




VM503
AESTHETICS AND HISTORY
OF NEW MEDIA

WEEK 6 CLASS 1

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Keywords to-date

aesthetics, artificial boundary, **chance**, change, **collaboration**, **communication**, **cybernetic**, data, **distance**, **disembodied**, distributed, **durational**, egalitarian, electronic, **embodied**, ephemeral, **everyday**, experience, feedback, **fluid**, hypertext, **idea**, immaterial, **immersive**, impermanence, **indeterminate**, information, **installation**, intangible, **integrated**, interactive, **interdependence**, interdisciplinary, **interrelated**, living system, **machine**, mobile, **net art**, networked, **non-hierarchical**, non-object, **open**, organic, **participation**, performance, **physical**, presence, **process**, readymade, **real time**, **relational**, **responsive**, self-organizing, **self-regulating**, **social**, social sculpture, **system**, telematic, **telepresence**, **time**, **unpredictable**, virtual reality.

Key Concepts: **Cybernetics**

- The study of **communication, feedback, and control mechanisms** of living systems and machines.
- The study of **patterns of organization** in organic relations.
- The science of **self-organization and self-regulation.**

Key Concepts: **Conceptualism**

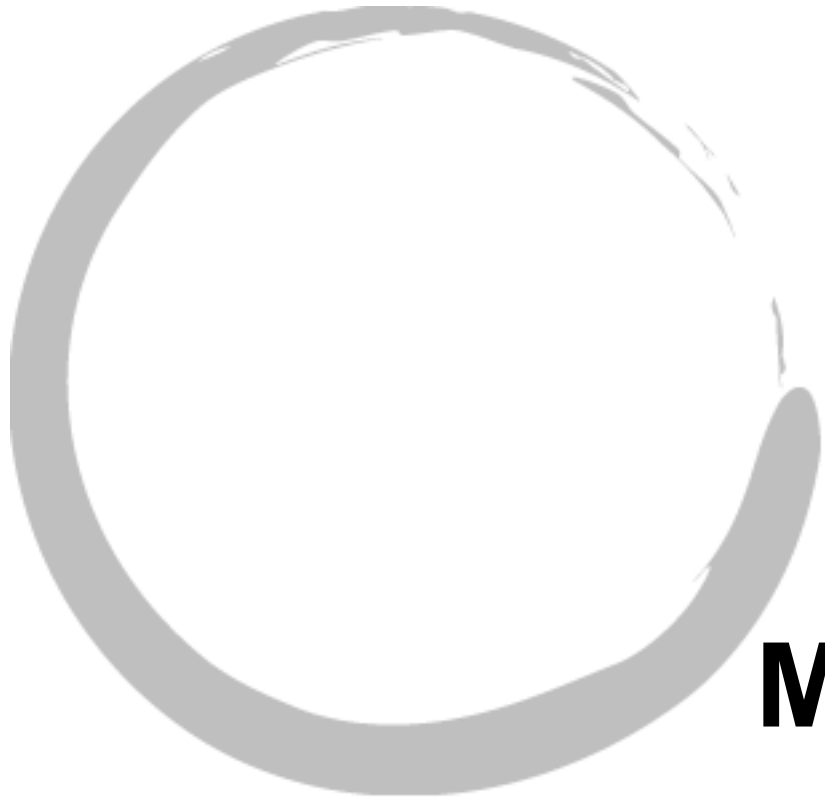
- Emphasis on **idea**/information.
- Desire for **alternative** modes of **communication** and **distribution**.
- **Communication about communication.**

Key Concepts: **Real Time**

- Predicated on **communication networks**.
- Systems that gather and process data from environments **in time to effect future events** within those environments.
- 2-way dialogue that **moves both** (machine-human, machine-machine, human-human) **beyond their original state**.

Key Concepts: **Systems Esthetics**

- The **orderly processes at work in any complex array of multiple, interacting variables**, be it a living organism, an environmental milieu, or a computing machine.
- All systems regardless of size or complexity are **interconnected**.
- **Matter-Energy-Information** exchanges.
- Natural events poetically isolated.
- **Artist = cultural producer = maker of esthetic decisions.**



Mail Art

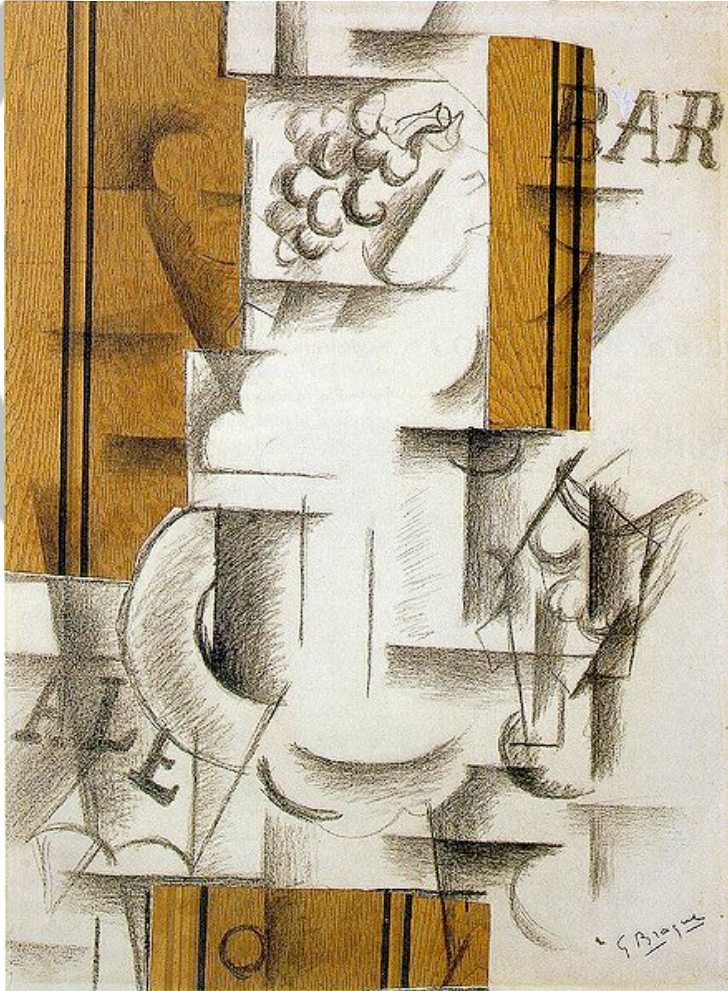


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Historic Precedents

- **Collage** (from the French: *coller*, **to glue**) is a work of formal art, primarily in the visual arts, made from **an assemblage of different forms**, thus creating a new whole.
- Modernist collage began with **Cubist** painters **Georges Braque** and **Pablo Picasso** (1912).
- **Kurt Schwitters** 'Psychological Collage' (Mertz); used fragments of found objects and wood to make witty allusions to current events.
- **Dadaists, Futurists, Surrealists** dabbled with social connectivity, art and technology.

Braque



*Fruitdish and Glass, paper
and charcoal, 1912*

Picasso



*Comptoir avec fruits, violon et
verre, oil cloth and paint, 1912*

Kurt Schwitters



Das Unbild, 1919, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

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Hannah Höch



Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, 1919, collage of pasted papers.

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Mail Art: Networking Without Technology

by

Seeta Peña Gangadharan



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Ray Johnson

- Studied at Black Mountain College.
- Familiar **John Cage/Fluxus** and **Andy Warhol/Pop Art**, **Joseph Beuys/Social Sculpture**, **Happenings**.
- 1950s and 1960s: devotion to **information**, **communication** and **connection** from a human perspective.
- Compiled a **list of 200** artists, art historians, art connoisseurs, other members of the downtown New York arts scene, and celebrity figures (**placed art and artists on equal ground with art critics, viewers and appraisers**).

Ray Johnson



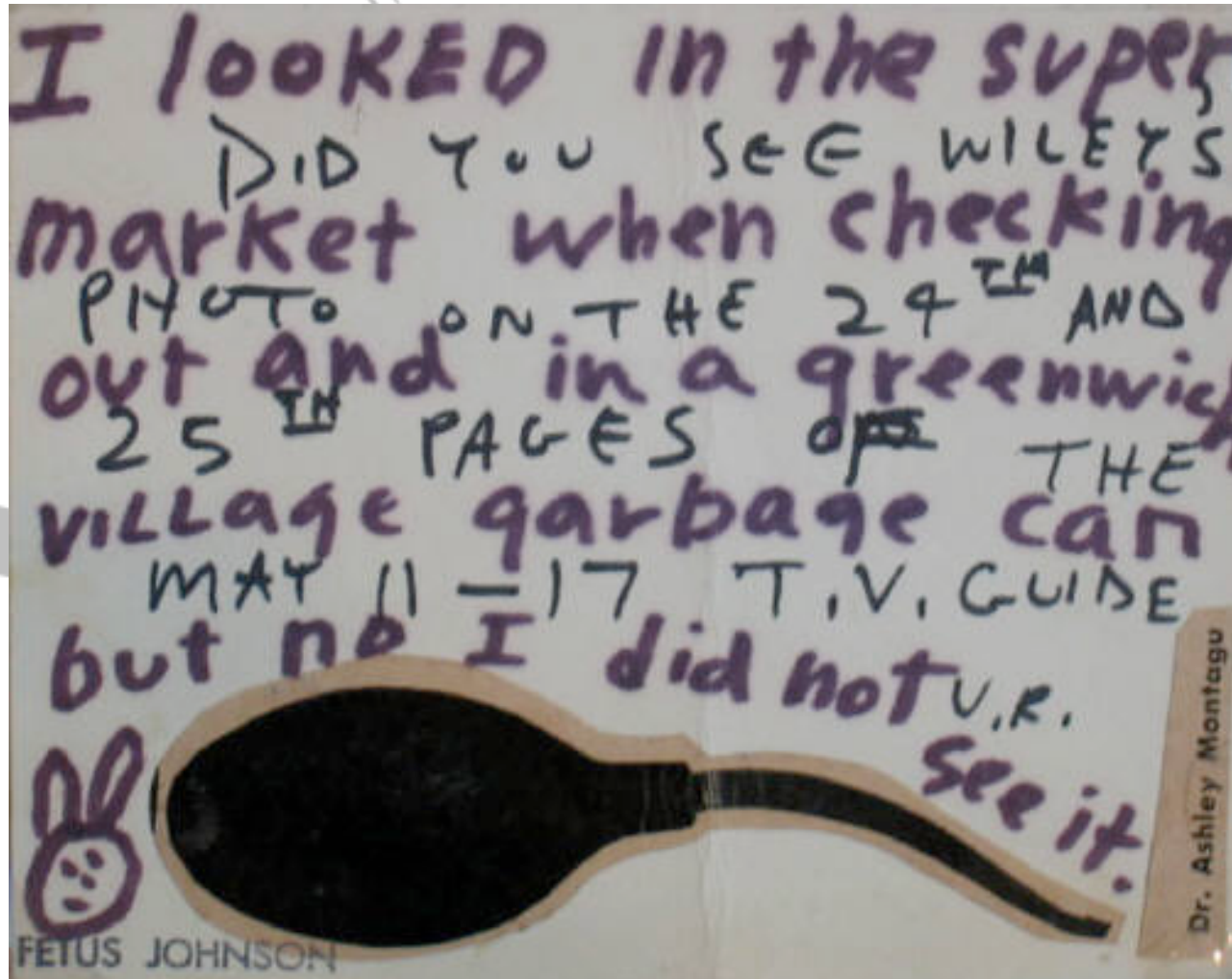
James Dean (Lucky Strike), 1957

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Ray Johnson

- ‘**Sendings**’ and ‘**receivings**’ (moticos) through postal system were an attempt to ‘**sculpt**’ an intimate network that participated in his art.
- **Collaged** cut-up imagery from magazines, adverts, packaging, photographs, other mass media or consumer artifacts, original drawings or paintings and text (*the collage represents the **social relations** or **associative work** taking place behind the art’s final display*).
- Frequently instructed receivers to ‘add to’ the piece, then ‘forward’ it on to another person on the list.
- **Emphasized a relational aesthetic**; co-creative process of art-making in both **embodied** and **disembodied** forms.

Ray Johnson



Mixed media collage on card from a 1968 mailer to V.Romano

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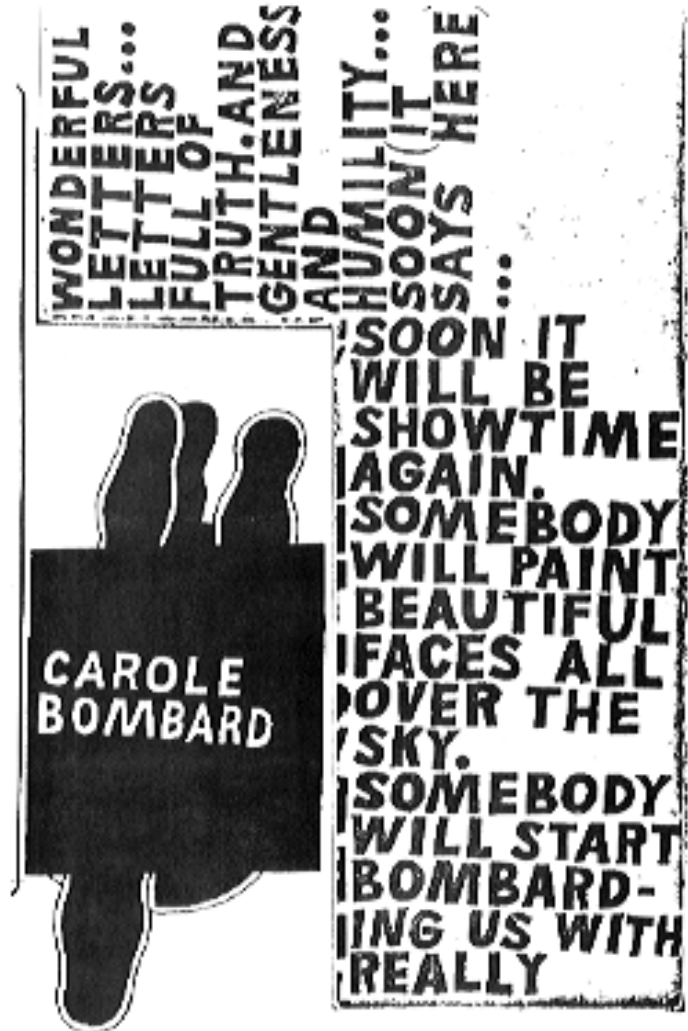
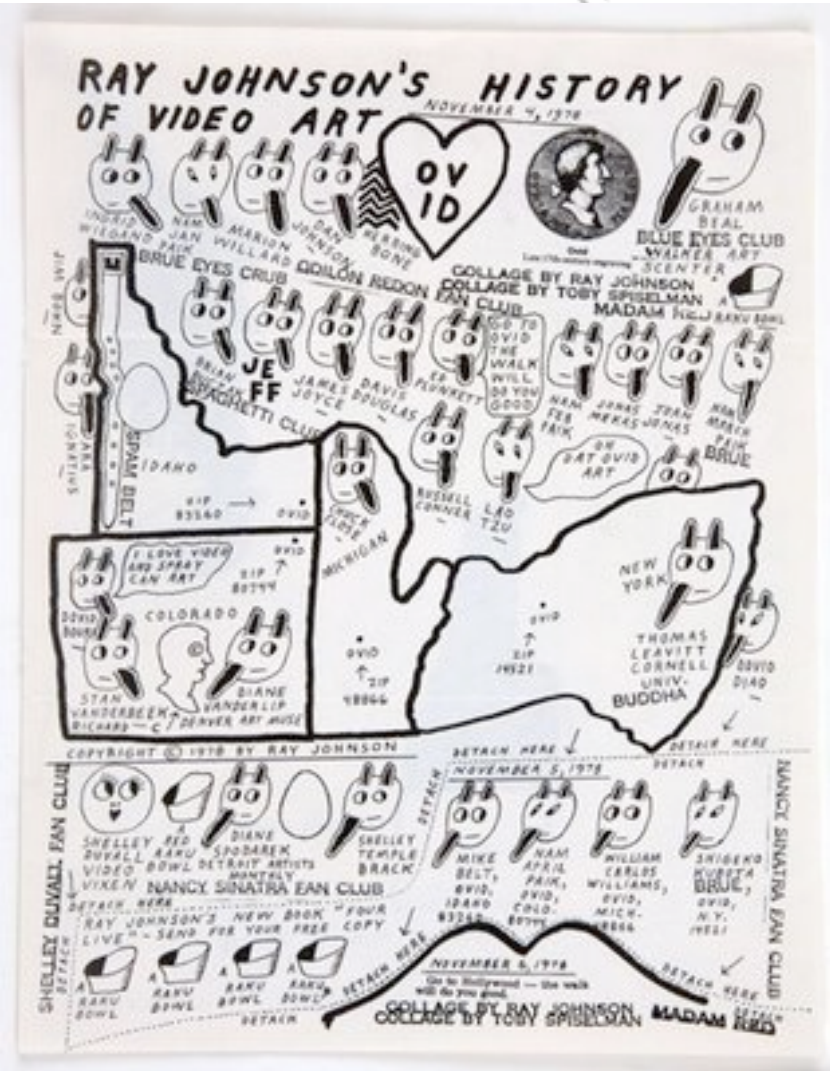
Ray Johnson

- Mail Art was **both object and experience** (ephemeral).
- Participants acted as **consumers** of his work and **producers** of the process.
- Evoked the idea of a 'network' and configured participants as equals within it.
- His **correspondence-as-performance pieces** were fundamentally **based on meaningful, exchange** – meaning **which he accorded to the collective, rather than to himself**.
- He was opposed to the art establishment and the commodification of the art object.

Ray Johnson

- Organized events featuring artist performances; called his performances **nothings** (from **Happenings** and Cage's philosophy on 'silence').
- **New York Correspon-dance School** (1962); poked fun at the seriousness of the abstract expressionists and played with notions of performance art.
- The 'a' in the misspelled word, 'Correspon-d**a**nce', stood for **action**.

Ray Johnson



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The Mail Art Community (1970s)

- An **alternative to the hierarchical, commodity-oriented,** mainstream art world.
- An **alternative to the impersonal, information and communication-saturated, bureaucratic society.**
- Practices involved **collective authorship** across a **geographically diverse** setting.
- Artists dabbled with **pseudonymous identities.**
- Bartered their works, creating a **gift economy.**

FILE Magazine

FILE

1972–1989

Mr Peanut Issue
Manipulating the
Self Issue Eye of
the Shadow Issue

Special Double Issue IFEL Special Paris
Issue Mondo Nudo Issue Annual Artists'
Directory Issue Glamour Issue New York
City Edition Issue Special People Issue
Punk 'Til You Pukel Issue 1984 A Year
in Pictures Issue Special Transgressions
Issue Special Global Downtown Issue
Foreign Agents Issue Special \$ucce\$\$
Issue The Re-materialization of the Art
Object Issue X Ray Sex Issue Special
General Idea Issue—Mondo Cane Kama
Sutra General Idea's 1984 and the 1968–
1984 FILE Retrospective Issue Diane
Frankenstein Issue Sex, Drugs, Rock 'N'
Roll and Art & Text Issue Artnews Issue
The Journal of the New Mortality Issue
The Journal of the New Art Market Issue
Final Issue, The City Issue

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FILE Magazine (1971)

- An outgrowth of an artist collective *General Idea* which served as a platform for the conceptual arts scene in Toronto and beyond.
- Promoted the relational aesthetic by regularly **compiling and publishing an artists' directory** (1,400 names) and **request list** for artworks.
- Readers could **connect** and **interact** with anyone on the list, which included Joseph Beuys, Judy Chicago, William Burroughs and Marshall McLuhan.
- Allowed individual artists the freedom to participate and interact on their own terms and **collaborate** rather than **compete**.

FILE Magazine

- Valued **openness**, egalitarianism, and freedom from economic constraint.
- Helped to grow Mail Art, promoting the movement within and outside of its pages, and **spreading the network ethos** to a wider set of participants.
- By the **mid-1970s**, Mail Art was incorporated into an ensemble of networked art practices -- **book arts, video art, cable art, cassette art, telematic art** and, later on, **internet art** -- that examined **social connections** and performed and played with notions of **distance, time, technology** and **connection** through various different media.

La Mamelle (1975)

- Founded by **Carl Loeffler** and **Trudi Richards** in San Francisco, CA.
- Emphasized **collaboration**, **cross-pollination** and **relational aesthetics**.
- Functioned as a *physical space* in which to conduct experiments.
- Served as an *informational space* through which to disseminate information.

La Mamelle

- **Two-Way Demo: Send/Receive** (1977, NY to SF via NASA Satellite CTS) with *Liza Bear, Keith Sonnier, and Willoughby Sharp*; **two-way telecommunication**, 25,000 viewers.
- **Artists' Use of Telecommunications** (1980, multiple nodes in US and Canada, Vienna, Tokyo); conference to discuss and explore ideas pertaining to **satellites** and **slow-scan video**; presented in "**telecommunication space**".
- **La Plissure du Texte** (1983, 11 locations in the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia); an experiment with "distributed authorship"; utilized ARTEX, an electronic mail program for artists on the I.P. Sharp Associates (IPSA) timesharing network.

Two-Way Demo: Send/Receive (1977)

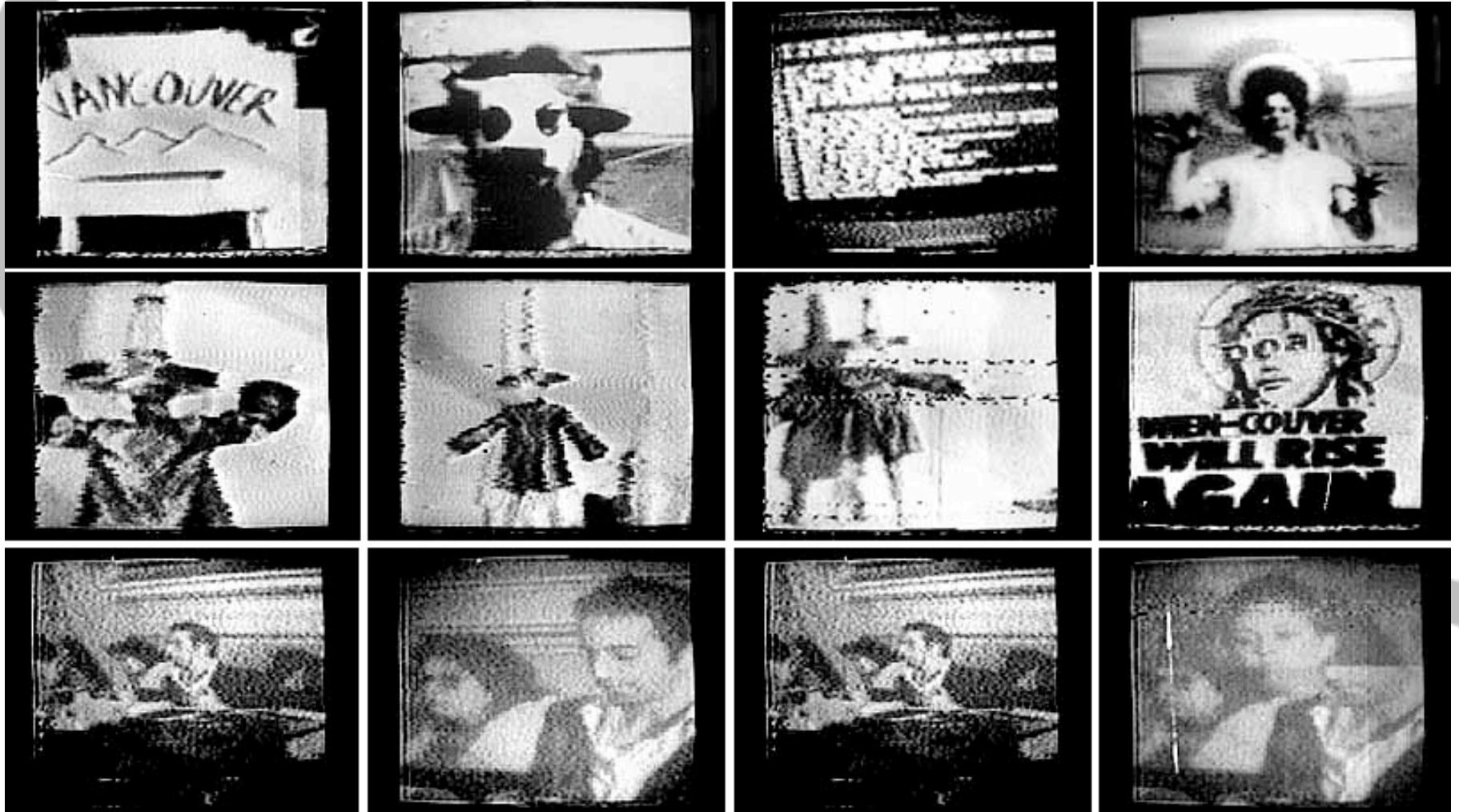


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Artists' Use of Telecommunications (1980)



Artists' Use of Telecommunications (1980)



Slow Scan Images

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La Plissure du Texte (1983)



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FYI: The WELL (1984)

- Started by *Stewart Brand* and *Larry Brilliant*.
- Grew out of the 1970s **back-to-the-land-through-technology** idealism embodied by the *Whole Earth Catalog*: providing citizens with the technology to do more things for themselves; free people from their dependence on mass consumer products and corporate marketing.
- Began as a dial-up BBS (computer teleconferencing system); became one of the original dial-up ISPs on the web in the early 1990s.
- Was the forum through which the founders of the **Electronic Frontier Foundation** -- John Perry Barlow, John Gilmore, and Mitch Kapor -- met.

Art Contemporary Electronic Network (1986)

- ACEN (La Mamelle) was an **electronic-based discussion platform, information exchange and exhibition space**.
- Technically speaking, it lived on the WELL.
- Thus, it was **driven by the dynamism of the wider WELL community**, bridging boundaries between ACEN and WELL members.
- **Das Casino** invited guests to participate in a text-based online performance based around a one-game (roulette) casino (had a 'status report' window where people could post updates about themselves.)

Culture and Technosocial Change

- The **focus on technology** inventors and early users or user communities **ignores cultural processes** at work in the history of the Internet.
- Culture refers to the symbolic, i.e. meaning-making processes.
- While social and economic forces can shape or structure culture, culture can act as its own force with **determining effects**.
- Disparate cultural, social, political and economic forces sometimes come together **unintentionally**.

Culture and Technosocial Change

- Cultural values and practices of people centrally involved in the creation of some of the earliest forms of sociability online shaped the understandings and uses of digital technologies. **Art clears the ground for social practices that technology instantiates.**
- Artists invested in social sculptural practices made poetic use of bureaucratic systems, signs, symbols and language that commented on and parodied mainstream mass society; they also celebrated the systems and inverted impersonal bureaucracy into a personalized, artisanal craft. **Mail Art challenged the threat of technocracy by creating metaphors for, and the experience of, networking.**

Culture and Technosocial Change

- *We make our buildings and afterwards they make us.* - Winston Churchill
- *We shape our tools and afterwards our tools shape us.* - Marshall McLuhan
- What is possible in technology **depends** on the particular cultural imagination and individual subjectivities, while in turn cultural imagination and individual subjectivity are **produced by** these technologies - Norie Neumark
- Mail Art's goal of social connection inspired other networked arts, foreshadowing the ways in which online communities would be envisioned and experienced; explored themes of disembodiment; presaged the merging of art and technology *milieus*.