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Adrian Searle encounters ... a teacup falling 70 times in a 14-hour film

The Guardian art critic tests his stamina by watching David Claerbout's video *Bordeaux Piece*, in which the same scene is repeated 70 times from first light till nightfall



Endless human misery ... David Claerbout's *Bordeaux Piece*, 2004. Photograph: David Claerbout/Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

I have been doing time, sitting on a white bench in a white room, watching [Bordeaux Piece, a 2004 video by David Claerbout](#). It's part of *The Time That Remains*, a survey show of the Belgian artist's work that began at [Wiels gallery in Brussels](#) and, rejigged, is now at [London's Parasol Unit](#).

The back-projected video plays on a long wall of stretched translucent white fabric. There's white carpet to lounge about on. I almost expect canapes and drinks. I can see other works, veiled and milky through the scrim. The sound of a guitar leaks in, from a work beyond the wall. But here I am with my headphones, staying the distance. I can also see the light from the projector itself on the far side of the screen: a second sun, or the eye of God staring me down as I put the hours in.

The action in *Bordeaux Piece* takes place in and around a house designed by [Rem Koolhaas](#): his [1998 Maison à Bordeaux](#), set on a hillside outside the city. A bullish father struts about, his stomach bulging through his open shirt. It is quite clear the guy's an asshole. He's on the phone, arranging a film-shoot on Capri, involving his son Ralph and Jana, Ralph's girlfriend. Jana's a piece of work, too. She seems to have a thing going with dad. Ralph arrives, simmering with resentment, as well he might. There's a bit of verbal argy-bargy, sulkiness and tension.



Lofty location ... Bordeaux Piece is set in a Rem Koolhaas-designed house.
Photograph: David Claerbout/Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre
Pompidou, Paris

Dad is played by [Josse de Pauw](#), a theatre director and actor who helped Claerbout write the script. The others are unnamed. The Capri shoot is a reference to [Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film Le Mépris](#) (or Contempt). Contempt is what you feel for this unseemly bunch, rich and ripe with summer lassitude. Towards the end, [Arvo Pärt's 1978 composition Spiegel im Spiegel](#) kicks in, as if to indicate the endless round of human misery. The father leaves for Berlin. His final words to his son, "I know", are the only sign of genuine recognition. The camera pans across the city in the distance. The end. Except there is no end. Here it comes again.

The 10-minute scene is just long enough to make me feel I have something invested in this mildly unpleasant trio. You wonder what is going to happen next, what occurred before, how they got themselves into this mess – but you are always stuck in the middle of things. There is no resolution, only the arc of the day itself.

Coming to it by chance, you might assume that Bordeaux Piece is an inconclusive loop, a sliver of a story broken up into seven shots, each lasting a minute or two, the whole thing over and done with in a little over 10 minutes. This need not detain us long, I thought.

But Bordeaux Piece lasts for 13 hours and 40 minutes, from first light till nightfall. Step for step, word for word, gesture for gesture, the action is repeated 70 times through the course of the day. The cameras take up the same positions, follow the same shots. Each re-enactment may follow the same trajectory, the same script, but it is always different. Words fall differently, a cup falls to the floor and breaks or doesn't break, the world turns, light and shadow stalk around the house. In all, 70 teacups fall to the floor. That's a lot of crockery. And 70 cigarettes are half-smoked then flung to the ground. At dusk you see its glow. There are 140 phone conversations and just about as many bouts of anger, the same lies and selfish intrigues, the same wallowing silences, the same protestations and recriminations. Looking down at my notes, I saw I had written the same things almost as many times.

Down through the valley, the Garonne river flows on and on. Resentment and anger ebb and flow like the traffic on its far bank. On the afternoon shift, I felt my energy sapping, my stamina wilting. I keep watching all the same. The middle of the day seems to go on for a very long time. The acting goes into automatic pilot and so do I. I had to get out. I went to watch the carp in the canal basin near the gallery, holed up in the weed, fat grey backs in the sun, indifferent in their own afternoon torpor.



Cup of tea? ... David Claerbout's *Bordeaux Piece*, 2004. Photograph: David Claerbout/Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

What changes in *Bordeaux Piece* is more than just the light. There are shifts in the emotional timbre of the day and incidental interruptions: the house's real owner makes an impromptu early morning appearance. A microphone swings into shot, the shadow of a sound-recorder's boom stalks the father across the lawn. Claerbout could have edited such moments out – it was shot in the course of a month, with each episode put together from footage taken at a specific time of day – but he left them in.

"I usually work out of anger," Claerbout tells me, as he wanders into the gallery to adjust a couple of projections. What provoked him here? "Everyone was talking about the architecture," he says, tailing off. *Bordeaux Piece*, he told me, is a projection pretending to be a tableau. I think, at first, it is a work that attempts to attain the condition of painting. Every time you come back to these same repeated images, they look different. The light has changed, so have you. You can only see it for the first time once. Just like Pärt's composition, *Bordeaux Piece* is an accumulation of small differences and incremental shifts and stalled development. The story falls away, its clumsiness apparent in the surging of the day. But *Bordeaux Piece* is more a kind of sculpture in light, carving at the house and its surroundings, modelling the human drama.

When people talk of immersive artworks, I often find myself looking for the way out. But for some reason, I enjoy very long works like Claerbout's, where nothing much happens, perhaps because they are much like life, which is better than thinking that life is like the movies. I go fishing for much the same reason: to feel the day flow through me, being in one place with nothing much happening, going in and out of focus.



Another cup of tea? ... David Claerbout's *Bordeaux Piece*, 2004. Photograph: David Claerbout/Collection Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris

If I told you I watched *Bordeaux Piece* from beginning to end I would be lying. I doubt anyone has, apart from its maker. In any case, the gallery isn't open long enough. Dawn I missed completely. So I dipped in and out, an hour here, two or three hours there, confusing my day and Claerbout's day, inside and outside.

Bordeaux Piece gets into you as you get into it, the birdsong, the insects sizzling in the grass, the wind in the leaves, the tension and cruelty and malevolence of the human action, the non-sequiturs and the unsaid. By evening, the colour leaks out of everything and the camera can barely register Claerbout's characters as they blunder through their final turns. I came out to meet my own dusk, and not for the first time.

- David Claerbout: *The Time That Remains* is at [Parasol Unit](#), London N1 until 10 August