

# The Year in Art

The Cold War, fifties brushstrokes, and a pickup artist run amok.

By [Jerry Saltz](#) Published Dec 4, 2011



Christian Marclay's *The Clock* at Paula Cooper Gallery.  
(Photo: Benjamin Norman/The New York Times/Redux)

## The Top 10

### 1. *The Clock*, Christian Marclay

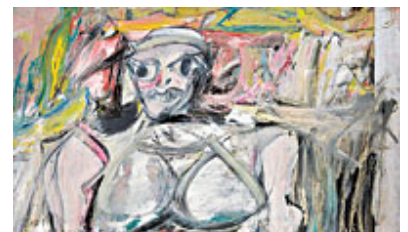
I imagine Darren Aronofsky onstage at the Academy Awards next February, announcing, “And the winner for Best Picture is ... Christian Marclay’s *The Clock*.” Movie stars would be dumbstruck; the art world would cheer. Marclay’s film, painstakingly assembled out of time-specific clips from classic movies, was a 24-hour odyssey of chronology.

### 2. The Chauvet Cave Paintings, in 3-D

Speaking of movie theaters, I yelped when I saw the panoramic shots in Werner Herzog’s astounding *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* and gleaned that 30,000 years ago, painters in southern France could draw with atmospheric and linear perspective. Mammals have never been rendered better.

### 3. “De Kooning: a Retrospective,” at MoMA

The transcendently sensuous show of almost 200 works by the Dutch-American master Willem de Kooning teemed with visual wisdom, annulling the many ridiculous critical complaints that this cloudburst of artistic genius was too big or passé. A painting supernova.



#### 4. “Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty,” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Art made me gay! I was shaken to my hetero core by the unbridled originality, brazenness, and riveting vision on display in the Met’s Alexander McQueen show of clothes that became sculpture that turned into art. Dismissing this as “only a fashion show” is like saying Mozart only wrote songs.



(Photo: © Willem de Kooning/Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York)

#### 5. “Bliss,’ Ragnar Kjartansson

This twelve-hour performance with ten Icelandic opera singers, all repeatedly performing the divine final aria of *The Marriage of Figaro*, created a replicating masterpiece of love, redemption, and Icelandic insanity.

#### 6. “Dana Schutz: If the Face Had Wheels,” at the Neuberger Museum

Given the continued imbalance in the system, for a woman to paint at all is still a political act; for her to do so in a vaguely gestural figurative style is almost insurrectionary. The show proves that like all outstanding artists, Schutz probably has an extra wrinkle in her frontal lobe.

#### 7. The Women of “Performa 11”

Though wildly uneven, Performa once again generated triumphs, including Frances Stark’s sex life of chat rooms; Maria Petschnig’s naked strangers on a stairway; Iona Rozeal Brown’s hip-hop Kabuki Aesop’s tale; Laurel Nakadate and James Franco’s theater auditions as blood sport; and Liz Magic Laser’s fantastic cracking of the news-cycle codes. All deserve a berth in the upcoming Whitney Biennial.

#### 8. “The Social Failure,” at Maccarone

Curator Bjarne Melgaard created the best installation in last summer’s Venice Biennale, *Beyond Death: - Viral Discontents and Contemporary Notions About AIDS*, and followed it with this wildly untamed exhibition and journey into pleasure, pain, abjection, and what one visitor called “the failures of heterosexuality.”

#### 9. “Ostalgia,” at the New Museum

This buildingwide show of art from the former Soviet bloc, *Ostalgia*, indicated that curator Massimiliano Gioni is now master of his own form of large-scale exhibition as narrative, time machine, pleasurable pedagogy, historical potboiler come to life, and insight.

#### 10. Lisa Yuskavage at David Zwirner

Just as I was dismissing Yuskavage’s new candy-colored paintings of young buxom monstrosities as more of her typical calendar-art sci-fi kitsch, my wife whispered to me, “These are all sacrifices.” Though I’m still not a fan, I suddenly reeled from the sight of a painted knife with blood on it beneath a table with a headless female body on top, all of it standing in for the bodies of women and the body of painting.



(Photo: Courtesy of Lisa Yuskavage and David Zwirner, New York)

---

## And Twelve Honorable Mentions ...

- **Rob Pruitt's** wonderful silver Warhol statue in Union Square, just steps from the Factory.
- **Lynda Benglis's** impressive that's-not-a-dildo-that's-art-dear [New Museum](#) retrospective.
- *The Whitney Museum's* **Glenn Ligon** survey, the year's strongest first-rank exhibition of a strong second-rank artist.
- *The Frick's* temporary reinstallation of Bellini's blissful **St. Francis in the Desert** at eye level.
- **Jennifer Wynne Reeves** and **Lori Ellison** for excellent under-the-radar exhibitions.
- **Todd Levin's** "Night Scented Stock" at Marianne Boesky, joined by other big gallery group shows like "La Carte D'Après Nature" at Matthew Marks and "Invitation to the Voyage" at Albus Greenspon, showing that assembling art from all over the style and era map can contain multitudes.
- **The Met's** new **Islamic art** galleries, so visually electrifying that the first few times I left I was certain I needed Botox to relax my startled expression.
- **David Altmejd's** melding of cases, werewolves, bad taste, mystic crystals, and amazing sculpture.
- **David Hammons's** abstract paintings enshrouded with beautiful speckled coverings seemed to gather themselves into reincarnated ghosts and shamanic presence.
- Swirling skyward in one of America's greatest buildings, "**Infinite Variety: Three Centuries of Red and White Quilts**" transformed New York's Park Avenue Armory into quilter heaven.
- **Anna Betbeze's** gutty wool-based wall works which look like animal pelts crossed with ratty old rugs and Constructivist paintings.



Matthew Barney, *Secret Name*, 2008/2011  
(Photo: © Matthew Barney/Courtesy Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels)

**AND...**

**It Was the Year of...: Waiting in Line for Art**

We did it for *The Clock*. We did it for “Alexander McQueen.” We’ll do it to get into the groundbreaking exhibitions, come hell or high water. But do we really need to be cooling our heels just for those individual, experiential artworks? (Wait time at [MoMA](#)’s Abramovic show peaked at over twelve hours.) Most of the “experience” at “Carsten Höller: Experience,” now up at the [New Museum](#), is spent standing around, awaiting a few moments’ fun.

### **Top Comeback: Matthew Barney**

It’s been five years since everyone’s favorite J.Crew model turned conceptual artist had a show in New York, and eight years since his seminal, semen-soaked “Cremaster Cycle” exhibition at the Guggenheim. (Had he retired to planet Björk?) His recent exhibition at [Gladstone](#), “DJED”—three huge sculptures crafted from very un-Barney materials like bronze, lead, and copper—gripped, surprised, and intrigued us. He’s still got it.

### **Best Use of Art-World Clout: Gagosian’s “Picasso and Marie-Thérèse: L’Amour Fou”**

Larry Gagosian’s excessive sway and prestige let him borrow many of these 80 works from major collections, almost impossible for any other gallery. The result was a bold, salacious, and tightly focused primal portrait of the shifting dynamics between the painter and his fleshy young lover-muse. Carnal energy has rarely been so powerfully concentrated.

### **Top Up-and-Comer: Ryan Trecartin at [MoMA P.S. 1](#)**

At 30, he’s not exactly a newcomer, but Trecartin’s summer [MoMA P.S. 1](#) solo show, his first at a major New York museum, was the one that really delivered his distinct brand of mind-numbingly shrill, oppressively flamboyant, tightly scripted video installation to the masses. If all the chipmunk babble, cracked-out storylines, and fast edits are still making you want to run for the vomitorium, just be patient.

### **Most Overrated: George Condo at the [New Museum](#)**

Collectors go batshit for him, and a recent *New Yorker* profile revealed that he gets driven around in a limo, loves gambling, hangs with the likes of Kanye West—who hit him up for some media-stunt album-cover art—and collects fancy French furniture. Unfortunately, this fixation on artifice is also reflected in his paintings, which are still rife with kitschy appropriation and self-congratulatory mockery. Maybe everyone likes being in on the joke?

— *Miranda Siegel*



George Condo, *The Insane Queen*, 2006  
(Photo: © George Condo 2010/Courtesy of the New Museum)