

The Art of Marsia Alexander-Clarke

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Few artists working today are transfixed by metaphysical ideas and ideals; many, if not most, are preoccupied with pressing issues of political, societal, and personal import. Their conscientious art forms make for an exceptionally vibrant and diverse period in art modern art history globally, nationally, and locally. Within this exceptional art moment, Marsia Alexander-Clarke's art stands out as its own exception for its independent, perhaps idiosyncratic, form and content that shuttles, like a quantum particle, between its physical form and its metaphysical content.

To begin with, the initial attraction of her art is patently sensate in its use of exquisite color, and the darkness of its surrounding gallery space suffused with either music or silence. Her art further directly engages, or nearly confronts, the viewer in the deliberate slow motion of her abstract images that change and divulge their patterns of color and light slowly, slowly, slowly through the passage of time, demanding the viewer's abandonment of "moving on" to "other things" to do or see. Her installations preoccupy our attention by demanding deference to its governance over our usual, typical activities, even in the specialized space of an art gallery.

Beyond all those physical and physiological manipulations of bodily and mental participation, her art depends for its very existence in an arsenal of digital software and electronic hardware – and, as anyone acquainted with electronic gear knows, a regimen of continuous maintenance, repair-and-replacement of parts, and technical adjustment. It entails lots of electronic and mechanical "stuff."

Yet for all its sensate rendezvous with our eyes, ears, and experience of duration, the ultimate focus of her art is beyond our material world. It is a contemplation, a meditation, on the meta-physical realm of time and space. It is an ode to our groping aspiration to comprehend realities beyond those we deal with minute by minute, day after day, year in and year out.

Her video installations and static pieces alike seem to exist on an ethereal plane, quite abstracted from daily life, and evoking a reality that we can surely intuit but not readily experience as we go about our workaday routines. *If we compare what we experience in our normal day-to-day living to the shadow play on the cave wall that Plato described in his Republic, then we would find in Alexander-Clarke's art an analogue to a world of ideas and ideals that Plato describes as the real, true, eternal world that transcends our crude and clumsy earth-bound material world.*

In this her art shares in the disciplines of pure geometry and theoretical mathematics, and particularly of calculus. Not that she ever has ever been a student or theorist of such disciplines – she hasn't – but *her aspiration to represent a pure, transcendent, and transporting reality that would seem to exist almost independently of her computer- and video-generated evocations of it is unmistakable and profound.* Calculus is the mathematician's attempt to reconcile, or conjoin, the existence of Platonic, Euclidean, and Pythagorean notions of the Ideal with the clunky facts of our physical world.

It approximates – some would say equivocates – the difference between the smallest *utilitarian* units of infinitesimal smallness and instants in time and the *ideal* concept of seamless indivisibility of the eternal fluidity of time and the “placeless-ness” of space. In essence, calculus is a branch of theoretical mathematics with application to the most practical innovations of science, like laptop computers, cellphones, and GPS gadgetry in our cars, to probing the

deepest mysteries of theoretical physics and the existence of the universe. Calculus treads the conceptually opposite, yet inherently linked, concepts of the infinitesimal and the infinite.

“An infinitesimal is a hazy thing,” muses math and science writer Steven Strogatz. “It is supposed to be the tiniest number you can possibly imagine that isn’t actually zero. More succinctly, an infinitesimal is smaller than everything but greater than nothing.... Just as there are infinitesimal numbers, there are infinitesimal lengths and infinitesimal times. An infinitesimal length is not a point – it’s bigger than that – but it is smaller than any length you can envision. Likewise, an infinitesimal time interval is not an instant, not a single point in time, but it is shorter than any conceivable duration.”¹

Consider the movement of the hands of a clock that indicates hours, minutes, and seconds of time. These are illusions. For, like the sweep of the hands of a clock, time is continuous; it does not proceed in increments, however small we might conceive them to be – *nanoseconds*, for example. There is *never* an instant when we can say “what time it is,” for time is always ongoing; parsing it into distinct units is a fallacy. Similarly, a dimensionless point in geometry cannot be unitized: no matter how small we represent a point, a point doesn’t actually exist in space; it is only an idea, an intellectual construct. Likewise, we can certainly see, and describe, and approximate a representation of the path of an object moving in space; and yet we cannot truly “pinpoint” its location anywhere, for it is always in motion and never in any one place.

Alexander-Clarke’s prints (in her exhibition at UC Riverside’s California Museum of Photography) are screenshots representing infinitesimal moments that comprise her fluid, time-oriented video and sound installations. They are not derivatives: they are the very substance, the “quantum” units of her

¹ Steven Strogatz, *Infinite Powers: How Calculus Reveals the Secrets of the Universe*. New York: Mariner Books [an imprint of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt], 2020. pp. 202-01.

expansive time- and space-oriented video works, each implying all that came before and after them in an endless continuum that we call eternity and infinitude. Indeed, these still images depict *instants* – captured and rendered as static depictions – in what physicists call the space-time continuum. Hermann Minkowski, the German mathematician whose pioneering theory on the interdependence of space and time, and who profoundly influenced Albert Einstein’s development of his theory of relativity, described such a space-time continuum in 1908, asserting that *“space by itself, and time by itself, are doomed to fade away into mere shadows, and only a kind of union of the two will preserve an independent reality.”*²

In all of her oeuvre, Alexander-Clarke’s imagery begins with video clips recorded in the real world: trees, leaves, patches of sky, and in her musical works, faces, eyes, lips of people singing make frequent appearances. She then isolates and digitally splices together these recorded slivers of the real world, gathering them into montages of vertically arranged stripes that course horizontally into abstract panoramas of light and color. She explains that “the narrow linear marks are echoes of the narrow lens through which I experience my surroundings. In a larger sense they are echoes of the limitations of human understanding. How little we know about the Universe, about nature, about ourselves. Who are we? Why are we here?”³

If anything lasts forever, at least within the narrow lens of human history, it is these questions. Every religion, every philosophy, every human being surely has asked themselves these very questions since primeval human creatures found the wherewithal to ask such questions. Different religions and philosophers have quite literally gone to war over these questions, and their alleged answers, throughout world history, and such battles (whether intellectual or war-ridden), endure today.

² [Gravity Probe B - Special & General Relativity Questions and Answers \(stanford.edu\)](https://www.stanford.edu/~lbruno/Gravity_Probe_B_-_Special_and_General_Relativity_Questions_and_Answers)

³ [Marsia Alexander-Clarke | home \(videoasmart.com\)](http://www.videoasmart.com)

Alexander-Clarke proposes no answers – to do so might be hubristic and beside the point of embodying through her video creations her expression of faith in the essential validity of the questions themselves. Although she is the daughter of Christian missionaries, she is not herself a religionist. For her, these intellectual and spiritual quests are a measure of mankind’s very humanity. As humans, we have psyches that straddle both our sensate and empirical knowledge of the world we inhabit and our imaginative capacity to wonder about what might exist beyond the realities we so readily perceive. Alexander-Clarke’s artistic vision is to evoke, in a perfect melding of sensory perception and boundless imagination, our desire and our capacity to wonder at the infinite space of the universe and endless time.

Marsia Alexander-Clarke’s visual poems proffer an exquisite visual allegory of how each living thing, each animate creature, each sentient person proceeds from the beginning to the end, from birth to death, from the alpha to the omega. When we experience her video installations, thoughts about a life span, and of mortality, inevitably percolate from their habitual presence somewhere in the back of our minds into our waking awareness. At root, her art is spiritual – not *religious* in the sense of organized tenets, ritual, and prayer to a divinity, but evoking a frame of mind trained on the perception beyond the workaday realities we call “living” to more expansive contemplations on the nature of existence. As in nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism, or European Romanticism, or Asian Buddhism, she finds the evidence of the metaphysical within the physical. Her art stirs within each of us what we desire to understand what we already know is unknowable. And it leaves us longing to know it all the more.

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