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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SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY


What is art? If most of us were asked whether it is a painting in a museum or a television set in our living rooms, the answer would be obvious. What if, however, the television was 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 normality 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 nonsensical poetry. They also incorporated modern materials and found objects into their art, the most famous examples of which were Marcel Duchamp’s “readymades,” 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 in the work, 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 recontextualizing them in a Space for Dialogue. 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.