

**Dé-collage/Collage:
Notes Toward a Reexamination of the Origins of Video Art**

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to create new meanings by breaking up the old...

Wolf Vostell

I am tired of renewing the form of music.... I
must renew the ontological form of music.

Nam June Paik

The thesis of this paper is that video, as a cultural discourse, has been formed by two issues: (1) its opposition to the dominant institution of commercial television; (2) the intertextual art practices of an international constellation of artists during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The materials and argument presented here are introductory and, I hope, serve to encourage research into the formal, aesthetic, and ideological agendas that were later to be embodied in video as a contemporary international art form.

The institutionalization of the electronic medium of television as a commercial/studio production led to uniform styles and codes for cultural/political programming in the United States and Europe. By the mid-1950s, the statistics of how many people owned televisions and the amount of time they spent in front of their sets were staggering. One did not usually watch broadcast television to see a new visual art form or an innovative means of expression. Whether explicitly in terms of advertising or implicitly in the way of life portrayed in popular melodramas or the content of news programming, television had become a marketing tool. It was not the communications medium it claimed to be but, rather, a one-way channel, broadcasting programs that sanctioned limited innovation and whose very means of production were invisible to the home consumer. Television, through its management by corporate monopolies or state-run systems, had become a seamless hegemonic institution. The introduction of the portable videotape recorder and player in 1965 created the potential for alternative production by placing the tools of the medium in the hands of the individual artist. Yet the body of post-1965 video art was profoundly influenced by the work of a few artists who had appropriated the television as icon and apparatus in the years preceding 1965. These formative concepts are important in delineating the trajectory of the history of video art as a discourse through the 1960s to the present. I propose a reading of the work of Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell that suggests that they provided powerful models and genealogies for the later practices and thinking of video artists.

In their examination of television, Paik and Vostell confronted a powerful state apparatus that, in both Europe and the United States, loomed large beyond the high-art aura of museums and art galleries. Television (and later video) was not coded-by-traditional-art-world categories and, like film before it, offered a new means for reproducing and transforming the world around us through recorded images. Because television was seen as a mass medium, its possibilities as a flexible electronic and real-time medium were barely explored or recognized in the years before artists gained access to a portable video technology. The achievements of Paik and Vostell, both independently and collaboratively, were to strip television of its institutional meanings and expose it as a powerful co-optive force in capitalist society. In their writings and actions, Paik and Vostell were attracted to both ideological and epistemological issues. By fusing the social and aesthetic in single-channel and multimedia works within installation, performance, and television formats, they radically questioned the basis of art as an elitist and nonpublic discourse.

The incorporation of the television set into artworks began amid a constellation of art and nonart events in a period when the process of creation and the perception of art were changing. A number of movements, which were identified by the labels Gutai, assemblage, environments, happenings, musique concrète, lettrisme, nouveaux réalistes, concrete poetry, pop, fluxus, minimalism, objective dance, and avant-garde film, all shared an engagement with direct experience, the physical presence of materials, and by extension, the social and cultural worlds these artists inhabited. By rejecting the notion of the heroic, existential artist-self, which had been associated with abstract expressionism, these movements reevaluated the art object and its sources. It would be a mistake, however, to define this period as a marginal phase or experiment in some larger narrative of art history; rather, I would argue that this period was not peripheral but located a major effort to demolish both the boundaries between art forms and practices in addition to those higher batlements that sanctioned off art from the political and social.

The acknowledgment of the everyday was articulated in various parodistic and ironically critical agendas: the replication of popular culture and consumer goods (pop art); the performance of everyday gestures and movements (dance and performance art); the reduction of method to a fundamental material base (early minimalism); a skeptical reversal of high cultural standards and sanctions (Fluxus); the revision of language as a medium of visual and linguistic expression (lettrism); the reworking of the everyday visual environment (nouveaux réalistes); and the joining of different media and materials in public actions (happenings). These strategies reoriented artistic practice away from previous hierarchies and standardized categories toward an ironic, detached, and exploratory approach that acknowledged the quotidian ebb and flow of life. One of the inescapable facts of this daily life was the omnipresence of television.

de-collage actions to change the environment . . .

Wolf Vostell

As collage technique replaced oil-paint, the cathode ray tube will replace the canvases.

Nam June Paik

It is the thesis of this paper that artists working with video in the early 1960s were engaged in a utopian impulse to refashion television into a dialogue of visual and auditory experiences that would allow them to reconstitute themselves as an ever-renewing community of artists.

The focus of my attention is on Fluxus and the nouveaux réalistes, two groups that incorporated the "real" into their work, an aesthetic technique that the Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell called "de-collage." I will further suggest that décollage together with the earlier strategies of collage (Kurt Schwitters) and ready-mades (Marcel Duchamp) provide a basis for understanding the strategies of video art. The following, which were selected to identify issues and are not definitive for either artist or period, are drawn from fluxus and the nouveaux réalistes to suggest that there was a real dialogue and blurring of categories between affiliations of artists. I will further propose that the techniques of collage and de-collage overlap media technologies and strategies as they share in a turn to social and political issues through the manipulation of the material world.

Fluxus was a loose, anarchic association of artists formed around the mercurial figure of George Maciunas, its founder and leading advocate. Beginning in the late 1950s and extending through the 1960s and 1970s, Fluxus assumed a stance that can best be described as anti-high art. Its actions debunked the institutions of the art world with a playfulness and humor previously associated with dada and the seminal ideas of Marcel Duchamp. John Cage, who taught at the New School for Social Research in 1954, was a primary influence on Fluxus and a catalyst for the happenings that would occur later in that decade. Cage's emphasis on the role of chance in artmaking and perception had a profound impact on a group of artists including Allan Kaprow, Wolf Vostell, Nam June Paik, George Brecht, George Maciunas, Dick Higgins, and Jackson MacLow. They postulated a conceptual basis for Fluxus that resulted in events which highlighted the materiality of consumer culture. As with other anti-art movements during this turbulent time, this gave a distinct social edge to Fluxus, whose efforts were directed to overturning the jargon of art history and politics through subversive humor and irony.

The nouveaux réalistes, an affiliation that was identified by the French critic Pierre Restany in 1960 and that was to break up by 1964, consisted of Arman, Dufrené, Raymond Hains, Yves Klein, Martial Rayasse, Danie Spoerri, Jean Tinguely, Jacques de la Villegle. The group, which, although based in Europe, was aligned with such American artists as Jasper Johns, Rob-

ert Rauschenberg, John Chamberlain, and Richard Stankiewicz, reexamined the aesthetic treatment of the object by pursuing the appropriation of the real to new limits. It is the torn posters of the "affiches" (Hains, Villeglé, Dufrène, and Mimmo Rotella) that I am particularly interested in, especially in relation to the de-collage of Wolf Vostell and Fluxus. The spectator participates in the process as he or she deciphers and reexamines the consumer object within the text of the work. The poster as a container of commercial and political messages was a pre-electronic form of public advertisement. The visual and linguistic economy of slogans and graphic announcements is torn apart by the artist to reveal an archeological layer of hidden messages, deconstructed to expose their material and ideological base.

As the Happening is the fusion of various arts, so cybernetics is the exploitation of boundary regions between and across various existing sciences.

Nam June Paik

marcel Duchamps has declared readymade objects as art, & the futurists declared noises as art—it is an important characteristic of my efforts & those of my colleagues to declare as art the total event, comprising noise/object/movement/color, psychology—a merging of elements, so that life (man) can be art—

Wolf Vostell

Drawing upon the Fluxus aesthetic, Paik and Vostell removed television from its conventional setting by incorporating it into their performances and installations. In so doing, they challenged what Erving Goffman has called the "organization of experience" by inventing the "primary frameworks" of the social order.¹ By violating the social and cultural frames of reference we use to organize our everyday life, Paik and Vostell "broke frame" (Goffman). They employed humor—defined here as a subversive action from inside the frame that mocks or undermines conventions of behavior—to highlight the obvious. As Umberto Eco noted, humor "reminds us of the presence of law that we no longer have reason to obey. In so doing it undermines the law. It makes us feel the uneasiness of living under the law—any law."² The work of Paik and Vostell attempted to undermine the "law" of television by employing collage and de-collage to make us uneasily aware of how television functions as a medium shaping our world views.

Nam June Paik was born in Korea and educated in Japan where he studied Western modernism in music. In the 1950s he moved to West Germany in order to pursue his interest in composition and performance. In his performances Paik used his body as a metaphor for and extension of the musical in-

strument. He created a number of "prepared" pianos—instruments decorated with noisemakers, clocks, and assorted household objects. He would chop, wreck, or otherwise violate the pianos, often obtaining extraordinary sounds.

Having attacked one of the most cherished symbols of Western culture and bourgeois life, the piano, Paik went after the television set, which was fast becoming a new icon. His approach to television was first delineated in his 1963 exhibition at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, West Germany, where he filled a room with televisions that were randomly scattered about on their sides, on their backs, or upside down. The apparatus was scratched and disfigured, and its screen was either filled with abstract noise or patterns generated by magnets applied to the set, or was left blank; thus stripped of TV's traditional connotations and associations, it no longer fulfilled the function that television usually serves in the home. By utilizing the concept of "breaking the frame," Paik subverted not only what was seen on the screen, but also challenged the way in which television is understood as an object of daily life.

In 1964 Paik moved to New York, and the following year he presented a one-artist exhibition at the New School, "Nam June Paik: Electronic TV, Color TV Experiments, 3 Robots, 2 Zen Boxes and 1 Zen Can." In this installation, televisions were remade so that new images could be created, often by the viewers themselves. Among these pieces were *Demagnetizer (or Life Ring)* (1965), a circular electromagnet that created wave patterns on the television screen; and *Magnet TV* (1965), a television set with a large magnet placed on top that could be moved to manipulate the abstract image on the screen. In addition to these participatory pieces created with magnets, Paik in collaboration with Jud Yalkut created pieces such as *Videoactive Study No. 3* (1967-69), which distorted the received image from broadcast television. By manipulating soundtrack as well as image, Paik and Yalkut gave a wry and satirical commentary on the politics and content of broadcast television. Paik employed the de-collage techniques of deconstructing images and techniques through chance procedures in order to expose their hypocrisy. These works became a model for a viewer-controlled television, a concept Paik has pursued throughout his career.

Paik was always at the forefront in appropriating new video technology, such as the Sony Portapak in 1965, as well as in developing new tools for image-making as he did in creating the Paik-Abe video synthesizer with the Japanese engineer Shuya Abe. In *Global Groove* (1973), produced through the Television Laboratory at WNET in New York, Paik introduced a global model of artists' television, proclaiming a future "TV Guide as thick as the Manhattan telephone directory." In this work, Paik developed a collage technique by synthesizing images from a variety of sources (Japanese television, avant-garde filmmakers such as Robert Breer and Jonas Mekas, and other artists from John Cage to Korean folk dancers). Paik's video collage technique has been extended



Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut. *Videoage Study No. 3*, 1967-69.

to his global satellite projects such as *Good Morning Mr. Orwell* (1986), which invited the participation of performers and artists around the world to be part of his "Global Groove" extravaganza, an international mix of synthesized images that combined and recombined with each other in both real-time and postproduced modes.

By the mid-1950s, the German-born artist Wolf Vostell had begun to produce a remarkable series of multimedia projects, performances, and actions. His artist's publication, *Dé-collage*, to which Paik contributed, documented Vostell's concept of dé-collage, a kind of happening event that often took place on a large scale and involved an engagement with the public space as a social environment. In the *Dé-collage* publication, all manners of text and information were erased in a technique that revealed different elements by tearing off the surface to reveal new combinations. This was opposed to the collage technique of adding on and joining different materials in new combinations. In his dé-collage projects that incorporated television, Vostell articulated a powerful critique of the medium as ideology, seeking to undermine the political

assumptions of social discourse and the commodity definitions of high-art culture.

Vostell's performances explored the boundaries between the primary frames of organized experience; in his video works, the social and cultural meaning of television was transformed and, in the process, so was our relation to it. In his *TV Dé-collage* (1963), a wall display in a Parisian department store, Vostell proposed distorting the received broadcast image in order to subvert the ordinary frame of reference, a dé-collage technique that relied on random interference with the broadcast to cause a constantly changing easure of the image. The ironic intention of Vostell's installation was to comment on programming within the very marketplace that television serves—the department store.

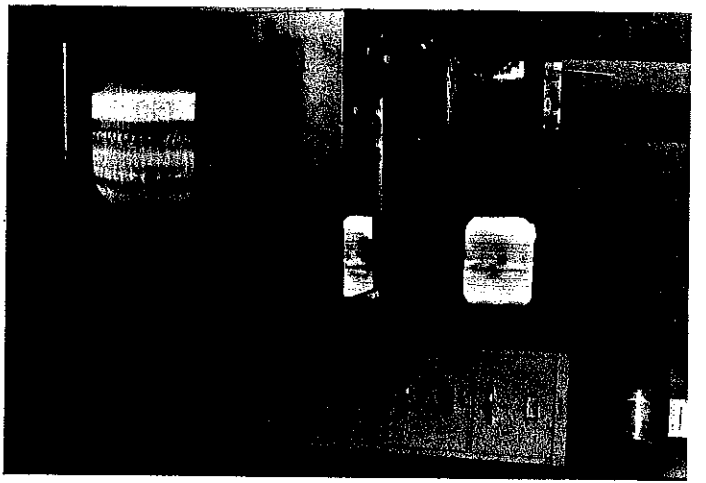
Two other projects were presented at the 1963 Yam Festival organized by Robert Warts, George Brecht, and Allan Kaprow at George Segal's farm in New Jersey and concurrently in an installation at the Smolin Gallery in New York City. A performance of *TV Dé-collage* in New Jersey began inside a shed where a television was covered with objects, such as barbed wire and a picture frame, which dé-collaged the set by reframing it and removing it from its customary context. In a mock ceremonial interment, Vostell, with Dick Higgins, Ayo, Al Hansen, and others, carried the television into a field where a hole was dug in the ground with shovel and jackhammer. The broadcast image was then altered and transformed, the set was removed and destroyed, and finally the television set itself was buried. In this public action of dé-collage, Vostell commented on the public institution of television as something to be confronted and transformed through art. The text prepared by Vostell for the event is a description of dé-collage TV.

TV-picture De-formation
with
magnetic zones
DO IT YOURSELF
Wolf Vostell

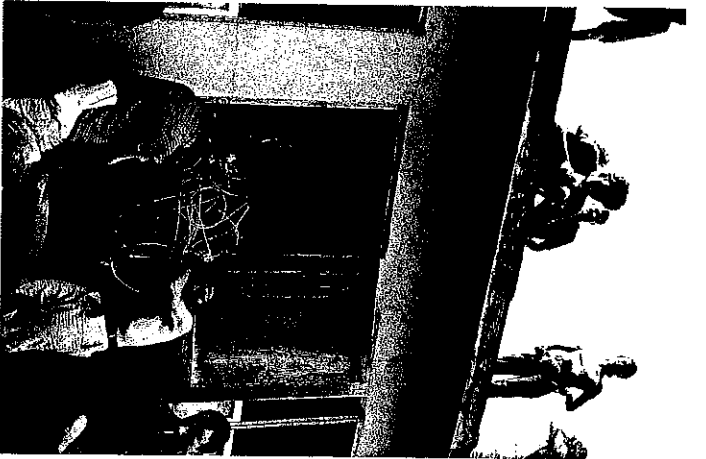
How to de-educate the educational TV???

Nam June Paik

TV Trouble (1963) at the Smolin Gallery consisted of a room filled with televisions resting on top of the furniture and file cabinets, or laid on their sides; TVs whose reception had been distorted or reduced to simple wave bands. As a commentary on both office space as information storage and on television as a form of information, the piece was a dé-collage of the space as well as of television itself. By deconstructing the ideology of television, Vostell effectively "broke the frame," taking art out of the art world in order to help us understand the real function of television within society.



Wolf Vostell, *Dé-collage Performance*, 1961. © Peter Moore.



The strategies employed by Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell are closely aligned to those of Fluxus and the *nouveaux réalistes*. Paik is identified with Vostell in that they shared collaborations and interests as members of the international Fluxus movement. However, my point is not to delineate their differences or similarities or to ascertain who did what first, for Paik and Vostell are not alone in the early history of video as an art form. Nor should we see influences on the early history of video as an art form. (Nor should we see directly employed the medium. The roles that these movements played were important both art historically and culturally as examples of the reciprocal relationship that exists between evolving modes of depiction and perceiving.

These early pieces demonstrated the need for artists to question television's economic and ideological power (as exemplified in Vostell's work) and to create new tools and experiences out of video and television (as embodied in the extraordinary career of Paik). By questioning the notion of a high art removed from everyday experience, Fluxus and other constellations of artists attempted a dialogue between artist, artwork, and public. The *dé-collaged* posters of Villeglé, which were ripped and torn apart to reveal altered alignments, were more than a formal exercise: like Vostell's proposed *dé-collaged* wall of

televisions in the department store, the public wall of the posters combined statements of defacement and revelation. By alerting us to how we looked at television, Paik and Vostell proclaimed the possibility of changing this relationship from a passive to an active one.

The history of video as an aesthetic discourse is one of a language of collage, in which strategies of image processing and recombination evoke a new visual language from the multireferential resources of international culture. The spectacular history of the expanded forms of video installation can be seen as an extension of the techniques of collage into the temporal and spatial dimensions provided by video monitors placed in an intertextual dialogue with other materials. Thus the works of Mary Lucier, Rita Myers, Fabrizio Plessi, Bulky Schwartz, and others continue and build on this process. The technique of *dé-collage* in video installation also extends performance and multimedia into a critique of the social and ideological by deconstructing existing constructions of communication technologies and industries. Here one is reminded of the work of Francesc Torres, Juan Downey, Paper Tiger Television, and Dieter Froese.

The directions and oppositions articulated in the early appropriation of television by artists and their contribution to image making continues today in the international and intercultural alignment of artists who are regaining a community of shared intention as they continue to explore the possibilities of this art of the future.

look up