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CHECKLIST

Vito Acconci, American, born 1940

Command Performance, 1974

DVD BetaSP NTSC; 56:40; black and white with sound
Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund;
2005.23

Documentation of the Performance "Command Performance," 1974

Photographs and white crayon on paper

Gift of Monroe A. Denton Jr., Class of 1968; 2006.100.1

Dennis A. Oppenheim, American, born 1938

Lead Sink for Sebastian, number 6 of 10

Rocked Circle—Fear, number 7 of 10

From the portfolio *Projects*, 1970, printed 1973

Photolithographs in black and blue on Arches Cover White paper
Purchased through the Adelbert Ames Jr. 1919 Fund; PR.975.10.6–7

Nam June Paik, American, 1932–2006

Zen for TV, 1963/1978

Altered Sylvania Dualette television set,

originally manufactured c. 1959

Gift of the artist; GM.978.211

Ben Vautier, Swiss, born 1935

A Flux Suicide Kit, 1963

Plastic, box, paper, straight pin, matches, razor, hook, rope, and plug

Gift of Dr. Abraham M. Friedman; GM.986.80.235

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Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS



Nam June Paik, *Zen for TV*, 1963/1978, altered Sylvania Dualette television set.
Gift of the artist; GM.978.211. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.

DISCOMFORT ZONE

Fluxus and Performance Art from the 1960s and 1970s



Ben Vautier, *A Flux Suicide Kit*, 1963, plastic, box, paper, straight pin, matches, razor, hook, rope, and plug. Gift of Dr. Abraham M. Friedman; GM.986.80.235. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.

What is art? If most of us were asked whether it is a painting in a museum or the television set in our living rooms, the answer would be obvious. What if, however, the television were placed in the museum, right next to the painting, and credited to a well-known artist? How might we then look at it, talk about it, and understand it? As viewers of art, our experiences necessarily place us in dialogue with what we are looking at. In this *Space for Dialogue*, the selected works are concerned with the use of new and different media and their recontextualization as art. They also explore how our perceptions of and reactions to these works serve to define their meaning.

In the early twentieth century, some artists began to intentionally manipulate ordinary objects in an artistic context. Since then, many modern and contemporary artists have chosen to make, use, assemble, and create these types of objects (or situations) for the purpose of upending traditional definitions of art and art-making. Four such artists, Vito Acconci, Nam June Paik, Dennis Oppenheim, and Ben Vautier, working in the 1960s and 1970s, used a variety of unconventional media and in the process pushed the boundaries of “art.” The works exhibited in this *Space for Dialogue* share broader implications about what it means to break out of one’s comfort zone, as artists and as viewers, whether through the disruption of convention, the use of non-traditional media, or the sometimes aggressive attempt to push people beyond the physical and psychological bounds of normalcy and even safety.

These works have been described as transgressive, absurd, confusing, difficult, disturbing, or just plain uncomfortable. Yet is precisely

through viewers’ strong and sometimes negative reactions to their art that these artists hope to spark new and exciting dialogue about the nature of art and human experience. These works have been brought together in this space so that we can work to understand them both as they relate to each other and in the context of our individual responses to them.

The 1960s and 1970s were decades of highly experimental avant-garde art, much of which critiqued what artists saw as an increasingly commodified art world. Sometimes termed “anti-art,” these works had roots in the Dada movement, which began in Europe in 1916 (National Gallery of Art, 2006). The Dadaists drew inspiration from everyday life and modern European society, both during and after World War I. Working to shock and provoke viewers, they staged elaborate live performances in which they sang, yelled, or recited nonsense poetry. They also incorporated modern materials and found objects into their art, the most famous examples of which were Marcel Duchamp’s “readymade” works, typically ordinary objects that he signed and then recontextualized by displaying them in an exhibition.

Building upon the conceptual and aesthetic traditions of Dada, Fluxus was an international art movement that began in the early 1960s and eventually attracted a wide variety of artists concerned with engaging in “a spirit of exploration, of breaking down boundaries, of looking to process instead of product” (Kaplan et al. 2000, 8). Included in this installation are two prominent Fluxus artists, Nam June Paik and Ben Vautier, both of whom appropriated and manipulated everyday objects in their work, while posing very different challenges to viewers.

In *Zen for TV* (1963/1978), Nam June Paik elevates a very commonplace object, the television set, to the realm of abstract thought and spirituality. The single vertical line we see resonates with the work’s title, conveying the idea of meditation and evoking it in viewers even as the TV itself appears to be meditating (Baas 2005, 182). In *Flux Suicide Kit* (1963) Ben Vautier practices the creed he had set down as a work of art on paper in 1962: *Absolument n’importe quoi est art* (Absolutely anything is art) (Hapgood and Rittner 1995, 67).

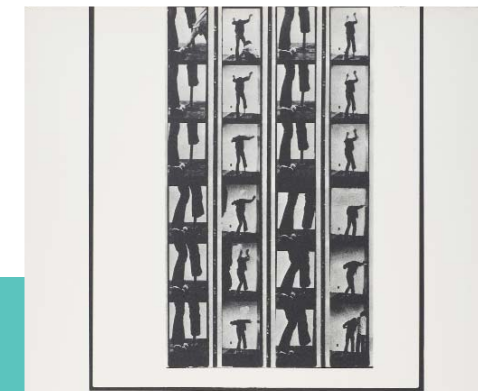
In this instance, Vautier presents us with a particularly macabre play on the notion of a first-aid kit, by pulling small objects out of their everyday contexts and resituating them. Though the box’s title alludes to the implied purpose of these objects, it is in our imaginations that they become potentially and chillingly useful, each bringing to mind a different death. Yet the scale of the box and the “cuteness” of the miniature objects provide us with some sense of whimsy and humor. After all, if “absolutely anything is art,” then we as viewers can certainly feel free to laugh at it, perhaps more than if it were a

traditional artwork. It is possible that the unexpectedness and unconventionality of the piece are what allow us to find it at all humorous.

While the two Fluxus objects push viewers with regard to artistic conventions, much of the avant-garde art of the 1960s and 1970s also reflected an interest in pushing the boundaries of the human body, challenging preconceived notions about how artists’ and viewers’ interactions are mediated by art. In performance art, artists worked to bring art into the arena of live events and free it from its identity as a tangible commodity. Art was no longer about “objects,” but about “happenings” in real time and space, and the act of art-making and the act of viewing were no longer separated. In an embodiment of the risk-taking often associated with the artistic process, and the vulnerability many artists experience when making a work of art, many of the artists involved in what is known as “body art” purposefully endangered their own bodies. Dennis Oppenheim’s two works, *Rocked Circle—Fear* (1970) and *Lead Sink for Sebastian* (1970) exemplify an artistic invasion of a person’s physical comfort zone, originating in what Oppenheim refers to as the “eye of the gut. . . not mental, not visual, but somewhere in between” (Heiss 1992, 74). In *Rocked Circle—Fear*, Oppenheim creates a situation in which he experiences (and artistically expresses) his raw fear as a victim of violence, as stones are thrown at him. In *Lead Sink for Sebastian*, an amputee’s lead-pipe leg melts, his physical size and shape controlled by Oppenheim in a living sculptural process. Finally, in *Command Performance*, Vito Acconci calls into question how viewers look at and relate to art. The roles of performer and spectator are upended, and viewers find themselves locked in the gaze of the artist, literally sitting in the spotlight, implicated as invaders of his psychological space as they voyeuristically witness his seemingly private monologue.

Ultimately what is so fascinating about these works is their aggressive insistence on our involved experience as viewers. They challenge us and are in many ways defined by our discomfort. We are given an active role, becoming collaborators with these artists, our responses and subsequent dialogues adding dimension and relevance to their work.

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Dennis A. Oppenheim, *Lead Sink for Sebastian*, number 6 of 10 from the portfolio *Projects*, 1970, printed 1973, lithograph. Purchased through the Adelbert Ames Jr. 1919 Fund; PR.975.10.6. Photo by Jeffrey Nintzel.