

Mid-Term Assignment // Lecture Diary
Desma 201: Media Arts – An Introduction
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Professor Erkki Huhtamo

Meeting 1: Confronting Media with Media

(note: I had an excused absence from this day's meeting, so my diary entry will be based on that day's readings and video material related to that day's meeting. Consequently, it will be shorter than the normal 600 words)

The two artists discussed at length in this day's readings are John Heartfield and Marcel Duchamp, who exemplify two different approaches to re-using existing media to create their artwork. While the use of found material in art was a recurring method throughout the 20th century (including Burroughs' cut-ups, sampling in hip-hop and rock and roll music, etc), it was perhaps first identified and theorized in the early 20th century by Heartfield and Duchamp.

Heartfield championed photo-montage and compilation films as a visual way to raise political awareness against the Nazis (who are thought of as the first political movement to use mass media, to great effect). By using Nazi images and films as source material, Heartfield created new works which countered the original pro-Nazi messages of its source material by revealing that material's true intentions – a form of agit-prop which confronted media with media, propaganda with propaganda.

Duchamp's ready-made pieces appropriated common objects into new and ambiguous combinations and contexts. Both Heartfield and Duchamp selected and used existing artifacts from the world at large, but they differed in that Heartfield selected and reconfigured polemical material for his own polemical means, while Duchamp came from a more neutral position, picking found objects that were devoid of 'any idea or suggestion or aesthetic pleasure'¹ to create physical 'montages' which ambiguously questioned values and methods in art.

The political agitation of John Heartfield's compilation films has resonance today in our time, as a direct line can be seen from his Nazi counter-propaganda films to the 'scratch video' phenomenon of the early 1980's, to the more political video spoofs of EBN (Emergency Broadcast Network), to today's contemporaneous YouTube spoofs of topical political video footage. In each of these cases, mass media created by the political establishment is appropriated to create new visual work that acts as a near-instantaneous ideological counter-punch. Contemporary versions of Heartfield's photo montages include the visual work of Adbusters, various website hackers, and the countless anti-Bush t-shirts, bumper stickers, posters, etc, that have proliferated in recent years. Taken together, these artworks comprise what Joanne Richardson identified as 'tactical media', which address an external power structure through

¹ Adcock, Craig. "Marcel Duchamp's 'Instantanés: Photography and the Event Structure of the Ready-Mades'", *Event Arts & Art Events*, ed. Stephen C. Foster (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1988), pg. 244, quoted from Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp, Appearance Stripped Bare*, trans. Rachel Phillips and Donald Gardner (New York: Viking, 1978), pg. 28.

“makeshift, temporary infiltrations from the inside through actions of thefts, hijacks, tricks and pranks.”²

In the art world, the legacy of Duchamp’s ready-mades can be seen today the Device Art movement (to name just one descendant), while in the realm of unauthored mass-produced objects, the ready-made’s influence can be seen in the celebrated ‘unuseless Japanese inventions’.

Meeting 2: The Urge To Destroy

Even though this meeting was a rather free-wheeling affair that covered a lot of the territory of 20th century art (the auto-destructive art of Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Situationists, etc), at its core was an examination of art’s urge to destroy old ideas and methods, an urge that shares its roots with Modernism’s impulse to replace old ideas and methods. My diary response will focus on the parallels between the destructive urge of the art movements discussed in this class meeting, and the ethos of the 1970’s English punk scene.

Both punk and the various movements of what Gustav Metzger identified as auto-destructive art emerged as responses to unsatisfactory conditions in society. The urban wandering of the Lettrist International (an activity dubbed *derives*) can perhaps be seen as a precursor to the nihilistic boredom of London teenagers who formed the first generation of English punk bands. Both were responses to the alienation of the modern city.

Alienation also sprang from the futility of society’s obsession with consumption, which for the Situationists, ‘had come to define happiness and to suppress all other possibilities of freedom and selfhood’³. Guy Debord, in his *Society of the Spectacle*, decried society’s “decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing⁴”. Punk orthodoxy had a similar disdain for consumption, as exemplified by Vivienne Westwood’s re-purposing of scrap clothing into stage clothes for punk bands, the crude ransom note-style recycling of Jamie Reid’s punk graphic design, and by the squatters’ lifestyle favored by the original London punks.

Also common to punk and auto-destructive art is the belief in a kind of reformist agenda, the desire to create new orders to replace old ones. As Guy Debord wrote in *The Society of the Spectacle*, Dada’s salon at the Cabaret Voltaire was “a laboratory for the rehabilitation of everyday life”⁵. Punk music of course was a response to the rock and roll establishment which by that time had become bloated and moribund, bound by what Joe Strummer of the Clash called ‘phony Beatlemania’. Both were destructive forces against a morally and creatively corrupt establishment.

Punk and auto-destructive art also share the subversive use of news media as a way to infiltrate the established power structure for dual purposes of attacking it, and to

² Richardson, Joanne. *Language of Tactical Media*, http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors2/richardsoncontext2.html, August 2002.

³ Marcus, Greil. *The Long Walk Of The Situationist International*, from *Guy Debord and the Situationist International*, McDonough, Tom (ed) (MIT Press, 2002), pg. 3.

⁴ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Thesis 2, 1967. From the Nicholson-Smith English translation, as cited at www.wikipedia.org.

⁵ Ibid, Marcus, Greil. pg. 5.

disseminate their own agenda. Just as Marinetti published his Futurist manifesto in *Le Figaro* in 1909, Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren (who studied the Situationist movement) ably manipulated the London tabloids into publishing shocking exploits of his band.

As is the case with many revolutionary movements, the seeds of punk and auto-destructive art's decline were built into their blueprints. What began as a kind of protest against the production and consumption of commodities, inevitably became itself commodified. After all, the Sex Pistols were a band created and calibrated to outrage by their svengali-like manager – rebellion packaged for consumption. In a similar way, Duchamp's spontaneous and decidedly un-precious ready-made objects have ended up in high-art museums. Both punk and auto-destructive art are destined to live on in commercialized forms, through endless band reunion tours, coffee table books, souvenirs sold at art museums, compilation box sets, 'punk'-style fashions sold at malls, and so on... fitting conclusions of their anti-consumption beliefs, the result of their built-in paradoxes.

Meeting 3: Avant-Garde and the Moving Image

This class meeting was primarily spent screening several videos and films, as professor Errki Huhtamo was away. The pieces we watched were 'Zygnosis', a documentary on John Heartfield by Gavin Hodge; *Entr'acte* (1924), a Dadaist experimental film by René Clair; *Vormittagspuk* (1928), a Dadaist experimental film by Hans Richter; *Ballet Mekanique* (1924), and avant-garde film by Fernand Leger and Dudley Murphy; and *The Art Of The Future* (1969), a CBS television documentary on the then-emerging alliances between science and art.

Since professor Huhtamo was absent and the entire class time was devoted to watching films, there was no discussion about the qualities, merits or production of these films. Therefore, my comments on them will be impressions from merely watching them.

These films clearly fall into two sets: the factual documentaries and the experimental art films. The three art films all shared similarities in that they were free of narrative structure, free of dialogue, and free of synchronized sound. It's actually hard for me to remember where one film ended and one began. Each film comprised various short plotless scenes, strung together almost at random. They were scenes of what were then undoubtedly eye-popping visuals such as hovering hats, people walking backwards, kaleidoscopic views of pumping machinery, disembodied close-ups of human facial features, etc. What became clear to me was that all three films were made with a sense of joy derived from the discovery of the physical and optical properties of film, a kind of pure cinema that parallels the photogram experiments of Man Ray, Moholy-Nagy and others. It's also worth noting that all three films are made by Europeans, at a time when most American cinema appeared in comparison to be made as stage plays that happened to be captured by motion picture cameras (in the same way that early automobiles were modeled on horse carriages, before cars had evolved into their own independent form).

The makers of *Entr'acte*, *Vormittagspuk*, and *Ballet Mekanique* appeared to have a keen awareness of the inherent properties of their medium. This awareness also shows up in the work on Nam June Paik, who was included in this class' readings, but not the class meeting. Much of Paik's work exploited inherent physical properties such as the RGB color synthesis and horizontal scanning of CRT tubes, their sensitivity to magnetic forces, in a similar way that René Clair, Hans Richter, Fernand Leger and Dudley Murphy

exploited film's inherent qualities such as its sensitivity to light exposures, its time structure (through montage and editing), its ability to be recorded or played backwards, etc. This awareness of their media definitely enriched their work.

The John Heartfield documentary *Zygnosis* does a good job of describing his life and explaining the significance of his work. As a documentary, however, it suffers from several pitfalls. The visual design of the film was quite busy-looking, perhaps as an homage to Heartfield's compilation films and photo-montages. But it was unclear to me whether many of the film loops and doctored Nazi footage were actually Heartfield's work or late 1980's-era video effects zealously created by the documentary filmmakers. *Zygnosis* also fell into the common documentary trap of being overly reliant on favorable testimonials from close friends and associates of the subject. In particular, Heartfield's female companion (whose name I didn't record) had more screen time than her contributions merited. The documentary could have benefited from some more objective viewpoints.

The Art Of The Future in comparison is pretty free of this problem, as it was made by a television news department during the golden age of television journalism. The documentary is a straightforward-yet-fascinating look at the kinetic art movement in the late 1960's, and how developments in science and technology were impacting art. Artists covered included EAT (Experiments In Art And Technology), and Victor Vasarely. The work covered had a strong hint of the colorful optimism of the late 1960's, but this documentary could have benefited by at least mentioning earlier artists like Moholy-Nagy and Duchamp, who laid the groundwork for the artists covered in this film.

Meeting 4: New Harmony? Art, Engineering, Science, Life

This meeting began with a pledge from professor Errki Huhtamo to bring more spontaneity to his presentations, which he then put to action by going off script and delivering part of a recent presentation he gave on *Urban Gigantology: the Archaeology of Big Screens*. The presentation gave a brief, truncated history of large-scale display images in urban settings, covering things like billboards (both commercial and political), posters, electronic displays, cloud projection and Albert Speer's *Cathedral of Light*. It resonated with me because as an undergrad architecture student I had done some research into many of the same case studies, looking for a secret history of the alliance between architecture and image technology.

We next moved on to the official class meeting, on Constructivism and its legacy. Constructivism was described as a notion of art that related to engineering and the idea of labor, and synthesized art, design, technology and science.

What followed was a sweeping survey of many artists whose work embodied or were influenced by Constructivist ideals, including Vadimir Tatlin, El Lissitzky, the Bauhaus, Naum Gabo, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Thomas Wilfred, Nicolas Schöffer, and EAT (Experiments in Art & Technology). In some ways, these artists span the territory between the two documentaries shown at the previous class meeting, between the graphic and political force of John Heartfield's work, and the technological optimism of the artists shown in *The Art Of The Future*.

The lecture content which interested me the most was the later work that dealt with kinetics and 20th century technology. Projects like Moholy-Nagy's *Light-Space Modulator* and Thomas Wilfred's *Lumia* and *Table Model (Clavilux)* are predecessors to current artists' work that I feel allied with, and formed an artistic trajectory which I would like to extend through my own work. I was pleased to learn about historical work

which shared my desire to create art using electric light, color and automation. And projects like Nicolas Schöffer's *Le Lumino* and Thomas Wilfred's *Clavilux* light boxes raised interesting questions about the division between industrialized consumer culture and unique artistic creation.

The technological optimism of the projects discussed in this class meeting found a dissenting voice in one of the assigned readings: Jack Burnham's essay *Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed*. In it, Burnham raised and discussed answers to the question, "...why should electrical and electronic visual art prove to be such a dismal failure?"⁶ Through a detailed re-telling of the demise of five separate arts organizations which sought to synthesize art with technology – demises mostly brought about by mismanagement, or the immature state of technology - he declared the marriage of art and technology to be a failure. In hindsight, this declaration now appears premature, as Burnham wrote this in 1986, when the 'digital revolution' was just getting under way. The world had yet to see the dawn of desktop publishing, increases in computing power and convenience, the internet, haptic interfaces, and the flowering of readily available creative software.

Meeting 5: The Lure of Artificial Life

Perhaps as a continuation of Errki's promise to lecture spontaneously, this day's class meeting did not adhere to 'The Lure of Artificial Life' as listed. Instead, he delivered a rather enthusiastic talk on media experiments of John Cage, the Fluxus group, and Nam June Paik. Various music and video pieces were shown, including Yoko Ono's film *Bottoms*, Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman's video work on WGBH's "Experimental Workshop", and Joseph Beuys' song 'Sonne Stat Reagan'.

It is John Cage who appears to be the father figure to the group of artists discussed here. In particular, Paik – who had begun his creative career with sound - had made certain in writings and interviews to name Cage as a seminal influence on his work. Cage was a very influential innovator for media arts, working as a composer, philosopher, and visual artist, but his importance lies primarily in expanding the definition of music, to incorporate incidental sounds and strategies not previously associated with music. He was interested in relationships between order, contingency and randomness, which took him on a creative trajectory from 'music', to noise, to silence.

I found Cage's manifesto *The Future of Music: Credo* to be striking in its prophetic power, spelling out many developments in music and sonic art which would play out in the ensuing decades (remarkably predicted way back in 1937!). He preached the merits of using incidental noise and to create work that was not formal 'music', but an 'organization of sound'⁷ - an idea which prefigures later musical developments such as ambient music and sampling. Speaking about musical time-keeping, he said that, "The 'frame' or fraction of a second, following established film technique, will probably be the basic unit in the measurement of time", which successfully predicted the current use of bpm (beats per minute) in modern music production, away from classical terms to describe tempo such as 'andante', 'allegro', and so on.

⁶ Burnham, Jack. "Art and Technology: The Panacea That Failed", from *Video Culture: A Critical Investigation*, ed. Hanhardt, John (Peregrine Smith Books, 1986), pg. 233.

⁷ Cage, John. "The Future of Music: Credo", from *Silence*, (1973), pg. 3. Originally delivered as a talk in 1937.

It's also interesting how Cage set up the narrative structure of his manifesto, integrating two distinct voices running continuously through the text, which speak separately but discuss the same content at different paces.

Nam June Paik – an early member of the influential Fluxus group - started out in music and sound (for example, studying with Karlheinz Stockhausen), but soon began working in video, altering and treating television sets as Cagean musical instruments. He saw parallels between his studies in music and the new frontier he was establishing with video... "It is a historical necessity that a new decade of electronic television should follow the past decade of electronic music."⁸

Fluxus was also discussed, in terms of their indebtedness to John Cage, their inclusiveness, their playful desire to shock, their desire to work across different mediums, and their desire to create by performing. In a rare bout of public speaking, I raised my hand and volunteered the fact of Fluxus' hidden musical legacy: that LeMonte Young was a mentor to John Cale (who would later create seminal work with the Velvet Underground, Nico, The Stooges, as well as on his own), and that Al Hansen's grandson was Beck Hansen. This of course is in addition to the (in)famous musical work of Fluxus member Yoko Ono.

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⁸ Paik, Nam June. (1965). As quoted by professor Errki Huhtamo in a slideshow presentation at Meeting 5, Oct. 26, 2007.