SVEN LÜTTICKEN

PERFORMANCE ART AFTER TV

ELEVISION IS VIDEO, video is television; they are part of the same technological *dispositif*. What is a video artist, if not a television producer without a channel at his disposal? The formal characteristics of much video art are hardly compatible with the dominant regime in TV programming; video art has developed its own modes of distribution, mostly based on tapes or DVDs sold in limited editions. In the 1970s, René Berger distinguished between macro-TV (broadcast television), meso-TV (local cable) and micro-TV (video); at most, some artists managed to infiltrate and utilize the meso level of local cable TV, whose democratic potential was never fully realized.[1] While in general it failed to penetrate even this level, video art at its best pushed the *logic* of television to a point where the medium's potential and its failings, its complexity and its contradictions, were illuminated.

Television was the first medium that transmitted a potentially uninterrupted flow of images into people's homes, penetrating daily life much more thoroughly than film had done. The formats developed to fill this flow also created new forms of performance. In the 1960s, Andy Warhol's pop prophecy that everybody would be famous for fifteen minutes both articulated a fundamental transformation and belied its complexity. If it emphasized the element of *acceleration*—fame becoming ephemeral—it failed to note that time has also been *dilated* through the creation of what one might term 'general performance', a performance no longer bound by the conventional duration of plays or films. If Warhol's menagerie of 'superstars' was in many ways prophetic of the emergence of new forms of self-acting, of the reality TV of recent decades with its disposable celebrities, the role of performance in 1960s art was more complex than overly linear narratives of the co-optation or appropriation of the avant-garde suggest.

During the 1960s, performance art was not yet a common term for denoting the new forms of live art. The new theatricality was conceptualized in different ways: as event, as happening or, in Germany, as *Aktion*. Nonetheless, at the beginnings—in John Cage's work, for example—there was the question of performance: *performance for television*. The scores for Cage's pieces *Water Walk* and *Sounds of Venice*, both dated 1959, are subtitled 'for solo television performer'. In 1960, *Water Walk* was actually performed by Cage himself on a popular TV game show. But what are the specific properties of a television performer and of television performance? How has televisual performance infiltrated and shaped art since the early 1960s? And how do video and performance art intervene in the temporality of TV and the new, televisual modes of acting?

Real-time image

In contrast to most of Warhol's 1970s video projects, *Water* (1971) was not intended for television, but it shares an important characteristic with those other works: the role of the human voice, of conversation.[2] When Warhol TV pilots such as *Phoney* or *Fight* show people on the phone or fighting, the dialogue is clearly audible; by contrast, the conversation in *Water* consists of mumbled small talk from off-screen; what one sees is a detail of the office water-cooler, around which the speakers have supposedly gathered, perhaps discussing last night's TV. The cooler fills the screen and becomes its double—a plastic surface with bubbles rising behind it, functioning as pure light waves, a kind of empty yet oddly pregnant televisual time. The voices articulate this time, albeit informally, through a gentle swelling and ebbing of conversation. But as video performance, the water-cooler conversation stops being a 'break' and becomes a new form of labour.

In his philosophy of video, Maurizio Lazzarato states that 'capitalism and its technologies introduce movement and time into images, and vice versa'. But in contrast to Gilles Deleuze, he does not consider the

---

[1] René Berger, 'Video and the Restructuring of Myth', in Douglas Davis and Allison Simmons, eds, *The New Television: A Public/Private Art*, Cambridge, MA 1977, pp. 206–21.
[2] *Water* was made for a show by Yoko Ono at the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, NY. Collaborating with George Maciunas, Ono invited a number of artists to send in water-based works for *A Water Event*.

cinema to be the primary agent of the technological liberation of the 'flow of becoming' from traditional Western representation. Film and photography are both machines that crystallize time: photography does so by freezing it, while film creates an illusion of movement; only video captures movement itself by transmitting the vibrations of light. Film stays too close to a model of representation as impression on a medium, whereas video images are not representations or reproductions of reality, but oscillations of light, contractions and expansions of light waves—and thus of time itself. For the Bergsonian philosophical lineage, matter already consists of light in time; it is not so much that the brain perceives matter and transforms it into representations; rather, the brain is an interface between received movements (excitations) and executed movements (responses). Like our brain/body, Lazzarato emphasizes, media technologies are interfaces that modulate time.[3]

The point is an important one for historical-cultural analysis. Like Deleuze, Lazzarato to some extent ontologizes and 'naturalizes' history; yet the work still retains a potential for historical analysis. In fact, with its attempts to infuse history with becoming, opposing teleological and dialectical schematizations with paeans to unbound duration, neo-Bergsonian philosophy itself mirrors the increasing integration of history and subjective duration since the mid-20th century. As daily life is increasingly infiltrated by media that shape our time, the temporality of daily life is synchronized or syncopated with historical events in ever more complex ways.

Lazzarato's video philosophy could be read as a montage of Henri Bergson's thought and the writings of the video artist Nam June Paik. Crucially, in the 1960s Paik came to realize that Cage's reduction of music to one of its basic elements, time—most radically in *4'33"*—made sense in televisual terms: what is TV but a potentially permanent flow of time-signals that needs to be articulated in some way, as Cage did with his compositions? Decades before his manifold appearances in Paik's work during the 1970s and 1980s, Cage had appeared on the popular TV quiz show, *I've Got a Secret*, in 1960. Here, he performed his piece *Water Walk,* based on his earlier *Water Music*, with the overlaid sheets

---

[3] Maurizio Lazzarato, *Videophilosophie: Zeitwahrnehmung im Postfordismus*, trans. Stephan Geene and Erik Stein, Berlin 2002, pp. 24, 48, 71, 47.

from *Fontana Mix* used as compositional tool.[4] Asked by the show's host if it was okay if the audience laughed, Cage responded that he preferred laughter to tears—and proceeded to drop items in a bathtub, boil water and push radios off tables (the latter a stand-in for turning them on and off, which was not possible due to a union dispute at the TV station)—all with meticulous precision.

Perhaps the greatest televisual Cagean moment is Cage's own performance of *4'33"* in Paik's *A Tribute to John Cage* (1973/76), made for the PBS stations WNET in New York and WGHB in Boston: Cage sits behind a grand piano on Harvard Square, surrounded by a curious crowd that bursts into applause when, after four minutes and thirty-three seconds, Cage, with a pleased but somewhat exhausted look, finishes the piece and rises. In the 1960s, Al Hansen argued that *4'33"* had announced happenings by activating audience members, whose sometimes-hostile reactions became part of the piece.[5] Here, the reactions are much more cheerful, and the compatibility of this emancipated audience with the logic of television also becomes apparent.

With Bergson and Deleuze, Lazzarato posits two different 'syntheses' of time. The first is the *material synthesis* of the body, of the sensory-motor functions; this is the time of habit, of everyday perception. The second is the *spiritual synthesis*, that of memory proper: here virtual memory-images are actualized, and time truly becomes a deep, non-chronological duration. Even at the first level, time is already modulated, contracted and extended; but, as in our daily lives, new images are generated in largely predetermined ways. Lazzarato argues that some video pieces imitate the second, spiritual rather than material synthesis: here, memory actualizes the past in the form of memory-images—'contraction and expansion no longer bear on "time-matter", on "image-matter", but on the past.' It is electronic editing and image-manipulation that enable an imitation of the free play of memory: 'with Bergson, one could say that the electronic processing of images simulates memory and intellectual labour, rather than being the equivalent of the material syntheses of time.'[6]

---

[4] Dieter Daniels, *Vom Readymade zum Cyberspace: Kunst/Medien Interferenzen*, Ostfildern-Ruit 2003, p. 18. On this performance see also Ina Blom, 'Signal to Noise', *Artforum,* vol. 40, no. 6, February 2010, pp. 170–4, 226.
[5] Al Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings and Time/Space Art*, New York 1965, p. 35.
[6] Lazzarato, *Videophilosophie*, pp. 73, 34–5, 48.

Everyday temporalities

Such a schematic equation of electronic image manipulation and memory is clearly insufficient, however, since mainstream TV develops ever more subtle editing methods and uses digital graphics in ways that are compatible with its non-intrusive functioning in daily life, in accordance with the mental routines of its consumers. More and more, TV has come to combine various streams with pre-recorded material and graphics, modulating time with unprecedented flexibility, while the rigidity of its formats seamlessly reintegrates the results. Lazzarato faintly acknowledges this by arguing that commercial television betrays the ontological promise of video: it is a power structure that imprisons time.[7]

It is characteristic of TV that it often serves as a moving background to other activities—eating, housework, waiting—which can themselves generate a dulling, monotonous temporality that television can infuse with different rhythms. The remote control, in turn, can modify the cadences created by TV programming itself. Sean Snyder's 2007 video *Schema (Television)* is an intricate montage of seemingly disparate TV shows, from weather forecasts to cooking programmes and political documentaries, with some animals thrown in; none of the clips last more than a few seconds. While the work can be read as a critique of television's relentless reduction of news to entertainment, this quite generic move only becomes effective because of a somewhat unsettling flattening of affect that seems to characterize the subject who is performing this improvised edit—but is there even a subject behind these acts?

In some parts of the video, the menu of a digital TV provider is visible; this is television that has already become part of a universal media machine, formed by computer technology. If in modernity 'to look' and 'to be looked at' become value-productive forms of labour, this did not become fully explicit in the cinematic regime of the pre-war period. It was only in the post-cinematic constellation shaped by TV during the 1950s and 1960s that viewing itself increasingly became an economic act. In the cinema, the immediately value-productive act was the buying of a ticket, whereas with television—at first in the US, later elsewhere—viewing numbers and ratings came to determine advertising revenue. Furthermore, television created a distorted capitalist realization of the

---

[7] Lazzarato, *Videophilosophie,* p. 75.

quality that Walter Benjamin had ascribed to film under socialism: 'Some of those taking part in Russian films are not actors in our sense but people who portray themselves—and primarily in their own work process. In Western Europe today, the capitalistic exploitation of the film obstructs modern man's legitimate claim to be reproduced.'[8]

Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville seemingly honoured this 'claim' with *Numéro deux* (1975), a film essay in which the screen is constantly filled with TV images, with monitors. In *Numéro deux,* the cinema becomes a site for reflection on the new media regime. We see Godard himself in an editing suite and video images of a working-class family, predominantly played by non-actors. The man works in a factory, the woman does work at home that is not really being recognized as work. The film centres on this domestic site, not on the factory—a site that is being transformed by television. It is not for nothing that many TV formats have been built on some form or semblance of the home, from MTV's *The Real World* to *Big Brother*: here, what was once the sphere of private family life, following certain established rules, becomes a social factory in which roles are constantly reconfigured. In the televisual age, it is not that pre-existing labour is being reproduced, but that the act of being on TV becomes a model for labour as such. In that sense, Warhol's water-cooler video is symptomatic: Warhol does not reproduce industrial or even post-industrial (office) work, but voices that tell us of daily, relaxed self-performance during leisure moments—the kind of spontaneity that television strives to create. Post-televisual technology, represented by the rise of YouTube celebrities and bloggers, has exacerbated this development, which entails the production of new subjectivities.

Contra Lazzarato, we could say that the temporal novelty of TV and video resides not in the supposed ontological superiority of light waves, but in their doubling and articulation of the time of life, the time of performance. What matters is precisely the interaction, the montage, between technological and subjective time—and this montage is not so much the breakthrough of immemorial Being, a realization of a timeless duration, but a historical change in and of being itself, a mutation in and of time— and therefore, in Alain Badiou's words, an eruption of 'the ontologically un-founded and the transcendentally discontinuous'.[9]

---

[8] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version', *Selected Writings, Vol. IV: 1938–1940*, Cambridge, MA 2003, p. 262.
[9] Alain Badiou, 'The Event in Deleuze', trans. Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia,* no. 2, 2007, p. 42.

General performance

It is suggestive that Cage's *Water Walk* was structured in part by turning radios on and off; Lazzarato argues that television is closer to radio and telephony than to film, which, since it does not consist of a continuous signal, necessarily presents delayed representations of temporal syntheses. Warhol titled one of his video-TV projects *Phoney*, bringing to mind Marshall McLuhan's remark that the word 'phoney' entered the English language after the advent of the telephone.[10] Showing self-absorbed performers chatting away, the piece suggests that not only the talkers but the medium of television itself is 'phoney', a close relative of the telephone—a live signal that flows into the house like water through pipes, in no need of cuts or editing. Even if not all projects consisted of one single take, like *Water,* editing in Warhol's video-TV projects of the 1970s remained fairly minimal for years; only in the late 1970s and early 1980s would he adopt a more conformist type of montage, leading to his MTV shows.

In the early versions of the score for Cage's *4'33"*, the piece was presented as being 'for any instrument or combination of instruments', though the piano version would be the dominant one. In proportional notation, the score consists of vertical lines, indicating duration—pure time. Already here one may wonder why there even has to be 'any instrument', and in 1962 Cage radicalized the piece as *0'00"*, also known as *4'33" no. 2*: this was now a 'solo to be performed in any way by anyone', consisting of the performance of 'a disciplined action'. The written score clarifies: 'No two performances to be of the same action, nor may that action be the performance of a "musical" composition.' The work can be seen as Cage's response to the development of a new kind of performance by a younger generation of artists, associated with Fluxus and with happenings; indeed, the score of *0'00"* is dedicated to Yoko Ono and her then-husband, Toshi Ichiyanagi.[11]

If the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s mounted a prolonged critique of medium-specificity, resulting in the advent of generic art, or art-in-general, there were various routes to the post-specific. One, traced by Thierry de Duve, centred around the modernist painting that, when

---

[10] Bob Colacello, *Holy Terror: Andy Warhol Close Up*, New York 1990, p. 141.
[11] See Branden Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*, New York 2008, pp. 161 and 405 n.21.

reduced to a bare canvas, to its physical medium, turned into an 'arbitrary object' among others—this, the triumph of the readymade at the heart of modernism, is the development that Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried desperately tried to stave off in the 1960s. By contrast, the impact of Cage—which the young artists, especially Allan Kaprow, hybridized with their interpretation of 'action painting'—placed the emphasis on *general performance* as a form of intermedia.[12] But while the new forms of post-disciplinary performance temporarily brought down the walls between music, theatre and the visual arts, general performance as *an art form* was in turn part of a wider redefinition of 'performance'.

The term performance is slippery even within relatively well-defined contexts. In today's 'culturalized' economy, it not only refers to the productivity of one's labour but also to one's actual, quasi-theatrical self-presentation in an economy in which work has become more dependent on immaterial factors. As an artist, writer or curator, you perform by doing your job; but your job includes giving talks, going to openings, being in the right place at the right time. General performance tran-scends the limits of the (still) specific domain of performance art; as self-performance that goes beyond the mere execution of tasks, it is the basis of the new regime of labour. As both exemplary and eccentric mani-festations of this new regime, some artistic practices from the 1960s and beyond can help bring into focus the new performative regime—and its close ties to television formats that depend on non-professional actors.

In his 1965 book on happenings, Hansen—one of Cage's New School students in the late 1950s—illuminates the pivotal role of *4'33"*. In not pro-viding anything that resembled a traditional musical performance, Cage turned the tables on the listeners: 'the audience realizes that it is turned into the performer, and provides a performance—booing, scraping chair legs, chatting, moving about, visiting each other and going to the rest rooms.'[13] Not only does Cage's mode of composition replace 'the musical *what*' with 'the musical *when*'—that is to say, 'a pure temporalization', as Ina Blom puts it—but it is a 'when' in which the traditional distinction between passive audience and active performer is under attack.[14] The acti-vated spectator of post-Cagean performance has his or her mass-media

---

[12] For Thierry de Duve's account of generic art, see *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA 1996.
[13] Hansen, *A Primer of Happenings*, p. 35.
[14] Ina Blom, 'Signal to Noise'.

counterpart in television, the medium which promises to elevate audience members to momentary, small-scale (small-screen) stardom. Cage in the quiz show is not 'a famous composer'; he is a member of the public, albeit more eccentric than most, performing some strange tricks. Next week, there will be someone else.

Liberations

'Happenings', Allan Kaprow noted, 'should be unrehearsed and performed by non-professionals, once only':

> A crowd is to eat its way through a roomful of food; a house is burned down; love letters are strewn over a field and beaten to pulp by a future rain; twenty rented cars are driven away in different directions until they run out of gas . . . Not only is it often impossible and impractical to rehearse and repeat situations like these, but it is also unnecessary. Unlike the repertory arts, the Happenings have a freedom that lies in their use of realms of action that cannot be repeated.[15]

After the early years, in which happenings still took place in indoor spaces, amid—rather than in front of—an audience, Kaprow sought to demolish the distinction between performers and audience more radically, holding happenings without prior public announcement in urban public spaces or in the countryside. Kaprow termed this form the 'activity' happening, in which 'there should not be (and usually cannot be) an audience' that watches, as distinct from the participants and passersby. This kind of happening is 'directly involved in the everyday world, ignores theatres and audiences' and 'partakes in the unconscious daily rituals of the supermarket, subway ride at rush hour, and tooth brushing every morning'.[16]

Kaprow's main model for the 'acting' in happenings was the performance of everyday tasks, which can become newly visible and strange if they are performed with a greater degree of conscious attention. The distinction between performer and public having been eroded, the performer becomes his or her own double, his or her own audience. Cage's *Water Walk*, of course, was also based on everyday actions such as

---

[15] Allan Kaprow, 'The Happenings Are Dead: Long Live the Happenings!', in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1993, pp. 63–4.
[16] Kaprow, 'Pinpointing Happenings', in *Essays*, p. 87.

turning on the radio, but with a twist. Warhol, who was both well aware of the early happenings and a connoisseur of TV, staged his own non-stop speed-freak happening at the Factory, of which his films showed often supremely mundane extracts. The self-performance of Warhol's superstars would appear to be early instances of a form that general performance would increasingly take.

In 1970, when the German Fluxus/happening artist Wolf Vostell released a sequel to a 1965 publication in which he and Jürgen Becker had attempted to document the new general performance art, Vostell argued that after May 1968 such documentation could no longer be restricted to Fluxus and happenings. Echoing the rhetoric of his friend Jean-Jacques Lebel, Vostell claimed that the various protest movements of recent years had abolished any difference between life and art.[17] Hence, the performers whose 'actions' his new book documented include Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Rudi Dutschke and Abbie Hoffman as well as Kaprow and Higgins and the 'communards' Fritz Teufel and Rainer Langhans, who in Kommune 1 lived the liberated life in public. The book's cover image is in fact an infamous photograph of naked members of Kommune 1 seen from behind. If this photo was originally staged in 1967 as a protest against police arrests—the communards have their hands against the wall—it quickly became an icon of the Kommune as the site of an authentic life, lived without bourgeois shame. The point is not, of course, that Vostell and Lebel were right in their grand claims about the complete fusion of art and life, but that for once the insufferable self-promoter Vostell put his finger on something when deciding that a 1970 anthology of 'actions' could no longer be content with listing the works of a certain group of post-Cagean artists.

Kommune 1 had its roots as much in the artistic neo-avant-garde as in the student movement and new left; the second half of the sixties saw the widespread adoption of 'happenings' and 'events' outside the art world in the strict sense, both for commercial and countercultural purposes. One of the commune's founders was Dieter Kunzelmann, a former member of the Situationist-affiliated SPUR group, who practised a crypto-Situationist 'actionism'—progressively trying to realize the avant-garde programme of the abolition of alienated and alienating art in favour of a liberated life by creating shocking 'events' intended to rouse

---

[17] Wolf Vostell, '[Introduction]', in *Aktionen: Happenings und Demonstrationen seit 1965. Eine Dokumentation*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 1970.

the populace from their stupor. Kommune 1 was to be a radicalized form of general performance outside the confines of even the most 'extended' definition of art: lived biopolitics. In its later stages, before disintegrating in 1969, Kommune 1 was courted by celebrities and was generally happy to provide titillating images of the liberated life for mainstream magazines—the model Uschi Obermaier was a particular favourite.

Recently Rainer Langhans, one of the co-creators of Kommune 1, dominated the national media for weeks when he participated in the German version of *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*. While traditional TV formats of the 1950s and 60s such as *I Have a Secret* gave their contestants quite literally fifteen minutes of fame, after which they would go back to being ordinary citizens, the new formats of the 1990s and beyond operate very differently: their participants at least try to remain in the limelight, to live their lives in public. Langhans's media career can be seen as the model, in Germany, for this type of lifelong self-performance; there have been lulls, but he has never really been away. If *I'm a Celebrity* as a TV programme follows a rigid format, Langhans obviously thought he could infuse the proceedings with his *sponti* performance, possibly taking for granted that this performance would be neutralized as eccentric authenticity in a format depending on 'characters'. Such neutralization was at work even in Cage's *Water Walk* performance, but he was able to control the conditions of his performance to a far greater extent, and did not have to crawl through maggots. Most crucially, after the opening interview with the host, Cage could follow his own score, even if this score was in turn integrated into the programme.

By now television is no longer quite itself; as with practically all media, it has been integrated into the digital meta-medium, into a programmed culture in which social networks and the 'data mining' that makes them potentially profitable constitute the new horizon of self-performance.[18] Cage performing on *I Have a Secret* proved to be a crucial historical moment: giving fundamental impulses to the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s, Cagean performance in general can be seen as bridging two regimes of televisual performance. But if today's media self-performance is in many ways a debased form of the general performance instigated in the avant-garde around 1960, one should not create a linear narrative of co-optation. Rather, 'general performance for TV' and 'general

---

[18] On data mining, see Joe Scanlan, 'The Uses of Disorder', *Artforum*, vol. 48, no. 6, February 2010, p. 165.

performance in art' have co-existed and influenced each other for decades, mutually illuminating each other.

Starting in the 1960s, Wim T. Schippers—who with Willem de Ridder and for a short period Stanley Brouwn made up the Dutch Fluxus contingent—(co-)created a number of TV shows that brought Cagean lessons to a mainstream audience.[19] The Situationists, not entirely without reason, attacked the famous appearance of the first nude woman on Dutch TV, Phil Bloom reading a newspaper on *Hoepla,* as advanced spectacle.[20] But like Schippers's earlier *Manifestation on the Beach at Petten*, which involved the artist emptying a bottle of lemonade into the sea for the TV show *Signalement*, one can see this as pushing the televisual pseudo-event to a moment when its fundamental emptiness becomes explicit. Like the lemonade pouring, Phil Bloom's naked newspaper reading was oddly understated and matter-of-fact, a non-event completely at odds with the media backlash it occasioned. Pressing the vaudeville side of Fluxus, Schippers explored a populist version of Cagean emptiness.

The episode of the 1962 TV arts programme *Signalement* that was masterminded entirely by Schippers and de Ridder began with the image of an announcer tilted at 45 degrees, talking without sound; a bit later, the same announcer appeared the right way up and with sound, performing an Emmett Williams piece by saying 'If La Monte Young is watching this programme, will he please phone Amsterdam 24087'. George Maciunas apparently suggested these TV events.[21] The programme, which also contained segments on Pop Art, Nouveau Réalisme and Zero, included completely scripted interviews in which the flow of words was interrupted by ringing phones, close-ups of cakes, and the elaborate lighting of cigarettes and pouring of drinks, accompanied by clanging spoons and cups, devices that anticipated Schippers's later TV work. In the 1970s, he was the co-creator of comedy shows such as *De Fred Haché Show* and *Barend Is Weer Bezig,* in which semi-professional performers who looked anything but glamorous had to deal with Schippers's highly precise and

[19] See the early article on Fluxus and Schippers's TV work by Frans Haks, 'Over Fred Haché, Barend Servet, Fluxus en Wim T. Schippers', *Museumjournaal*, vol. 18, no. 6, December 1973, pp. 246–51.

[20] 'Le point culminant de l'offensive du spectacle', *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 12, September 1969, p. 50.

[21] *Actie, werkelijkheid en fictie in de kunst van de jaren '60 in Nederland*, Rotterdam 1980, pp. 67–71.

strangely stilted dialogues, as well as collapsing sets and seemingly incompetent crews who could forget to include the performers' heads in the shot. The breakaway star of these programmes was Sjef van Oekel, played by Dolf Brouwers—a melodramatic and absent-minded narcissist, spouting *non sequiturs*, whose programme *Van Oekel's Discohoek* featured genuine international rock musicians coping with the chaos staged by Schippers and Co.

Feedback

By the late 1960s, as artists were increasingly using video and reflecting on television, the eventual integration of TV into a post-televisual regime of information technology was already on the horizon. Critics and artists concocted a blend of cybernetics and systems theory, studying both natural and information systems, and emphasizing the cybernetic notion of feedback in both cases. The cybernetic study of communication as control—intimately connected to Second World War-era research into radar and early information technology—was *de facto* subsumed to systems theory, which originated in biology. In the words of Hans Haacke, who was introduced to systems analysis and cybernetics by the American critic and theorist Jack Burnham in 1965–66: 'A system is most generally defined as a grouping of elements subject to a common plan or purpose.' He added that he thought the term 'system' in art 'should be reserved for sculptures in which a transfer of energy, material or information occurs, and which do not depend on perceptual interpretation'.[22]

In the late 1960s, Haacke moved from investigating 'natural systems'— in pieces dealing with wind or condensation, for example—to 'social systems'. He started presenting visitor polls as artworks in 1969 with *Gallery-Goers' Birthplace and Residence Profile* at the Howard Wise Gallery, the viewers becoming cybernetic performers by answering questions. Within the broader economy, polls and profiles would go on to become ever more prominent, up to today's online profiles. Neither a technocratic affirmation nor an abstract rejection, Haacke's pieces attempt to play the system, to intervene in it through strategic mimicry. In the 1970 Museum of Modern Art *Information* show, which was

---

[22] Hans Haacke, quoted in an interview with Jeanne Siegel, in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, MA 1999, p. 243.

shaped by cybernetics, he presented a poll with a single political ques-
tion, on Governor Rockefeller's stance on Vietnam. That Rockefeller
was also a MOMA trustee was not stated, but for those in the know
it served to underscore the interrelations between the art world and
other social systems.[23]

If the MOMA poll used relatively simple mechanical technology—a
counting device triggered by the ballots—Haacke's contributions to
Jack Burnham's 1970 *Software* show at the Jewish Museum were more
technologically ambitious. *News* brought a live stream of news from
various agencies being printed out as it came in. Haacke also prepared
an automated version of *Visitors' Profile* which allowed for a more com-
plex array of questions than the mechanical MOMA version: a flow chart
starts with some basic questions dividing the participants into social
groups (age, gender), and proceeds with questions such as 'Do you like
school?' (for those who still attend school) or 'Would you mind bus-
sing your child to integrate schools?'[24] The flow chart keeps refining the
respondents' social profiles, through questions on income and religious
affiliation, while asking for opinions on a variety of social and political
issues. Visitors were to answer the questions on a 'teletype' hooked up
to a 'picture scope', and the computer programme to be written on the
basis of Haacke's flow chart would allow for real-time data processing,
with the permanently changing results of the poll projected on a wall
via video.[25] Unfortunately, technological problems prevented the work
from being realized.

In a polemical turn against idealist notions of art appreciation—think of
Fried's 'presentness'—Burnham stressed that 'these computer systems
deal with *real time* events, events which are uncontrived and happen
under normal circumstances. All of the data processing systems I have
referred to are *built into and become a part of* the events they monitor.'[26]
In the same sense, TV becomes integrated into a post-televisual
dispositif; this is not the 'real' time of live transmission, but of the near-
instant processing and display of data that functions as feedback in a

---

[23] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era*, Berkeley and
Los Angeles 2009, pp. 190–3.
[24] Flow charts for the unrealized *Software* version of *Vistors' Poll*, Hans Haacke
archive.
[25] Haacke, 'Visitors' Profile 1969', in *Software*, New York 1970, p. 34.
[26] Jack Burnham, *Great Western Salt Works: Essays on the Meaning of Post-Formalist
Art*, New York 1974, p. 30.

communications system. In the world of cybernetics and systems theory, there is no outside, no beyond the system: there is only perpetual fine-tuning by responding to feedback and adjusting one's acts accordingly; what is possible though, as Haacke's work and some of the responses to it show, is to provide undesirable feedback—mutant signals.

Inside cybertime

Burnham's and Haacke's real-time systems depend on the combination of computer and video technology. Already in the 1940s, the cathode ray tube had become an integral element of the computer; if information technology would end up transforming television, TV had already enabled the spread of the computer. Paik was not wrong when he evocatively characterized the birth of cybernetics from the spirit of television:

> Newton's physics is the mechanics of power and the unconciliatory two-party system, in which the strong win over the weak. But in the 1920s a German genius put a tiny third-party between these two mighty poles (cathode and anode) in a vacuum tube, thus enabling the weak to win over the strong for the first time in human history. It might be a Buddhistic 'third way', but anyway this German invention led to cybernetics, which came into the world in the last war to shoot down German planes from the English sky.[27]

In this Paikean culture we have, paradoxically, moved far beyond the confines of a 'video philosophy' that wants to base itself upon a privileged ontological status; we are entering a post-video regime in which a different real-time performance dominates.

Harun Farocki's double video projection, *Eye/Machine III* (2003), and the related single-channel film *Erkennen und Verfolgen*, investigate the use of TV cameras in self-guiding missiles, combining footage from recent wars with images from Vietnam, and Nazi experiments with a 'television bomb', integrating the TV screen into a cybernetic system of real-time feedback. Farocki charts a different real-time feedback system in his multi-channel video installation *Deep Play* (2007). This shows the 2006 World Cup final in Berlin, in real time, with the other channels showing moving digital diagrams intended to give trainers, players or

---

[27] Nam June Paik, 'Cybernated Art', in *Manifestos*, New York 1966, p. 24.

commentators better insight into the game: players become moving dots, or arrows. This aspect of the piece recalls a phrase by Vilém Flusser, in whose work Farocki has had a longstanding interest. Writing about the city of Cologne, Flusser stated that its inhabitants 'are densely scattered swarms of points', moving data in a real-time system: 'The human being can no longer be seen as an individual but rather as the opposite, a dense scattering of parts; he is calculable.'[28]

In simultaneously broadcasting live video footage and morphing diagrams of the game in progress, *Deep Play* shows feedback in action: the use of data for improving performance; not for nothing is cybernetics intimately associated with the rise of the diagrammatic flow chart in the postwar era. In the late 1960s, with films such as *Inextinguishable Fire,* Farocki had participated in the rediscovery of the politicized montage of Soviet cinema; Eisenstein's dialectical montage, joined with Brechtian strategies, seemed to hold the promise of social intervention. In the post-cinematic world of *Auge/Maschine* and *Deep Play,* a revolutionary transformation is hard to conceive. Indeed, with his parallel montages on multiple channels, Farocki intervenes in the diagrammatic relations that constitute actually existing cybernetics, offering and stimulating—like Haacke's systems pieces—a rather different kind of feedback.

However, such mutant feedback obviously constitutes a relatively weak signal in what Franco Berardi calls our 'cybertime'. In *Precarious Rhapsody,* Berardi notes that cyberspace is endless, but cybertime—the organism's capacity for processing information from cyberspace—is not.[29] Increasing flexibility has led to an increase in psychopathologies. A commercial by an internet company showing a manager happily absconding from the office and enjoying the park on a beautiful summer's day puts a positive spin on the fact that the office, for many people, is now everywhere and all the time. The burnout syndrome, that new mass disease, is a temporal pathology—a time-ache. We may be swarming dots, but we are pathological dots, sick from the real-time results of our inscription in social media. Under the working conditions of Fordist capitalism, with the archetypal conveyor belt, the time of work could still be experienced as an imposition on life; in post-Fordism, when the time of work increasingly coincides with the time of life, we are entering a regime that I

[28] Vilém Flusser, 'The City as Wave-Trough in the Image-Flood', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 2, Winter 2005, pp. 327, 324.
[29] Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody*, London 2009, pp. 69–71.

have elsewhere called that of concrete abstraction; financially as well as technologically—and in financial technology—abstraction has become concretized.[30] This is Berardi's cybertime, with its pressures and pathologies. Perpetually alert for the next message notification, workers are perennially concerned with their futures; it is a time of generalized suspense. Every act or non-act can have repercussions on one's career; one is forever following and trying to boost the market rate of one's future, or one's futures. The realm of concrete abstraction is thus marked by feedback. Television has been integrated into this real-time system as one app among others.

In 2009, Haacke paid 'homage' to Silvio Berlusconi in a church in Como with *Once Upon a Time*. On the empty, damaged parts of the Baroque frescos, Haacke projected live streams of three Berlusconi-controlled TV channels. The piece can be seen as an update of *News*, perhaps most of all because of an additional element: projected tickers with the latest quotes from the Milan stock exchange—including the rates for Berlusconi's Mediaset. If Haacke's early experiment with 'real-time systems' presupposed that feedback mechanisms could be used for progressive purposes, *Once Upon a Time* shows a stream of images that viewers cannot act upon and a parade of financial data on which only a small group of investors could have an effect, even while it affected millions of lives.[31] In late 2011, Berlusconi was finally (though perhaps just temporarily) deposed not by a popular movement, but by pressure from the financial markets to which he had become a liability rather than an asset; the Italian version of neo-liberalism needed to be 'normalized', divested of its grotesque sub-Mussolinian operetta traits. What remains is a (post-)televisual state shaped by the perpetual feedback of exchange rates and financial news, in which the only chance of participation that most viewers have is to self-perform in one of the many game and quiz shows on which Berlusconi built his media empire.

The subject of Harun Farocki's single-channel video *Worte und Spiele* (1997) is the production of three German afternoon talk shows and game shows. Perhaps the most striking section is the first, on the talk show *Vera am Nachmittag*, which in this case is dedicated to the topic

---

[30] Lütticken, *Idols of the Market: Modern Iconoclasm and the Fundamentalist Spectacle*, New York and Berlin 2009.
[31] On *Once Upon A Time*, see also Alexander Alberro and Nora M. Alter, 'System, Dialectics and Castles in the Sky', in *Hans Haacke: Castles in the Sky*, Madrid 2012, pp. 20–9.

of long-distance relationships. Farocki re-cuts the show and its prepara-tions, focusing on briefings of the guests, rehearsals, and people waiting behind the scenes, as well as on the actual show—in the latter case, how-ever, breaks in the recording session are as important as the moments when the cameras are rolling. The show's rigorously regulated temporal flow is modulated, morphed into a different rhythm in which moments of waiting and preparation are important. These programmes have since disappeared, in part because of the rise of 'reality' formats that are cheaper to produce than studio-based shows; but this does not mean that *Worte und Spiele* is now only of archaeological significance. Much is to be gleaned from the way in which Farocki shows self-performers rehearsing or biding their time, waiting to spring into action. During a discussion between guests, his camera catches the talk-show host alter-nating between attentive and supportive focus on these people, with lots of nodding and sideways glances at members of her team. Everybody plays their part, yet in these moments of suspension, of potentiality, dif-ferent actions and improvised scripts can be imagined.

In a related work, *Interview* (1996), Farocki shows scenes from a number of seminars or training sessions in which people are taught how to pre-sent and sell themselves during job interviews. They are given lessons in self-performance. Some of the sessions are aimed at the unemployed or at youngsters who have just left school, while others—much more expen-sive, obviously—cater to highly paid managers. In several cases, video playback is used to give a trainee insight into the image he or she pro-jects, and its possible divergence from their self-image; the use of video for feedback has moved from psychotherapy to training for semiotic capitalism. Recording this video playback, Farocki offers another form of feedback, one that—from the vantage point of the system—is super-fluous and excessive. In creating this constellation of the various types of actors, from managerial self-performers to people who 'just want to get a job' and who, in some cases, have to learn the basics of re-presenting themselves, Farocki momentarily (though only virtually) sets his sub-jects free from the feedback loops of their respective seminars.

De-programming?

If we are 'highly potential creatures', as Paolo Virno argues, under the conditions of industrial capitalism this potential takes the form of labour power—that is, it is redefined in quantitative terms, as the expected

average performance.[32] Post-Fordist ideology and, to some extent, prac-
tice go beyond the classic industrial use of the human potential as
generic, abstract labour power—a power reduced to a statistical average,
to a number of repetitive actions performed in accordance with carefully
calculated standards. Post-Fordism wants to mine not just the worker's
potential for repetitive acts, but also for more personalized touches, for
creative self-performance. Television, with its more accessible formats
demanding more and more 'spontaneous' performers, was the medium
that allowed this self-performance to develop and mature. Now that we
are labouring inside this regime, the question arises of how we can mine
that part of our potential which is not part of the programme.

In his installations, radio pieces and videos (the latter often made
together with Eva Meyer), Eran Schaerf focuses on situations that are
to some extent 'programmed' in more ways than one; they may be pro-
grammed by software, by digital codes, yet these are usually shaped in
turn by cultural, economic and political constraints that determine—
among other things—which types of performance are allowed. In much
'talk radio', the apparently unmediated and spontaneous contributions
of listeners are largely determined by the show's format, which in gen-
eral necessitates going from one person venting his spleen or telling us
about personal problems to the next. In Schaerf's audio play *Listener's
Voice* (1999–2001), various voices talk about the conflicts and taboos
surrounding both Arab music and Wagner in Israel—a loaded subject
that would quickly become a shouting match in real talk radio, but which
is here represented in a carefully crafted, ambiguous montage.

Schaerf's exercise in de-programming is, of course, completely scripted,
though the artist is planning an online platform on which users can
make their own edit of the constituent elements, actually functioning as
the moderator. In the installation version of *Listener's Voice,* the viewer
can listen to the play on wireless headphones while a large TV test pattern
is projected from the ceiling. *The Listener's Voice*'s listener is thus caught
in a TV signal that signals the absence of programming, of images.
Schaerf's work with the 'phoney' medium of radio, then, can also be
seen as a displaced televisual practice, focusing on the interplay of voice
and programme, of actor and structure. For Cage, programmed chance

---

[32] Sonja Lavaert and Pascal Gielen, 'The Dismeasure of Art: An Interview with Paolo
Virno', in Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne, eds, *Being an Artist in Post-Fordist
Times*, Rotterdam 2009, p. 25.

operations had a liberating effect, lifting a weight from the shoulders of both the composer and the performer. Schaerf, by contrast, focuses precisely on the role of the performer in the arena of programmed chance, on acting as a form of planned feedback. In doing so, he homes in on an element of neo-avant-garde practice that has not been sufficiently addressed and understood: the development of modes of performance that might be termed *liminal*, in that they situate themselves in the interstices between the performer and his or her part, even when that part is ostensibly the self.

Liminal performance

The contrast between Rainer Langhans's self-performance and Schippers's use of non-professional or marginal actors stands for a fundamental division within general performance. If Langhans and others spoke the language of exhibitionist authenticity, Schippers's comic personae used the quirks and imperfections of the actors, creating caricatures whose wooden delivery of highly artificial dialogues and monologues—full of clichés, *non sequiturs* and odd turns of phrase—sabotaged the rhetoric of 'authentic' self-performance. And yet in 1989 Dolf Brouwers, who increasingly performed a less funny version of the Van Oekel persona under his own name, sued Schippers over the use of his likeness in the Sjef van Oekel comic strip. A staged photo from a few years previous, in which Brouwers as Van Oekel is given a thought bubble which shows him to be vexed about all the stuff that Schippers and artist Theo van den Boogaard 'had made up', seems to announce this bizarre turn of events.[33] As grotesque as the Van Oekel persona was, and as consciously artificial as Schippers's writing strove to be, actor and role had become hopelessly entangled.

What we see here is something that might be termed *liminal performance*, creating confusion about the borders between role-play and self-acting. If the general performance instigated by Cage and his followers has often taken the form of post-Fordist *self-performance*, liminal performance is a different branch of performance in general. Rather than taking it for granted that there is a self-evident self to perform, liminal performance pries open this self, investigates the cracks in the montage of actor

---

[33] This staged photograph was published in a number of Schippers and Van den Boogards's *Sjef van Oekel* comic books in the 1980s.

and (social or fictional) role. Godard's ambiguous interviews with his characters/actors are one early instance of such performance. Godard staged interruptions of the documentary in films such as *Une Femme Mariée* by asking his actors questions (from off-screen) for which they were unprepared. It is not always clear to what extent the actors answer them 'in character' or as themselves; they are in between. In *Numéro deux,* Godard and Miéville likewise created ambiguity by having amateurs play roles that may or may not be close to those they inhabit on a daily basis.

The title of the video essay *Flashforward* (2004) by Eran Schaerf and Eva Meyer can be related to the film's rejection of the conventional cinematic flashback as representing a 'Flucht in die Innerlichkeit', a flight into subjective interiority. The flashback, of course, stands for a Hollywood convention in which a character remembers a past moment, often indicated by a close-up of the face and a dissolve to the scene in question. Such flashbacks generally remain integrated in a linear narrative. As if to emphasize a break with such linearity, *Flashforward* contains numerous circles—circular forms as well as circular camera movements. The voice-over proposes a 'possibilistic logic' in which repetition comes with a difference, in which potentials are not allowed to lay dormant forever, in which actors 'become extras of time'—*Statisten der Zeit.* Such extras of time could take on many roles, but fleetingly, without becoming identified with them. Consequently, the speakers of the voice-over regularly change in mid-sentence. This voice-over mentions a 'programme' that converts flashbacks into flashforwards: 'We demand: exteriority! Cross-fade from yourself to roles which are familiar from dreams, cinema and the news!'[34]

At one point, the voice(s) tell a tale about two actors who regularly have to dub love scenes in foreign films together, and end up falling in love. Most of the people seen sitting, walking, reading in *Flashforward* are indeed more like extras than like actors in the conventional sense; they are filmed while doing something, or nothing much at all, but they don't perform a dramatic role. In this sense, much avant-garde performance since Fluxus and Kaprow's happenings also resembles the bit parts traditionally performed by extras rather than the roles played by film stars. The new breed of television self-performers are even more so: after all,

---

[34] Eva Meyer and Eran Schaerf, *Flashforward* (2004), DVD release by Intermedium, Munich 2006. English translation adapted from subtitles.

the most frequently voiced complaint against such neo-celebrities is that they have no discernible talents. They just become a televisual image, creating value.

But they are hardly 'extras of time', in the sense suggested by *Flashforward*: they fill time, spend it, but they do not *make it*. They don't have the 'passion of possibility' invoked by the soundtrack: 'You have time. That is your invaluable potential, which takes you out of nowhere and positions you inside the image.'[35] Not that the 'extra of time' would be a heroic revolutionary leader; he or she is just an extra, after all, but perhaps there is a certain freedom in that. The extras may be less caught in the script than the actor; they have to move or stand in accordance with instructions, but do not have to carry the narrative. They are, literally, something extra, supplements. To be a supplement of time would mean to remain open to potentialities that are not part of the programme, options not foreseen by the software that makes our present history; to keep dissolving into different roles, or rather acts that never become congealed into roles. The practice of Schaerf and Meyer thus reflects on modes of avant-garde performance in the light of their ambiguous relation with more mainstream modes of self-performance in the post-televisual age. It does not provide any handy scenarios, any instant solutions for navigating a performative economy whose crisis grows deeper every day; but at the very least it poses a challenge. How to be an extra of time, to enact a potential that is not on the programme?

---

[35] Meyer and Schaerf, *Flashforward*. In the English subtitles, the German *ins Bild* is translated as 'in the middle of things'.