marked by five vertical zips – human surrogates, as Newman called them – which provide the viewer with a familiar verticality within a void, a horizontal expanse that is potentially all-consuming (fig. 3.7).[104] The zips are meant to hold the viewer, and likewise, the viewer may visually hold onto them. Newman was acutely aware of the zips' location on the canvas, ensuring that they were located just over or under one-third of the canvas.[105] The zips' calculated inexactitude "defamiliarize[s] the viewers' experiences of vision," and makes them aware of both their own interaction with the work and their own "existential alienation," while at the same time, the zips create a "sense of "presence" within the viewer.[106] One is able to see an abstracted reflection of oneself within this towering and overwhelming space.

Newman's zips can be seen as a stand-in for man, who is able to cognitively manage the vastness, despite his small and marginalized state (fig. 3.7).[107] Yet, because the zips are not centered and because they do not divide the space in any sort of mathematical pattern, they appear marginalized by the overwhelming orange field that surrounds them.[108] Consequently, the viewer feels de-centered and dislocated amidst the sea of orange. However, these feelings are abated as the very experience of viewing this large expanse activates an awareness of one's own cognitive processes, which in turn reminds one of his or her rational capabilities, thus allowing one perceive such a formless and expansive field in its totality.

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[104] Sarah K. Rich, "The Proper Name of Newman's Zip," in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, ed. Melissa Ho (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005), 99. Rich states that "Newman endowed these stripes with a heady metaphysical mission to address the sensory and existential alienation of modern viewers by making them aware that, in [Newman's] words, 'Man is Present.'"

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Double exposure of Barnett Newman with *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1951. Photograph by Hans Namuth. Image from: Mel Bochner, "Barnett Newman: Writing Painting / Painting Writing," in *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, Melissa Ho, ed., 23. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005.)

[108] For more on Newman's placement of the zips see: Rich, "The Proper Name of Newman's Zip," 99.

In effect, then, the zips allow a viewer to feel that *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*'s towering scale and flood of orange color – which, due to its overwhelming nature, is otherwise "ill-adapted" for judgment – is manageable through one's own rational capacities.[109] Thus, zips can be understood as facilitating the complex dynamic of the Kantian sublime whereby one oscillates between feeling marginalized, and then triumphant in spite of the boundlessness that threatens to envelop them.

Like *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, *Video Quartet* operates on a large scale. Marclay designed this piece to extend farther than viewers are physically able to see when facing the work from front and center in the confines of a typical gallery space. Thus, one must turn one's head in order to view the extreme ends of the projection; a view of the whole, the totality remains impossible. The viewer's position relative to the four screens influences one's perception of the piece, while also making the viewer aware of his or her own viewing experiences – experiences that are characterized by feelings of disorientation and pleasure. Moreover, like Newman's colossal painting, *Video Quartet* is cordoned off into sections. These sections are demarcated by the limits of each of the four video projections. The subtle lines between each "screen" provide one with certain parameters within which one can mentally process a seemingly limitless presentation of images and sounds. Just as Newman's zips ultimately function as a means of control or limitation, so too Marclay's filmic borders indicate to viewers that what seems limitless and unquantifiable is in fact manageable, bounded, and limited by the work of a human who has spliced them together in a purposeful manner.

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[109] Douglas Burnham, *An Introduction*, 89-90. Burnham writes, "[Kant] argues that the beautiful in nature (and analogously in fine art) consists in the recognition of the 'pre-adaptation' (thus 'purposiveness') of natural objects for our ability to judge them. Indeed, it is only for this reason that pleasure arises from the judgement. In the sublime, on the contrary, the initial experience involves the *ill adaptation* of the object for, or even an '*outrage*' against, our sensible judgment. Our faculty of cognition always sets out to look for form in its objects, or some feature that is in some other way *manageable* by that faculty; the sublime generally resists all this."

The concept of referentiality is another point of connection between Marclay and Newman and this, too, will return us to the issue of the sublime. While Newman eschewed overt illusionism in his paintings, Marclay's work is referential through and through. Entirely composed of pre-existing film footage, *Video Quartet* leads viewers to think of the origins of the various clips, the familiar actors that show up, or the individualized memories that viewers might bind to these images. And yet, even while Marclay's piece is overtly referential, leading viewers to things outside the work's frame, it also makes reference to itself, that is, to the very medium on which it relies. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, *Video Quartet* explores "the nature of [its] own medium, [it is] a meditation on synch sound as the 'technical support' of the cinema."[110] Indeed, Marclay repeatedly points to the infrastructure of the cinema within the work. The environment he designates for viewing *Video Quartet* is similar to the kind in which one sees a film in a movie theater – there is surround sound and a Cinemascope format, albeit an exaggerated one.[111] Certainly, its appropriation of films, its cinematic viewing conditions, and its invocation of CinemaScope refer back to the medium of film, but, more importantly, the aesthetic of the work – the delineated cells of images abutting one another in a long horizontal strip – is reminiscent of cinema's essential material: celluloid film. Seen in this light, the composition of *Video Quartet* most resembles the material properties of narrative film – an object that has been cut, rearranged, and pasted back together (fig. 3.8).[112]

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[110] Rosalind Krauss, "Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition," *October* 116 (Spring 2006): 55-62.
[111] Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 65. Gilbert-Rolfe makes this association between CinemaScope and Newman. On screen sizes and immersive or sublime experiences see: Haidee Wasson, "The Networked Screen: Moving Images, Materiality, and the Aesthetics of Size," in *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*. Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 74-95.
[112] Rosalind Krauss vaguely refers to *Video Quartet*'s overall appearance and its relationship to celluloid film in her brief remarks about the work, but she does not make an explicit connection between the two. See: Krauss, "Two Moments," 58. Image of spliced film from: The National Film and Sound Archive Australia. Accessed December 2, 2011 http://www.nfsa.gov.au/preservation/glossary/splices.

Through its self-referentiality and composition, *Video Quartet* recalls Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*. But is it also an occasion for the sublime? And, if so, what role might self-referentiality play in establishing this dynamic? As noted, Newman's painting taps into the expansiveness of nature and, in this way, viewers are provided with an experience that is overwhelming and then awe-inspiring. In a similar manner, Marclay's work expands, not only in terms of its proportions – the exaggerated horizontality of which references the natural horizon line – but also in terms of its seemingly limitless source material. At the same time, that expansiveness is variously contained, managed, and controlled, first by Marclay and then by the spectator, who sees in those moments of abutment the simple fact that celluloid is a manageable medium, subject to the human impulses to narrate and aestheticize. Thus, one could say that *Video Quartet*, like *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, thematizes the very experience of the sublime through its presentation of boundlessness and the visual ways in which the boundlessness is contained. And, even though the work is a carefully contrived product of culture, it still manages to simulate for its spectator the experience of being overwhelmed by (and then masterful over) the abundance of nature.

Of course, the fact remains that Marclay uses thousands of film clips in place of nature. *Video Quartet*'s overabundance of images and sounds displayed on multiple "screens" along with its "cut and paste" aesthetic reminds one of the contemporary moment, which is similarly defined by an overabundance of sensory stimuli, screens, and the ability to freely copy and paste information from an infinite number of sources. It is here that the contemporary notion of the technological sublime comes into play. Like its modernist counterpart, the technological sublime results from man's contact with something uncontrollable or overwhelming. Yet in the case of the technological sublime, technology replaces nature as that which is ubiquitous, limitless, and

frightening.[113] Furthermore, the late twentieth-century conception of the sublime focuses on feeling overwhelmed both sensorially *and intellectually* before feeling mentally triumphant. In other words, the technological sublime is largely concerned with cerebral limitations and triumphs, whereas eighteenth century conceptions of the sublime focused on the experience of feeling first *physically* overwhelmed and then feeling mentally masterful.[114]

Already, one can see how the technological sublime relates to Marclay's video in which it is the surfeit of films that provides one with a sense of limitlessness. While *Video Quartet* references the medium of film, it is not itself a film based work. *Video Quartet* is a digital video, it has no physical parts; rather, it is only a computer file. Yet, the formlessness of this digital medium is quite appropriate. Due to digital technology's seemingly invisible processes, its instantaneous nature, and its limitlessness, one feels paradoxically amazed and anxious when confronted with the idea of something as vast as the internet. Likewise, viewers of *Video Quartet* simultaneously experience anxiety and awe. Yet, the overwhelming and alienating nature of technology is controlled by Marclay, which ultimately allows one to triumph over the anxiety induced by the mental overstimulation.

Jean-Francois Lyotard's 1988 essay "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde" allows for additional connections between *Video Quartet* and the idea of the technological sublime, especially when his remarks are placed in dialogue with artist-critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe's analysis of Barnett Newman in his 1999 book *Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime*.

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[113] For more on technology's encroachment on the natural see: Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964). Perry Miller discusses a similar topic from an earlier point in history, see: Perry Miller, *The Life of the Mind in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1965).

[114] Of course, making a distinction between the sensations of the mind and the body is ultimately untenable. However, it is commonplace within contemporary culture to treat these two inseparable realms of experience as unrelated to one another. Yet it is through this common, albeit false distinction, that we must view the technological sublime because of technology's strong influence over contemporary intellectual advancement.

Lyotard connects Newman's ideas to notions of modern and postmodern temporality, and locates the sublime not in nature, nor in a man-made object, but in time – in the inconceivable experience of the "now." As artist-critic Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe explains, this feeling of immediacy "is in a sense a technological convention, second nature to the computer and the phone company, leaving the work of art to expand that immediacy into a gap of which one may be conscious." For Lyotard, it is precisely this consciousness that a sublime work of art engenders, providing for the viewer a sense of immediacy that is otherwise inexpressible and indeterminable. "The inexpressible," Lyotard writes, "does not reside in an over there, in another word, or another time, but in this: in that (something) happens."[115]

As Lyotard observes, the "now" can never be presented because as soon as one thinks of "now" it is already in the past. Like the vastness of the universe which tests the limits of one's ability to fully understand the whole, the "now" is that which cannot be mentally mastered. When faced with the task of comprehending the "now," one seeks to know what "it" is that is happening. But, paradoxically, in coming to know "it" one inevitably *loses* the now, which remains immediate only to the extent that intellectual mastery is deferred.

In viewing Marclay's montage, one is asked to process an overwhelming amount of information. This is not unlike the current state affairs in which information is unrelenting and overabundant. However, as Lyotard explains, information in today's society is debased because immediately transformed into "knowledge" or, as he puts it, "an environmental given." Under these circumstances, critical thinking and cogitation are rendered unnecessary and even undesirable. He writes, "The availability of information is becoming the only criterion of social importance. Now information is by definition a short-lived element. As soon as it is transmitted and shared it ceases to be information, it becomes an environmental given, and 'all is said,' we

[115] Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 35.

'know'." In the information age, one is never uncertain, one can always "know." Society's penchant for processing and converting raw data into a form of knowledge (the merits of which are, for Lyotard, dubious) leaves little room for uncertainty; hence, there is never an interstitial moment in which one can ruminate and experience one's own capacity for mental cognition. Thus, Lyotard favors moments in which two unrelated pieces of information are juxtaposed because between these different pieces lies uncertainty. The lack of correlation between these pieces results in a temporary sense of confusion, not unlike the temporary state of destabilization experienced by Kant before the sea or atop a rocky precipice. In turn, the benefit of this momentary lapse is that it allows one to sense the very process by which meaning is produced.[116] For Lyotard, the sublime resides in these moments of uncertainty, when one does not yet know. One's experience of the technological sublime is fundamentally reliant upon the sense that one is intellectually overwhelmed, unable to immediately to make meaning out of sensory input.

Filmic montage, then, for Lyotard, might also function as a means of summoning the sublime. As Lyotard remarks, the sublime is present in any medium of art that experiments with "surprising, strange, shocking combinations."[117] The technique of montage which involves the mixing of unrelated pieces of information shocks viewers from their role as passive receivers of pre-processed information and requires them to actively look and listen in order to understand the meaning of the film's disjunctive imagery. The strange and shocking combinations of sounds and images keep the viewer in a constant state of uncertainty. At every cut, viewers must question the meaning of the film because the montage precludes one from immediately knowing what is happening. One remains, as Lyotard might put it, in the now.

[116] Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," 39-40.
[117] Ibid., 36.

Sergei Eisenstein, an innovator in montage theory, defined montage as the "collision and conflict" of "*two* pieces in opposition to each other." [118] According to Eisenstein, from the collision of these two pieces "*arises* a concept."[119] Likewise, from Marclay's orchestrated collisions rises the concept of a harmonious quartet.

As conventionally understood, the cinematic environment allows one to escape the "now" and to transcend the body. However, montage prevents cinematic escape because of its fragmentation of linear temporality through the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated images. Because montage defies immediate comprehension, it preserves the immediacy of "now." Thus, montage prevents transcendence because it keeps one in the present and critically engaged. In effect, the viewer is unable to name what "it" is, and only knows that "it happens." For Lyotard, this inability, or the feeling one has when presented with the incomprehensible and the acknowledgment that there are things one cannot immediately know is central to the sublime experience.

Yet, in the end, the exhilarating vitality of uncertainty gives way to certainty as one becomes aware of Marclay's compositional strategy. Yet it is important to underscore that for Lyotard, as it is for Kant, the certainty one experiences will be all the more rich for having been deferred.

Initially, *Video Quartet*'s montage confuses the viewer's *intellect*. One is faced with an overwhelming amount of sensory information which must be processed by the very senses that are flooded with information. In these moments of sublime uncertainty, when one is fully aware of the "now" but unable to know what it is that happens in the now, one's mind is prevented from fully entering into the action on screen, thus preventing a state of transcendent

[118] Sergei Eisenstein, "The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" in *The Cinematic*, ed. David Campany (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 30-31. Emphasis Original.
[119] Ibid., 30.

unselfconsciousness through the cinema. One instead remains fully aware of one's immediate presence in time and space. By keeping the viewer engaged and present, *Video Quartet*'s montage conflates the technological sublime with an eighteenth century version of the sublime that is concerned with the transition from feeling physically confronted with limitlessness to feeling mentally dominant. When the viewer realizes that Marclay's compositional strategy is similar to a traditional quartet and comprehends the painstaking and complex technical process of creation, one becomes aware of one's own mental capacity, as well as that of the artist. This type of contemplation, too, gives way to a feeling of the sublime. Upon mental mastery of its pattern, *Video Quartet* allows viewers to sit and watch while what feels like chaos is deftly arranged into an aesthetically pleasing order. One then escapes the here and now, but only to be reminded of it because the piece as a whole reflects our current state-of-being which is characterized by a constant processing of digital, visual, and aural information, which is often transmitted by way of a screen, into meaningful data. *Video Quartet* requires viewers to mentally give themselves over to the chaotic audiovisual concert that plays out before them. Sensorially overwhelmed by technology, viewers experience the sublimity of the "now" wherein the mind sees its own capacities at work. Technology allows for one to transcend the limits of the body; however, one's rational supremacy over technology returns one to experience that revels in one's own abilities as a subject capable of abstract reasoning.

CHAPTER 4:

CONCLUSION

As I have argued, *Video Quartet* is a complex and highly engaging work variously in dialogue with the ancient concept of the sublime. As such, the work may seem far removed from the more immediate concerns of the telephonic series, focused as it is on recent developments within the field of telecommunication. Yet, similarities exist between the two. In addition to their use of both sonic and visual elements, another important link between them is their negotiation of embodiment.

As noted, Marclay's telephonic series elucidates a paradox inherent in telecommunication. As works like *Telephones* and *Boneyard* underscore, the telephone is a means of connection, but it is also a means of isolation. But, how exactly does this medium serve to both connect and isolate? If the telephone is a means of connection it is only because it allows us to transcend the body and talk to people from whom we are physically removed. At the same time, if it serves isolate us, it is precisely because it encourages users to imagine that telecommunication is an adequate substitute for embodied communication.

Once commonplace, being present, embodied, and engaged in one's environment and with one's peers is increasingly rarefied in an age that encourages disembodied experiences through the use of technology. Contemporary communication devices, whether a mobile phone or a computer, are often marketed with the promise that they can help maintain stronger connections within one's social group. Paradoxically, though, just as technology begins, in one

sense, to fulfill these promises, its "own excess" is the cause for its failure. Thus, as Baudrillard says, "community has been liquidated and absorbed by communication."[120]

As countless pundits have observed, the silent, disembodied nature of communication in the information age has wrought havoc on social skills necessary for effective, interpersonal face to face conversations.[121] The screen of a cellular phone or a computer is as if a "security blanket" that potentially shields one from having to actually talk or interact with another human. The pressure to speak extemporaneously, without mediation, is easily avoided, as one can simply retreat to a virtual world, preparing one's statements before speaking, or, rather before clicking the "send" or "share" button. Indeed, for some, the prospect of embodied interactions might appear as daunting as the vast ocean. Therefore, disembodied interactions allow for a distance to exist, which then allows the subject to control and master that which at first seems daunting. Yet, at the same time, when engaging in disembodied communication one must enter into a virtual reality – the internet – that, due to its ephemeral quality, is boundless, formless and expands beyond comprehension. Hence, within the marketing of cellular technology there exists a relentless emphasis on customization and control.

In the present, technology seems limitless. It permeates our existences and dominates our lives. Daily experiences are defined in terms of multiplicities whether one is multi-tasking or using multi-media. Such multiplicity and complexity seems to warrant a technological device

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[120]Jean Baudrillard, *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 47.

[121] Michael Bugeja, *Interpersonal Divide*: *The Search for Community in a Technological Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5. According to Bugeja, the human condition includes a search for "acceptance" or an "inner longing for something greater than one's self" within a "community" or "the external source that provides fulfillment or reaffirmation." He further explains how communication skills in face-to-face interactions are threatened by the appeal of passive virtual interactions: "Past generations found acceptance in community because our interactions there, however challenging or intolerant, taught us essential interpersonal skills. We knew when to look someone in the eyes and 'stand ground' and, equally as important, when *not* to do so. We knew how to read body language and tone of voice and adjust for them according to time, place, and occasion. … Now families, schools, neighborhoods, and work places are wired, and so are we, feeling displaced in homes and home offices, even though we communicate at ever faster processor speeds." Emphasis original.

that will aid our functioning in the midst of this influx of limitless information. The cellular phone often acts as just such a device for some, especially *smart* phones which promise consumers mastery over every aspect of their lives. Perhaps these phones and computer screens act as frames through which one is able to survey the limitless internet landscape so that one might be able to orient one's self within the flow of virtual information, while at the same time transcending the limitations of human embodiment.

Mastery, disembodiment, the infinite: as we have seen, such terms are central to any discussion of the sublime, and it is in this respect that a connection can be forged between Marclay's telephonic works and the comparatively abstract video considered in chapter three. As I have argued, the telephonic series can be understood as first advocating embodied communication and embodied interactions with one's environment, and second prompting one to consider the state of communication in contemporary culture. *Video Quartet* can be seen in similar terms. It is likewise concerned with disembodied experience. While the work requires that one be physically present in front of it, it also allows – and perhaps ultimately requires – that one transcend the body such that one might come to terms with a work, and by extension, a technology whose vastness requires the imposition of an abstracted mental framework.

As several commentators have observed, *Video Quartet* initially transports one into a realm that – like daily life – is overwhelmed by moving images and sounds. The scale of the work overtakes one's body; sights and sounds fully occupy one's senses. Clearly, Marclay has designed the piece so that one feels challenged by this barrage. The piece appears to mimic our daily encounter with the technological sublime as we seek to process multi-sensory stimuli without becoming overwhelmed. Yet, Marclay delivers viewers from this multiplicitous chaos by

deftly arranging images and sounds.[122] His mastery over seemingly infinite samples of film reminds viewers of their own ability to control and organize the technological landscape, so that mastery and pleasure may be regained.

Thus, when considered together, all the works considered in this thesis can be said to attend to technology's ability to unmoor the self from its immediate, physical context. When engaged with technology, whether the cellular phone, the cinema or the internet, one enters into a virtual reality in which one is fully immersed. This immersion allows for transcendence beyond the here and now so that one might emerge from one's immediate context, and thereby merge with technology. However, in the telephonic series, disembodiment – and, more specifically, the transcendent capacity of the telephone – is analyzed critically. Again, in these works, Marclay is concerned to call our attention to what is lost when the body is in some sense left behind. In contrast, in *Video Quartet* the ability to transcend one's environment is problematized and then celebrated, as it always has been in the context of both the cinema and the sublime. A tension thus exists between these works and within Marclay's oeuvre more broadly – perhaps reflecting the ambivalence of a culture that both desires and fears the kind of transcendence that technology increasingly makes possible.

[122] For more information on multiplicity and media (specifically recorded sound), see Stephen Crocker, "Sounds Complicated: What Sixties Audio Experiments Can Teach Us about the New Media Environments" in *Fluid Screens, Expanded Cinema*, Janine Marchessault and Susan Lord, eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 52-71.

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APPENDIX A:

FIGURES

Figure 1.1: *Möbius Loop*, 1994

Figure 2.1: Stills from *Telephones*

Figure 2.2: Sequence from *Telephones*

Figure 2.3: Sequence from *Telephones*

Figure 2.4: Sequence from *Telephones*

Figure 2.5: Sequence from *Telephones*

Figure 2.6: Sequence from *Telephones*

Figure 2.7: Sequence from *Telephones*

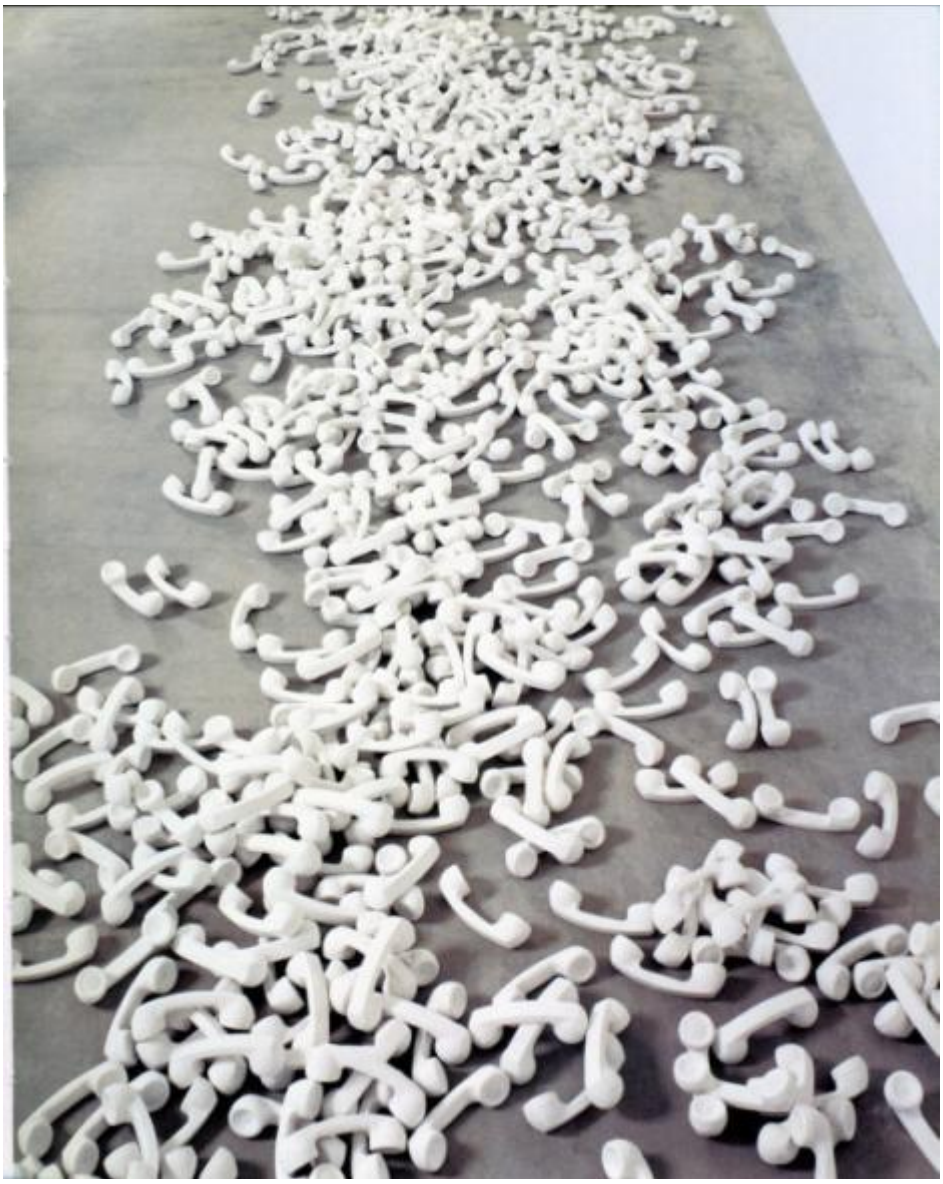

Figure 2.8: *Boneyard*, 1990

Figure 2.9: Evolution of the cellular phone

Figure 2.10: Advertisments from the Verizon Wireless "Rule the Air" campaign

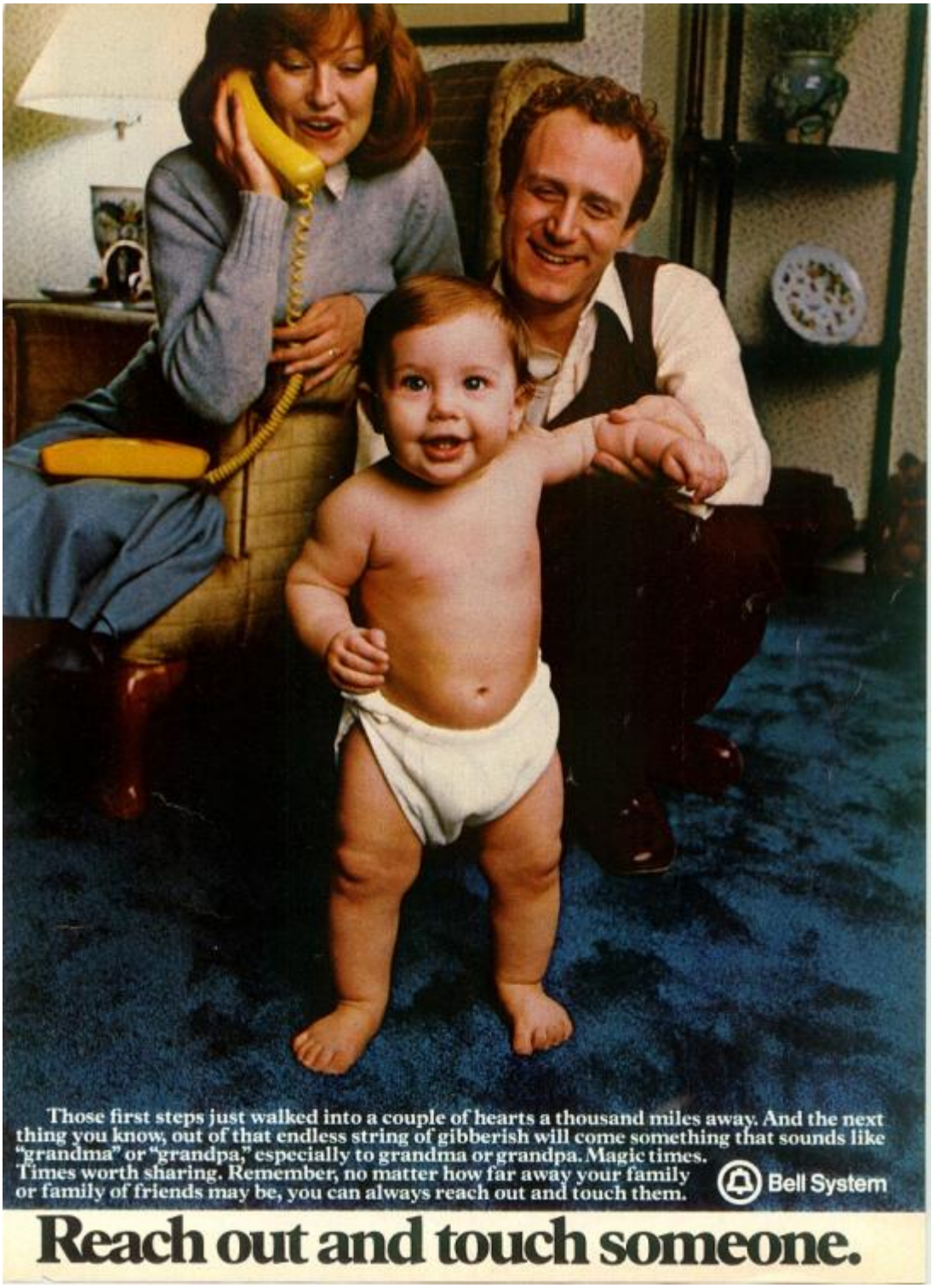

Figure 2.11: Bell System advertisement

Figure 2.12: *Glasses*, 1991

Figure 2.13: Extended Phone, 1994

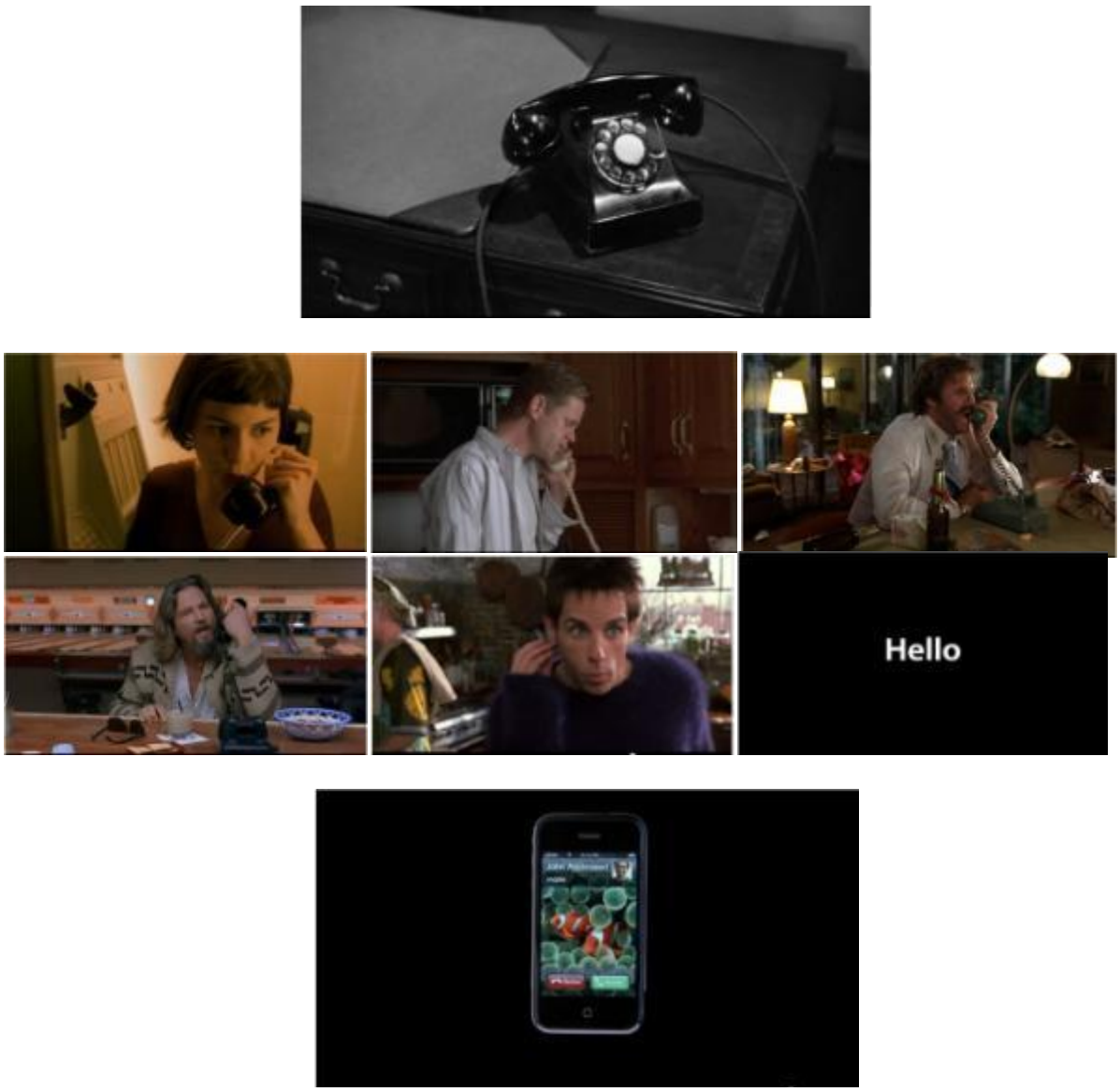

Figure 2.14: Stills from Apple's first iPhone commercial, 2007

Figure 2.15: Stills from *Telephones*

Figure 2.16: Still from *Telephones*

Figure 2.17: Stills from *Telephones*

Figure 2.18: The final frame of *Telephones*

Figure: 3.1: Installation view of *Video Quartet*, 2002

Figure 3.2: Stills from *Video Quartet* showing a build-up to a crescendo

Figure 3.3: Still from *Video Quartet* showing a crescendo

Figure 3.4: Still from *Video Quartet* showing a decrescendo.

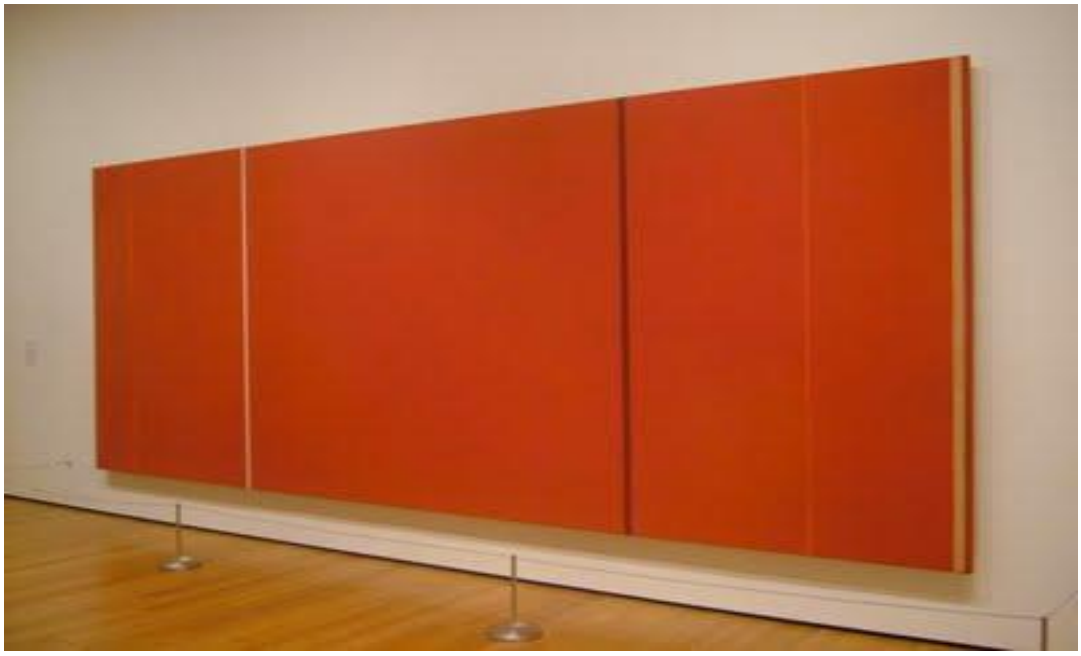

Figure 3.5: Barnett Newman, *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*, 1950-51

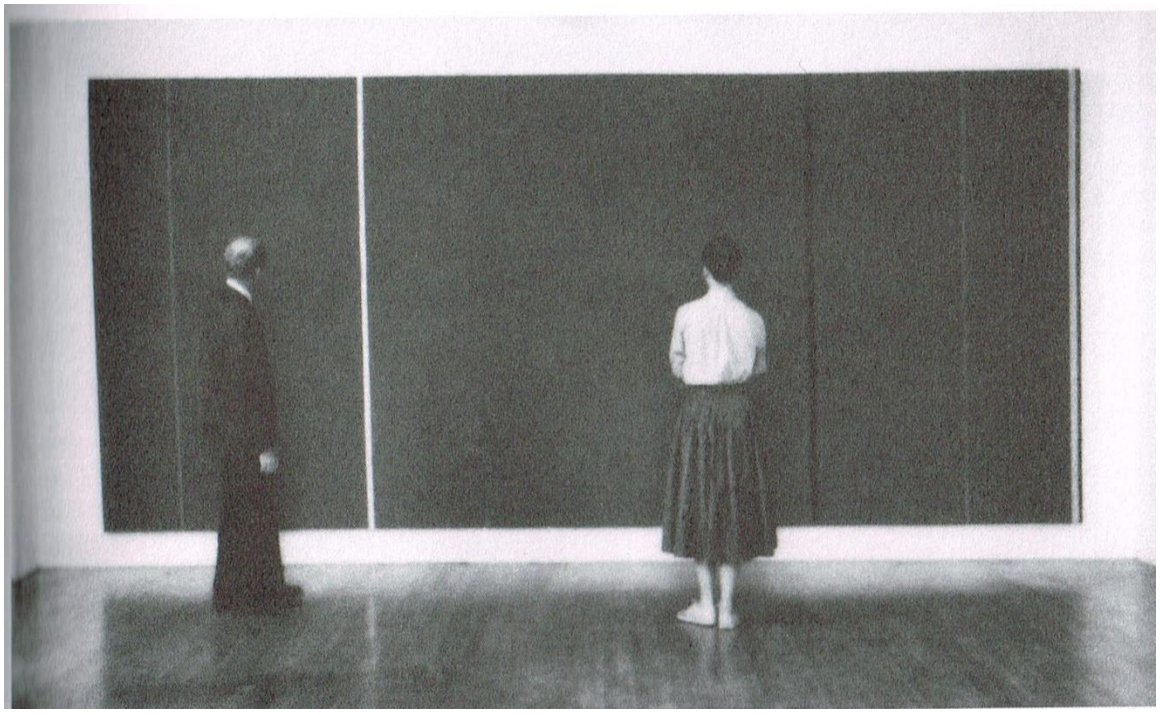

Figure 3.6: Two unidentified viewers in front of *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*

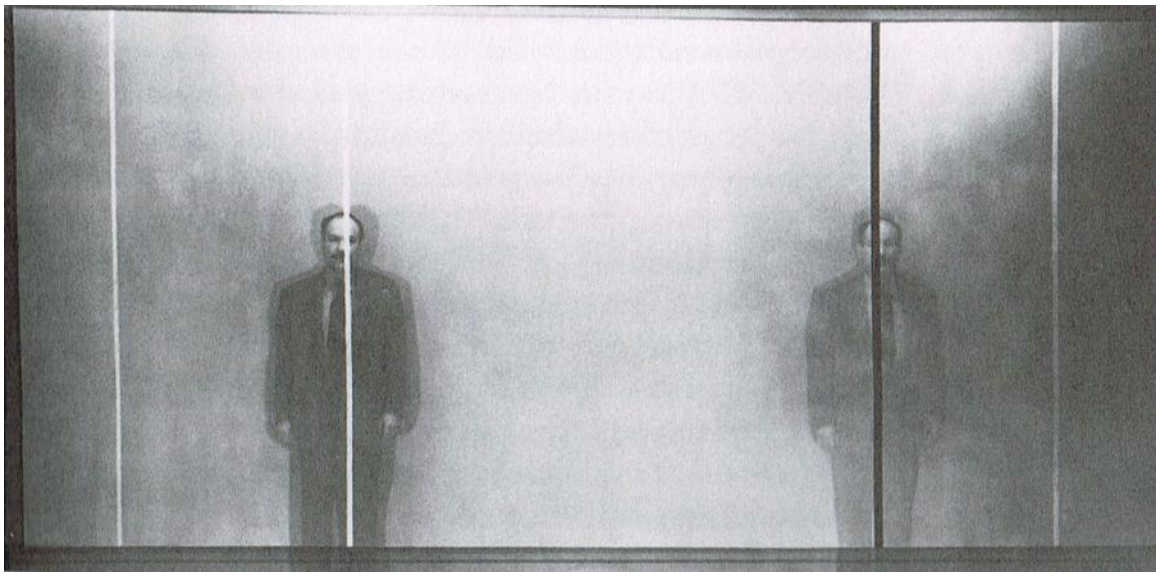

Figure 3.7: Double exposure of Barnett Newman with *Vir Heroicus Sublimus*

Figure 3.8: *Video Quartet* compared to a strip of edited film