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Becoming Video: The Prehension of Painting

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Becoming Video: The Prehension of Painting – a strange heading, perhaps, in the context of a conference that emphasizes the musical dimension of Nam June Paik's works. Compared with the strong musicological emphasis in Paik's approach to video, his interest in questions related to painting – a field in which he had no real expertise – might seem marginal. However, my objective is not to argue that painting is more central in Paik's work than what has previously been thought. My perspective is a very different one and springs out of my current research into the way in which new media technologies may be coupled with changes in the structuring of social memory. Today, the archive – and memory – is in motion. A modern archival culture focused on the storage, preservation, and classification of documents that represents frozen instants of historical time – an arrest of time itself, so to speak – is transformed by constant updating and transfer functions, as well the live interaction and communication characteristic of digital network culture. The predominantly spatial order of the modern archive, with its more or less stable physical objects, has in other words been exposed to a radical temporalization and mobilization that affects not just the material status of documents but the very terms of their use.¹

In this context, I am specifically interested in the way in which such changes in social memory open onto new social ontologies – i.e., alternative ways of understanding or modeling the social as such. My key claim is that such changes in the structuring of memory and the alternative social ontologies they open onto can sometimes be traced through the type of technological thinking that operates in and through art practices. Here, early analog video art emerges as an important site of technical/social reflexivity – a site where a technological agent named "video" forges

1. Wolfgang Ernst, *Das Gesetz des Gedächtnisses. Medien und Archive am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2007.

2. Ina Blom, "The Autobiography of Video. Outline for a Revisionist Account of Early Video Art," *Critical Inquiry* 39, Winter 2013, pp.276-295.

3. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, New York: Zone Books, 1988, pp.17-132.

4. In a 1963 interview with Gottfried Michael König Paik is asked whether the destructiveness of his music is a purely musical procedure, Paik answers: "Diese frage

an exploration of its own memory capacities.² Video and other signaletic real-time technologies may notably be seen as technologies that evoke the future-oriented character of memory described by Henri Bergson: Where Sigmund Freud theorized memory and the psyche as an indelible inscription and storage system reminiscent of the 19th century archive, Bergson's non-psychological account of memory seems to think alongside the more radical promises of the new time technologies of the mass media age. Memory – which here equals matter itself – was essentially the key term of an event ontology, where past materials only exist in terms of the unfolding movement of a constant now-time informed by the concerns of future action.³

In my view, early video art is a site where the social and political implications of this radically future-oriented model of memory is brought out in the open – its impact on the very definition of what we call “collective” imagined and explored, if in a rudimentary way. And this is also where Paik's scattered references to painting become interesting. They may, in fact, provide a key to certain important aspects of video's social imagination – provided that we accept that painting, in this context, operates at a certain distance from the emphasis on form, viscosity and opticality that informs standard accounts of modernist painting. As it happens, “painting” is here closely allied with the emphasis on uncontrollable forces and open temporalities that was the basis for Paik's musicological approach to video. To follow this alternative trajectory of painting and its alliance with video, we must, however, expand our focus beyond the work of Paik only. Not only must we access the work of friends and colleagues in the field of art and technology, such as Otto Piene and Aldo Tambellini; we also have to revisit key moments in the early history of modern painting.

As stated already, Paik's turn to television technologies was grounded in philosophical and aesthetic problems pertaining to the field of musical composition specifically. Video was a technological means for realizing a new understanding of musical time – one that displaced the focus on temporal structures internal to the musical object itself and aligned music with the event-oriented temporalities characteristic of process ontology (as found in the work of John Cage and the philosophies of Whitehead and Bergson).⁴ However, despite his lack of formal training in visual art, references to painting also permeate Paik's early video discourse: Inspired by the work of the German *informel* painter and radar image pioneer Karl Otto Götz, video was presented as a new electronic form of painting. Allegories of painting were already present in the 1963 *Exposition of Music* – most notably in *Zen for Head*, Paik's “painterly” interpretation of La Monte Young's *Composition 1961 #10* (Draw A

kann ich nur beantworten, wenn Sie mir definieren können: Was ist Musik? Ich habe die ganze deutsche Musikästhetik studiert und kein Antwort gefunden. Wenn ich einen Kompromiss vorschlagen darf: Musik ist eine Zeitabfolge. [...] Mich interessiert als Musiker: Wie kann ich mit der Zeit umgehen.” König, in Wulf Herzogenrath, ed., *Nam June Paik: Werke 1946-1976: Musik-Fluxus-Video*, Köln: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1976, p.51 . Paik's “new ontology of music” was presented in the leaflet manifesto *Postmusic*, *The Monthly Review of the University for Avantgarde Hinduism*, Fluxus edition, 1963.

Straight Line and Follow It). But in numerous documents in the following years, Paik described the cathode ray tube as a “canvas” or as a “replacement” of the canvas. He spoke of the need to introduce the musical principle of indeterminacy into optical art, and of a radical temporalization of painting (he imagined a painting that would exist for only one second in one hour).

Still, the most explicit reference to painting emerged with the 1969 introduction of the **Paik/Abe Video Synthesizer** – an instrument set up to facilitate sophisticated scanning modulations: Leonardo, Picasso, Renoir, Mondrian, Pollock and Jasper Johns were all evoked in order to explain the *versatility* of the new Color TV Synthesizer.⁵ And in general the development of video synthesizers in the late 1960's (such as Eric Siegel's 1968 synthesizer and Stephen Beck's 1970 machine) helped reinforce the association between video and a purely visual/optical discourse, since these machines opened for a controlled construction of electronic color imagery that could entirely bypass the video camera's photographic/indexical relation to the image source.

As it happens, this “painterly” approach to video became the point of departure for one of the key distinctions within early video art milieus: the distinction between formalist/painterly preoccupations with abstract electronic imagery and video as a tool for social and political engagement, expressed through media and institution critique, alternative TV and activist strategies, among other things.⁶ And this division has only been reinforced by recent documentation of the strong interest in television and televisual technologies in the 1950's painting – most notably in the work of Lucio Fontana and the German Zero movement. Focus on artistic interest in the specificity of the TV medium and its technological features seem to simply evolve out of the formalism of late modernist painting – while a socially oriented video art only emerged with the growing awareness of TV as an instrument of capital and governmental power.⁷

5. Nam June Paik, “Versatile Color TV Synthesizer,” in Judson Rosebush, ed., *Nam June Paik: Video 'n' Videology 1959-1973*, New York: Everson Museum of Art, 1973, unpaginated.

6. This dividing line is discussed in Paul Ryan, “A Genealogy of Video,” in *Video Mind. Earth Mind. Art Communications and Ecology*, New York: Peter Lang, 1992, pp.312-324. Here Ryan makes a distinction between processing signals for “surface of the screen” and using them as parts of a “communication system.” The question of formalism and the institutionalization of video art versus political engagement is also present, if from within a wider purview, in Martha Rosler, “Video. Shedding the Utopian Moment,” in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, New York: Aperture, 1990, pp.31-50.

7. This connection has been well described in Christine Mehring, “Television Art's Abstract Starts: Europe circa 1944-1969,” *October* 125, Summer 2008, pp.29-64. Here Mehring argues for a conceptual and historical distinction between television art and video art, which she sees as a later phenomenon. While this makes sense in terms of the 1950's artists she discusses (who had no access to video), it is less convincing when looking at the 1960's identification between painting and televisual media: here both broadcast affordances and purely videomatic technologies (such as the video synthesizer) play an important role.

The relation between painting and video may, however, be understood in terms that radically complicate the familiar division between “social” and “formalist” video art. In this account, video (including Paik’s video) is less a medium used by artists than a complex technical actant – a highly reflexive technical “being” whose individuation as a new type of memory technology is grounded in its association with a number of other practices. Here, A. N. Whitehead’s concept of *prehension* may be a useful tool since it allows us to trace the emergence of “video” through the materials and discourses of painting, architecture, sound, light experiments, radar and other practices. In Whitehead’s terminology, to prehend something is not simply to have an idea or a concept of a thing in the world. It is, more specifically, a mode of appropriation in which an actual entity or a prehending subject becomes itself by taking on elements from other actual entities. Such appropriation is in fact nothing other than the working of memory – it is memory’s way of filtering the world for the purpose of future action.⁸ To speak of video as a prehending subject is then very different from saying that video art develops out of, or logically follows from modern painting, or wartime radar technology or broadcast television. Instead, video becomes through its memorizing or filtering of certain select elements from such practices, and its equally important forgetting of others. And this is the twist, and my key claim: *What video prehends mainly has to do with memory itself. Video becomes by memorizing itself as a medium of memory.*⁹

From this perspective I focus on video’s prehension of painting – but not the painting in general indicated by the formalist term “electronic painting.” What is prehended here is, rather, a specific moment within modern painting, in which painting is actively dissociated from the problems of form and opticality and instead associated with *forces* and *haptical relations*. Once we start tracing the “painterly” Paik in conjunction with the work of Piene and Tambellini, we discover that such forces must inevitably be understood as “social” forces, new approaches to the question of collective being, as indicated in Paik’s *Video Commune* (1970) – a four hour long experimental televisual presentation of the technical affordances of his “painterly” video

8. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality. An Essay in Cosmology*, New York: The Free Press/Macmillian, 1978.

9. In “Whitehead’s Revolutionary Concept of Prehension,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 19 (3), 1979, Charles Hartshorne makes two assertions of particular importance to my analysis: One is that prehending subjects “cannot be things or persons as identical through change; they can only be momentary states, single instances of becoming. In memory it is not A remembering the identical A, it is an experience remembering earlier, and definitely not identical experiences. Only an event language can avoid confusion in a theory of relations” (pp.259-260). The second is that “the idea of prehension is infinitely more abstract and general than the idea of human feelings [...] The more imaginative power one has the more sense one can have of the difference between the specifically human and the generic meaning of ‘feeling’” (p.261). The concept of video as a prehending subject can only be understood in terms of this language of events and the access to a generalizable concept of “feeling” that moves beyond the framework of specifically human experience.

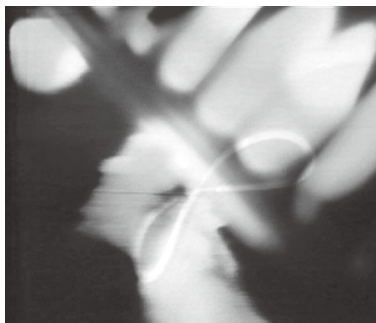


figure 1.
Video Commune, still image,
Nam June Paik Art Center Video
Archives Collection

synthesizer, broadcast from WGBX-TV, a sister station to Boston's PBS channel WGBH. Significantly, the broadcast was presented as “participatory TV”: audiences were encouraged to use the various dials on their TV sets to add further levels of modulation to the constant manipulation of scanning patterns in the transmission itself.

When tracing video's prehension of painting, the European painting practices marked by the advent of television are obviously interesting. For in the work of participants in the international Zero movement, a very different language of painting is brought out, both in writing and practice. It is hard to avoid noticing that the term deployed over and over again by artists such as Otto Piene, Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker is not form but *force* and that *force* is often used to militate against key tenets of formalist/modernist painting. In fact, much of their practice seems to simply pass beside the complexities of formalist reflexivity and the typically modernist emphasis on visual schemas and optical/phenomenological relations. Superficially, however, this might not seem to be the case. On first impression much of the Zero output seems vested in the idea of the flat picture surface as a screen where elements were distributed in repetitive all-over patterns, as if to further entrench the idea of the purely optical “screen” in modern abstract painting. If such works were on the one hand starkly material – “just” marked canvases – they also engaged the spectator's eye in the production of purely optical play: this was what made a critic like Clement Greenberg see the work of Jackson Pollock as the affirmation of the very essence of modern painting.¹⁰ Given a slight push in a more explicitly technical direction, modernist opticality at its most dynamic might be associated with television viewing. Photographic documentation from influential Zero exhibitions, such as the 1959 *Vision in Motion* in Antwerp or the 1962 exhibition at forum 62 in Ghent, shows picture screen after picture screen freely distributed in furniture-like arrangements throughout the spaces rather than hanging on the wall. Screens filled with dense

10. Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” 1961, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1910 An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, New York: Blackwell, 1992, pp.754-760.

scan lines or raster patterns of tiny dots were suspended from the ceiling or standing on metal rods, as if to recall the television set in all its commoditized glory, *and* the optical effects produced by its luminous emanations.

However, Piene actually argues *against* this easy identification between television viewing and painting. Or, to be more precise, he has little patience with the phenomenological focus on the image-spectator symbiosis that seemed to find both its fulfillment and its parody in the concept of the television viewer chained to his dynamic screen. Denouncing a world where the viewer is “forced into the picture, pressed as though through a tube,” his choice of words is that of someone rising up against a system of incarceration: Pictures are no longer “dungeons where mind and body are shackled together.” They are “mirrors whose powers affect man.”¹¹ Here one is clearly invited to think alongside Piene’s use of all sorts of reflective surfaces that catch and distribute wild light effects and not the idea of the picture as a mirror of reality. Painting, for Piene, is explicitly defined in terms of forces that attest to an “undisturbed energetic continuum” – a series of 1958/59 paintings were even entitled *La Force Pure*. Similar ideas are expressed by Heinz Mack who advice against the use of large parcels of form and all sorts of compositional and structuring strategies, since they “cannot become the force of continuous motion.” This principle has consequences for the use of color: to set one color in contrast to another may intensify the first, but also restrict its freedom since there is a governing relationship between the degrees of intensity and dependence. What Mack calls “the virtual objectification” of a color, or its “intrinsic energy” is only released when it “strikes its own vibration.” Colors are essentially vibrations or frequencies and hence one color may represent all, since difference in color is a matter of potential frequency modulation.¹²

Force, frequency, continuity of movement: This sounds very much like the vocabulary of the video camera’s pickup tube – a vacuum tube using a focused beam of electrons in order to continuously convert optical images or uncoded streams of light frequencies into electrical signals of varying voltages, ready to be carried by cables, recorded on videotape or transmitted through the air. If one takes seriously all the talk of forces and frequencies, the canvases of Piene and Mack are prehended as painterly media in a more signal-technological sense of the word. They are relays providing the breaks or constraints necessary for the transformation of movement from one state of intensity to another. In fact, works such as these may in fact be seen as instances of video prehending the new affordances of painting: the variable intensities of monochrome color, for instance – or the transformation from uncoded to coded streams of light that takes place when the light from moving torches or electrical lamps is sifted through perforated surfaces of various kinds. Or the

11. Otto Piene, “Paths to Paradise,” 1961, in Renate Wiehager and Heinz Mack, eds., *Zero Aus Deutschland 1957 bis 1966. Und Heute*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2000, p.235.

12. Heinz Mack, “Resting Restlessness,” 1958, in Wiehager and Mack, *ibid.*, p.105, and “The New Dynamic Structure,” 1958, in Wiehager and Mack, *ibid.*, p.227.

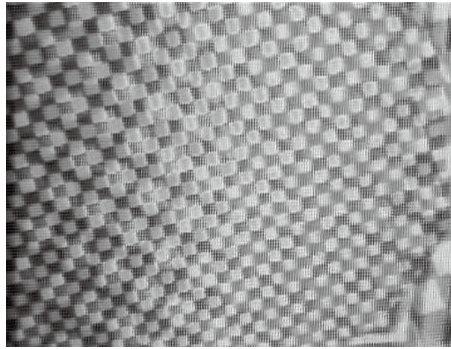


figure 2.
Video Commune

pixel-like traces of smoke that marks a canvas – the residue of fire meeting paint through a metal raster. Or all the other acts of tearing, slashing, shooting, stretching, suspending, pinning, layering, perforating and burning the canvas that marks the work of the Zero-related artists in Germany, Italy and elsewhere.

Yet, a signal-oriented memory of the forces of painting precedes the late 1950's efforts of the Zero group by at least a half-century. For video also seems toprehend those instances of modern painting that explores the affective dimensions of pure color – the pure color was, arguably, the regulative idea of modern painting.¹³ At least, such a perspective becomes possible once we accept that in some prominent instances the intensive color experiments of modern art posited painting as a form of mental processing, evoking brain functions and brain environments rather than the realm of pure optics and form, as traditional art history would have it.

This last point is the key argument in *L'oeuil-cerveau. Nouvelles histoires de la peinture moderne* – Éric Alliez and Jean-Clet Martin's revisionist account of what was at stake in the painting of Delacroix, Manet, Seurat, Gauguin and Cezanne. The immediate discursive context here is the psychophysiological studies that gained prominence in 19th century culture, and their impact on the understanding of color. In this account, the pointillism of Seurat is particularly instructive because of its overt reliance on “scientific” methods, it's a subjective technicity and its close dialogue with photographic technologies. Seurat founded his so-called “chromoluminarism” on a quantitative science of color and light, pushing to the side impressionist opticality and the popular idea that separate hues of unmixed color would meld on the surface of the image. For Seurat, the surface of the image is quite simply no longer where things happen: color has “radioactive” properties and hence its luminosity must be understood in terms closer to touch than to vision – as a form of sensation, that is.

13. Thierry De Duve, *Kant After Duchamp*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996, pp.147-166.

14. Eric Alliez and Jean-Clet Martin, *L'oeuil-cerveau. Nouvelles histoires de la peinture moderne*, Paris: Vrin, 2007, pp.223-293.

15. J.Y. Lettvin, H.R. Maturana, W.S. McCulloch and W.H. Pitts, “What the Frog's Eye

Put to work in a form of painting that really advertises its synthetic procedures, its painstakingly artificial construction, Seurat's myriads of tiny color dots alert us to the relation between *haptic* and *mental* processes in the production of the visible.¹⁴ In 19th century science, "hallucination" was the term for this *mental* production of visibility – 20th century neurology has since confirmed it as the mechanism of vision in general.¹⁵ What video prehends, though, is above all the idea of painting as a medium of neurological modulation or *memory-in-action*, a real-time operation through which brain and world engage in a process of mutual constitution.

Such an understanding of painting as memory may then be a productive framework for reviewing the long passage from painting to signaletic technologies in the work of Otto Piene and his companions. I want, however, to single out Piene's collaboration with Italian-American painter and video pioneer Tambellini – an artist whose critique of form, opticality and "lumiocentric" metaphysics extended from his black paintings of the late 50's and early 60's to his electromedia performances and video and television work from the mid 1960's onwards. For it could be argued that it was precisely the painterly background of Tambellini that led him to a socially and politically oriented video art based on the idea of sensorial onslaught, neuronal modulation and the collaboration between brains. "Man does not need his eyes but to function with 13 billion cells in his brain," Tambellini wrote, referencing a body of work where the question of psychophysiological forces and the feedback between environment and mental processing was explicitly formulated as a question of social and political forces.¹⁶

To see what was at stake here, we need to evoke the history of the phenomena that re-actualized the link between visual stimuli and hallucinatory experiences – the stroboscopic light and flickering that was generally associated with early television culture and explored in the expanded cinema of Peter Kubelka, Brion Gysin and Tony Conrad. The fact that flickering light can cause visual hallucinations is ancient knowledge, but it was only in the 19th century that stroboscopic effects became the subject of systematic investigations, starting with the 1923 writings of physiologist and poet Jan E. Purkinje. A popular breakthrough came with the researches of W. Grey Walter, who introduced the electronic stroboscope to psychophysical experimentation in 1946. The use of high-power stroboscopes and trigger-feedback techniques that made the light flashes move in sync with brain rhythm activity produced such vivid hallucinations that the brain actually appeared like an instrument modulated by light impulses. Walter used dramatic terms to describe such modulation, describing it as a process through which the brain was temporarily transformed into a different sort of brain. Not only did the stroboscopic

Tells the Frog's Brain," in Warren S. McCulloch, *Embodiments of Mind*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1988, pp.230-255.

16. Aldo Tambellini, statement in the program to Otto Piene's *The Proliferation of the Sun at the Black Gate Theatre*, New York, 1966 – part of a whole program of multimedia performances organized by the two artists.



figure 3.
Video Commune

effects on the brain occasion the production of vivid visual patterns in everyone subjected to it – “dazzling lights of unearthly brilliance and color developing in magnitude and complexity of pattern as long as the stimulation lasted” – in a number of subjects it also interfered with their sense of time. The flicker effect could produce overpoweringly vivid memories of past experiences, as well as more fundamental temporal confusions, where the past was no longer “behind” the present and the future no longer “ahead.”

Experiences like these were presented to the general public in the 1953 book *The Living Brain*, where Walter argued that they were not the results of the properties of light or of the mechanism of the eye, but of the brain itself. Thanks to this book, flickering and “neuronal modulation” became a guiding concept in an avant-garde culture already invested in self-transformation and alternative modes of collective being. Of particular interest here is the 1965 film *The Flicker* by composer and musician Tony Conrad, who understood the use of stroboscopic effects as form of subharmonic production generated without recourse to sound (Conrad's film is basically an alternation of single black and white frames, preceded by a warning about epileptic seizures or shock treatment symptoms; hallucinatory experiences in the viewer typically occur halfway into the film).¹⁷

But what was really at stake here was the attempt to imagine the role and impact of frequencies in the realm of visual phenomena and sensory experience in general – precisely the concerns outlined in many of Paik's references to “video painting.” In Conrad's work with the continuous sound environments of *The Dream Syndicate* – the group of composers/musicians including La Monte Young, John Cale, Marian Zazeela and Angus MacLise – musical pitch and harmonic systems were understood in strictly mathematical terms, i.e. as frequency ratios: This was the basis for the group's experiments with “just intonation” and psychoacoustic effects, among other

17. W. Grey Walter, as quoted in John Geiger, *Chapel of Extreme Experience. A Short History of Stroboscopic Light and the Dream Machine*, New York: Soft Skull Press, 2003, pp.14-27.

things.¹⁸ Yet, Conrad was troubled by the fact that the precise numerical relations that obtain between pitch and consonance in music did not seem to have any counterpart in other fields of sensory experience, such as touch, taste or vision. To an artist who had not yet had any concrete experience with video technology, flickering light seemed to be the only exception: it presented itself as one of the few frequency-dependent modalities in the non-aural parts of the human sensorium. From this point of departure it was at least possible to imagine that harmonic structures and precise quantifiable relations might be found within the range of sensorial experiences afforded by flickering light. The techno-scientific modes of description and control that once pertained to the realm of sound and aural experience only, might now be applied to aesthetic experience in general: One could, in fact, imagine a future in which all sorts of bodily sensations might be translated into numerical relations and modulated in precise technical terms. Music was the only aesthetic object that was “already” mathematical and Conrad’s interest in translating sensorial experiences to numerical terms may be seen in the context of the ever more intensive quest, within music itself, to technologically access and control psychoacoustic experience at the most precise and intimate level possible.¹⁹ Paik’s musically informed video discourse seemed to follow a similar logic, taking cues from general ideas about the haptical aspects of painting: aesthetics, for Paik, had to do with the modulation of physical bodies – extending into the realm direct neuronal stimulation. A 1966 text puts it in plain, clear terms: “Medical electronics and art is still widely apart, but these two fields can also change each other’s fruits, e.g. various signals can be fed to many parts of head, brain, and bodies, aiming to establish a completely new genre of DIRECT-CONTACT-ART, and this artistic experiment can bring some scientific byproduct for this young science in electro-anesthesia, electro-visual tranquilizer, electronic hallucination through the film for closed eyes, electro-sleep and other electro-therapy. Electro-magnetic vibration of the head might lead the way to electronic zen.”[sic]²⁰

In this context it is interesting to note that the specifically televisual question of scanning patterns – in fact, the technical level at which Paik made his first work with TV – was brought up by Walter when speculating about the unknown brain mechanism that caused flickering light to produce hallucinations and time warps. Walter suggested that the secret factor might be a scanning mechanism in the brain not unlike the one found in a cathode ray tube:

18. Kyle Gann, “The Outer Edge of Consonance: Snapshots from the Evolution of La Monte Young’s Tuning Installations,” in William Duckworth and Richard Fleming, eds., *Sound and Light: La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela*, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1996, pp.152-190.

19. Tony Conrad, interviewed by John Geiger, published on www.tonyconrad.net.

20. Nam June Paik, essay originally published in *Fylkingen Bulletin*, Stockholm, 1967, reprinted in Judson Rosebush, ed., op.cit., unpaginated.

The curious effect can be accounted for if we regard the flicker as interfering with the normal process of scanning. A similar effect can be produced on a television screen by illuminating the television studio with a flickering light. The resulting interference with the picture would be very hard to bear. The effect of flicker is sometimes just as confusing to the brain; the conflict between two different time patterns – the inherent scanning rhythms of the brain and the flicker can produce a brainstorm as wild as any distortion on the television screen. In short, the patterns were interference produced by a scanning mechanism attempting to deal with an intermittent signal.²¹

Indeed, how exactly would a television broadcast come across if the TV studio were to be illuminated with flickering light instead of the normal bright studio? And could television – the site of a media production that is based on the technical organization of time patterns – be understood as a brain of sorts, and thus also as the potential site of “wild brainstorms”? Tambellini and Piene seem to have attempted to find out, as they decided to bring their electromedia performances to German public television.

Their ***Black Gate Cologne*** (1969), made in collaboration with WDR's Wibke von Bonin, was an exercise in advanced flickering that reconfigured all known tenets of TV production. Originally a 47 minute long TV studio recording of a happening-like procedure involving films and Lumagram slide projections, mobile light objects, inflatable furniture-like installations and a participating studio audience; the recording of ***Black Gate Cologne*** was cut in half, and the two recordings layered one on top of the other so that the final broadcast program was 23 minutes. Not only did this layering mess up all visual/spatial coordinates in the TV image – the studio was also submerged in a darkness that contrasted radically with the kind of radiant *emission* that literally brought TV-images into the living room of each viewer. This particular TV-show seemed to close in on itself, wrapped up in its own dark shimmer. Gradually the dark studio turned into a rapidly flickering space, its architectonics increasingly indistinguishable from the complex electronic effects offered by video technologies. Visual layers multiply as the space fills up with people, as the throbbing electronic soundscapes alternate with sounds of the audience only, as the black and white image constantly shifts from positive to negative in synch with cameras zooming in and out on flickering light projections on the wall. And soon the flickering within the studio space seems to extend to the broadcast tape itself, as if Walter's hypothesis about interferences in the televisual scanning mechanism caused by flickering studio light had actually been proven true. In actual fact, there was no such technical connection between the different levels of flickering. The extension of visual disturbances from studio space to video image was a controlled construction – an effect, apparently, of a desire to explicitly subsume the social collective of the studio

21. Walter, quoted in Geiger, op.cit., p.26.



figure 4.
Video Commune,
Nam June Paik experimenting
on the screen synthesis with
his own face

production space under a general principle of signal manipulation and scanning interferences, to refuse this world its habitual recourse to image and representation and to redefine it in terms of sensorial or haptical attack and neuronal modulation.

Exactly what model of “the social” is presented here? Certainly not the sociological model the public sphere as a surveyable “arena” of debate and struggle – the model exemplified in the ordinary TV talk show format with audience in attendance. A televisual collective that only emerges in terms of the blinding flashes of light of synthetic electronic constructions, is clearly different from one defined as a collection of distinct individuals. It would be more accurate to say that it is defined in terms of sub-individual and supra-individual mobilizations of affects caused by sensory onslaught. Such a collective would be defined through a demonstrative attention to the way in which sensorial apparatuses construct and interact with an emergent world – an ecological perspective that can be made operative at the level of social ontology and political thought as well.

It is significant, of course, that the flickering in *Black Gate Cologne* is not just an abstract play of light (as in the work of Conrad and Kubelka), but laced with the kind of television news footage that would – in the TV-parlance of the time – be “flickering across the screens” in every home. The footage was mainly related to the 1968 assassination of Robert Kennedy and to the Black Panther movement that erupted on the US political scene in 1967/68 – related, that is, to the radicalization of the civil rights movement, the escalation of Israel/Arab hostilities and the paranoia caused by mounting suspicion of CIA intervention in US politics. This politically supercharged material was used in a way that set up associations between the public sharing of TV new materials and the form of stroboscopic disturbances that would occasion temporary transformations in the functioning of the brain. The strongly emotional character of the footage was so to speak identified with the sensorial impact of TV. The rage, paranoia and hysteria it elicited were here quite simply presented as the

specific content of the affective modulation of a properly televisual collective in the year of 1969.

John Protevi's theory of political affect and "bodies politic" is a useful framework for understanding the distinct shift in social imagination and description that is outlined in the *Black Gate Cologne* broadcast – but also, if in a less dramatic way, in the pulsating, hallucinatory, and "painterly" TV studio space that emerged thanks to Paik's modulation of scanning patterns in the participatory *Video Commune* broadcast. Political affect is the key term of a study that pays attention to the emergent character of subjectivity in the intertwining of somatic and social systems. The sensorial and affective opening to the world on which all cognitive activity is based is at once free and patterned: Bodies politic make sense of situations using political categories such as race, class and gender, and the habits of using those categories develop as the result of subjectification practices amenable to political analysis. Sensations of an already-political world have impact on the affective response patterning of bodies, which again shapes their cognition of, and action in, the world. To speak of political affect is quite simply to emphasize the historically and socially embedded aspect of affective cognition as well as the plastic and indeterminate nature of such processes vs. more mechanical ideas of social disciplining.²²

In the context of art, such a shift in social imagination emerges not just with the displacement of representation as a regulative framework for art production: as we have seen, the displacement of the optical/formalist emphasis in so-called "abstract" art is as important. Versus macroscopic and economistic theories of the interrelation between "art," "the social" and "the political" attention to the triggering capacities of sensorial materials held promises of more finely grained approaches: The psychophysiological charge of colors, of light, of darkness and of all sorts of rhythmic patterns and temporal contractions provided the basis for a more microscopic understanding of collective and political bodies and their emergent properties. It provided, in addition, an intuition into art's stake in the exploration of a concept of social memory founded on dynamic processes of differentiation and individuation rather than surveyable spaces and stable monuments. It is this social model that emerges in video's prehension of painting – a process where painting is *aligned with* the open temporalities of post-Cagean music, as well as with La Monte Young and Tony Conrad's psychoacoustic microscopy of the senses. If Paik's video synthesizer had anything to do with painting, it was through its quest to access precisely such forces and capacities. ∞

22. John Protevi, *Political Affect. Connecting the Social and the Somatic*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009, pp.3-60.

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이나 블롬

오슬로대학교의 철학, 고전, 미술사, 사상학과 교수이다.
모더니즘과 아방가르드 연구, 현대 미술 분야에서 특히 예술,
테크놀로지, 미디어, 정치의 관계와 미디어 미학에 초점을 맞춰
광범위하게 저술 활동을 해왔다. 영화, 미디어 연구자들과의
협력 하에 NFR 지원 연구 프로젝트인 '움직이는 아카이브'
(2011-2014)를 총괄하고 있으며, 미술비평가로서 『아트포럼』,
『애프터올』, 『파케트』, 『텍스트 주어 쿤스트』 등의 미술지에 활발
하게 기고하고 있다. 블롬의 최근 저서로는 『스타일 사이트에
관하여: 예술, 사회성, 그리고 미디어 문화』(2007/2009)이
있으며, 논문으로는 「비디오의 자서전: 초기 비디오 예술에 대한
수정주의 해석에 대한 개요」를 『크리티컬 인콰이어리』 2013년
겨울호에 수록하였다. 초기 아날로그 비디오와 사회적 기억
문제의 관계를 다룬 『비디오의 자서전』이라는 제목의 단행본을
집필 중이다.

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Ina Blom

She is a Professor at the Department of Philosophy,
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2007/2009) and her most recent article is "The
Autobiography of Video. Outline for a Revisionist
Account of Early Video Art," in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter
Issue 2013. She is currently working on a book
project named *The Autobiography of Video*, which
explores the relation between early analog video and
questions of social memory.