

The photographic essay features photo documentation by Peter Moore of three Wolf Vostell projects produced in New York during the period 1963–64. “Dé-collage and Television” focuses on Vostell’s use of dé-collage technique as a means to critique broadcast television. The projects represented are Vostell’s first one-artist show in New York at the Smolin Gallery and participation in the “Yam Festival of Happening” at George Segal’s farm, both in 1963.

Dé-Collage and Television

Wolf Vostell in New York, 1963–64

John G. Hanhardt

Photographs by Peter Moore

John G. Hanhardt, pp. 109–123

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decomposition is dé-collage TV

—Wolf Vostell

In 1963 and 1964, the German Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell participated in a series of performance and installation projects in New York City, Long Island and New Jersey. I have chosen to focus on those events in which Vostell incorporated the television set. My interest in Vostell's use of the television is part of an ongoing project investigating the early history of the artist's use of television in the United States.¹

My research has been greatly facilitated by the documentary record provided in Peter Moore's photographs. Moore's presence as a witness to the extraordinary variety of avant-garde art events from the late 1950s through the present has provided us with an unique photographic record of artwork that has been by definition transitory. Moore's photographs and his wife Barbara Moore's archive announcements, invitations, posters and ephemera generated by these events give the historian the means to uncover the seminal importance of the changing artworld of the late 1950s and 1960s.

The thesis I am exploring in this photographic essay is that, in appropriating the materials of everyday life and traditional culture, Fluxus artists sought to turn these discourses inside out, in the process revealing the constrictive conventions and rhetoric limiting liberated individual expression and desire. One of the key Fluxus strategies was Vostell's dé-collage technique, which erased or transformed the message contained within the surface codes of dominant cultural and ideological transmission. These actions of dé-collage were primarily directed toward magazines and newspapers but also included the television set.

In the early 1960s television was emerging as the dominant technology for transmitting news, information and entertainment. It had by the mid 1960s firmly established itself in this country and Europe as a rival in popularity and influence to the movies, radio, magazines and newspapers. Television was a conduit, a one-way street of audio-visual transmissions for which the viewer played the role of consumer. Television programming was produced in the studio, a highly capitalized center of new technology not available to the artist. It was only after 1965 that a portable videocamera recorder and player was developed that allowed artists to gain ready access to the medium. In the 1970s cable television provided a means for alternative television, including public access, in the United States. The history of artist's video and television is a complex one, involving both artists' initiatives and developments in technology. The Korean-born Nam June Paik, a performance artist and member of Fluxus, was to play a seminal role in Europe and the United States in fashioning a discourse and place for video as an artist's medium. However, in the fluid artworld of the early 1960s, Vostell was, along with Paik, among the very first artists to appropriate the television set and begin to remake it as both an installation medium and a paradigm for a critique of technology. Although video did not remain central to Vostell's artmaking, the extension of his dé-collage strategy to the broadcast



figure 2. Wolf Vostell, TV Dé-collage, 1963. Installation with same title at Smolin Gallery, New York.



figure 3. Wolf Vostell, TV Dé-collage, 1963. Installation with same title at Smolin Gallery, New York.

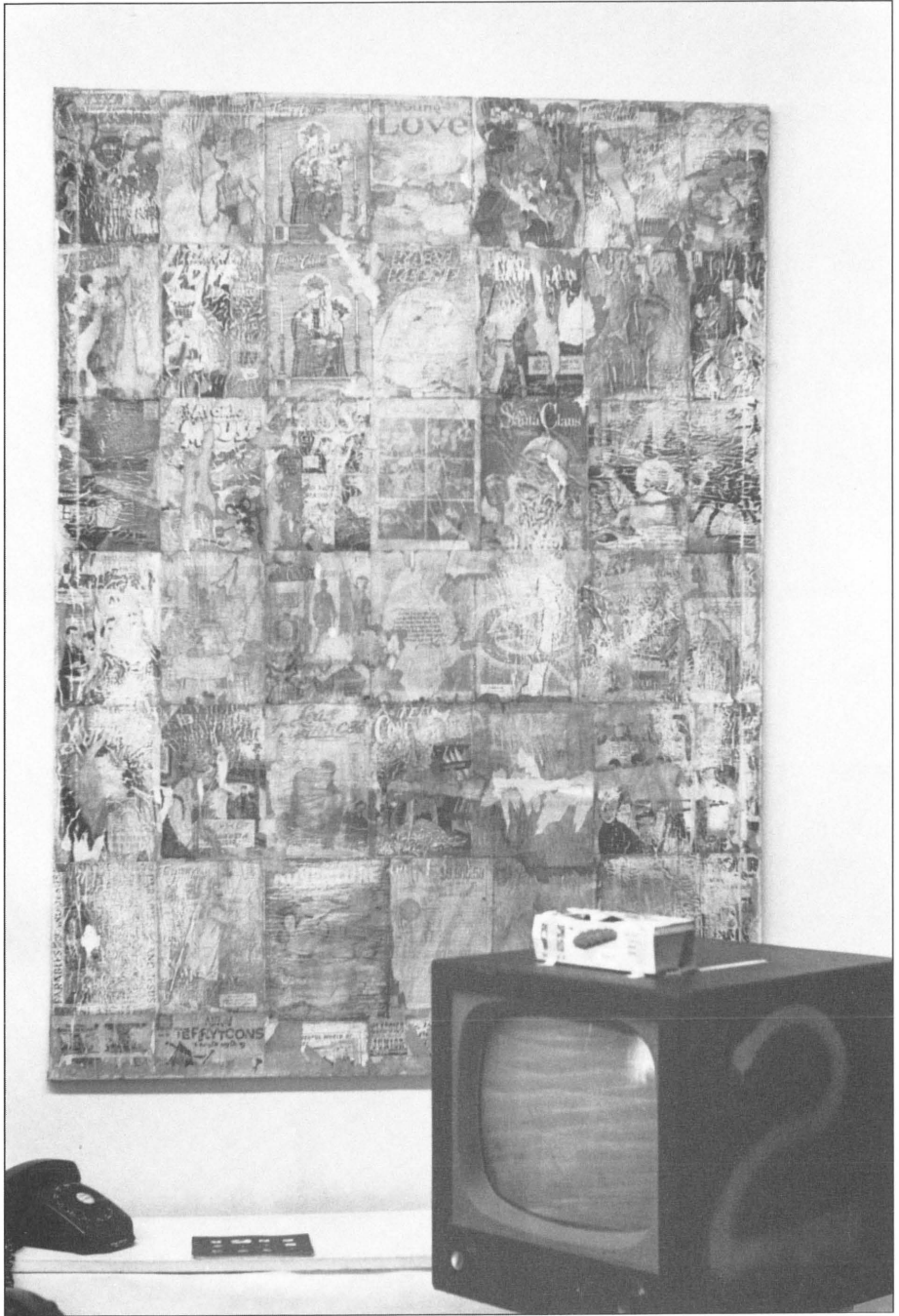


figure 4. Wolf Vostell, TV Dé-collage, 1963. Installation with same title at Smolin Gallery, New York.

figure 5. Wolf Vostell, TV Dé-collage, 1963. Installation with same title at Smolin Gallery, New York.



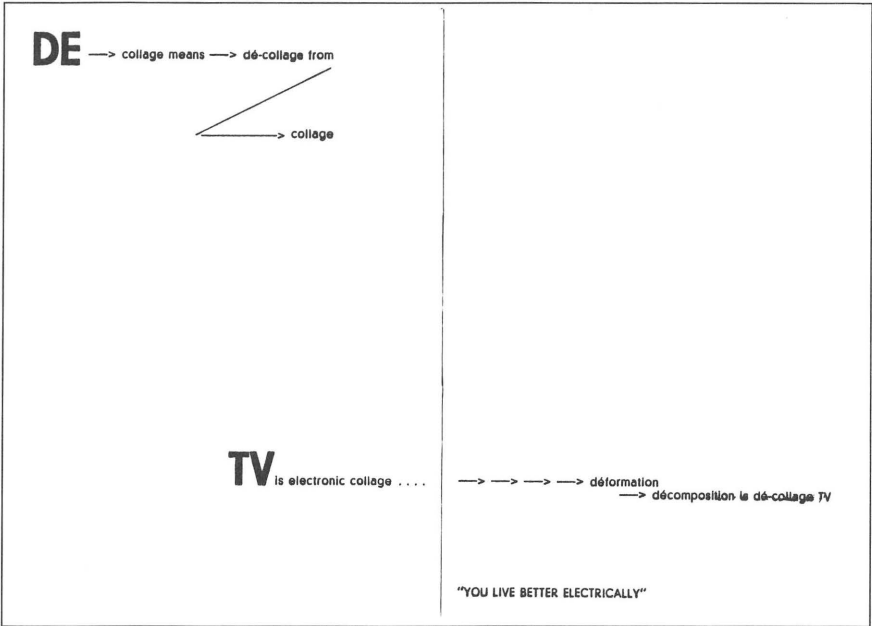
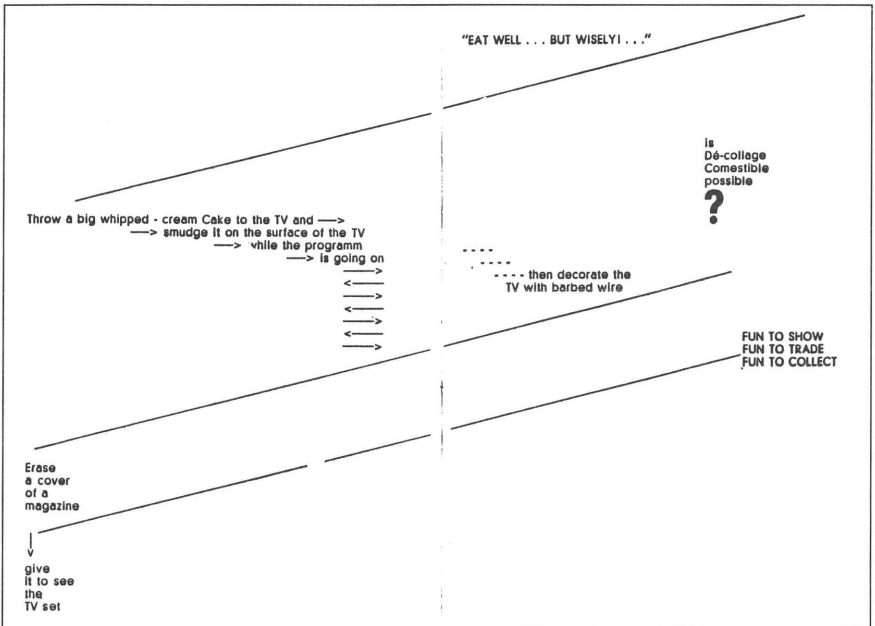


figure 6. Selection from text by Wolf Vostell describing his TV Dé-collage at the Yam Festival in New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1963.



figures 7. Selection from text by Wolf Vostell describing his TV Dé-collage at the Yam Festival in New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1963.

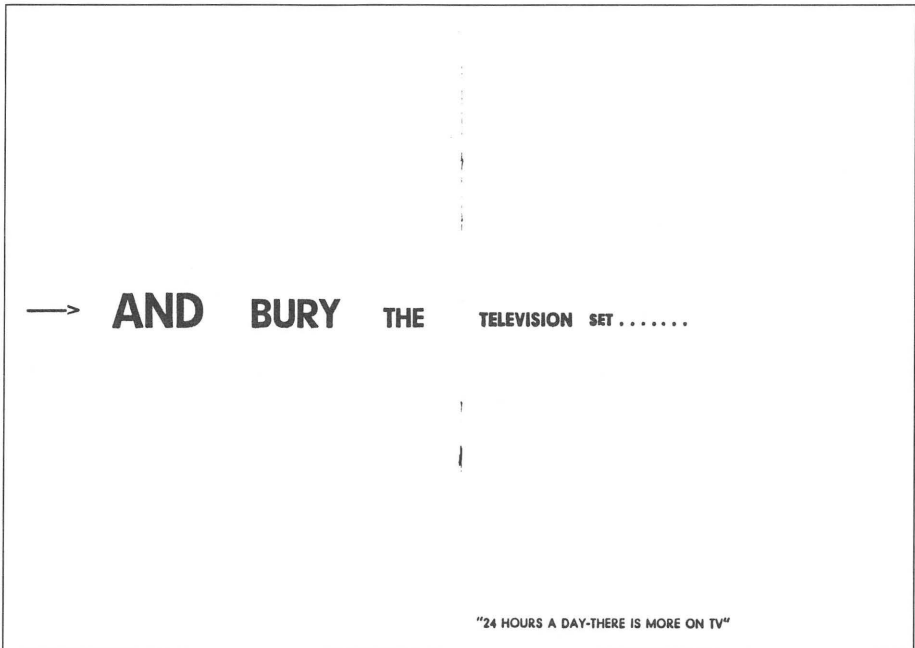


figure 8. Selection from text by Wolf Vostell describing his TV Dé-collage at the Yam Festival in New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1963.



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figure 9. Wolf Vostell's performance in the "You" event at Cricket Theatre in New York, 1964.



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figure 10. Wolf Vostell's performance in the "You" event at Cricket Theatre in New York, 1964.

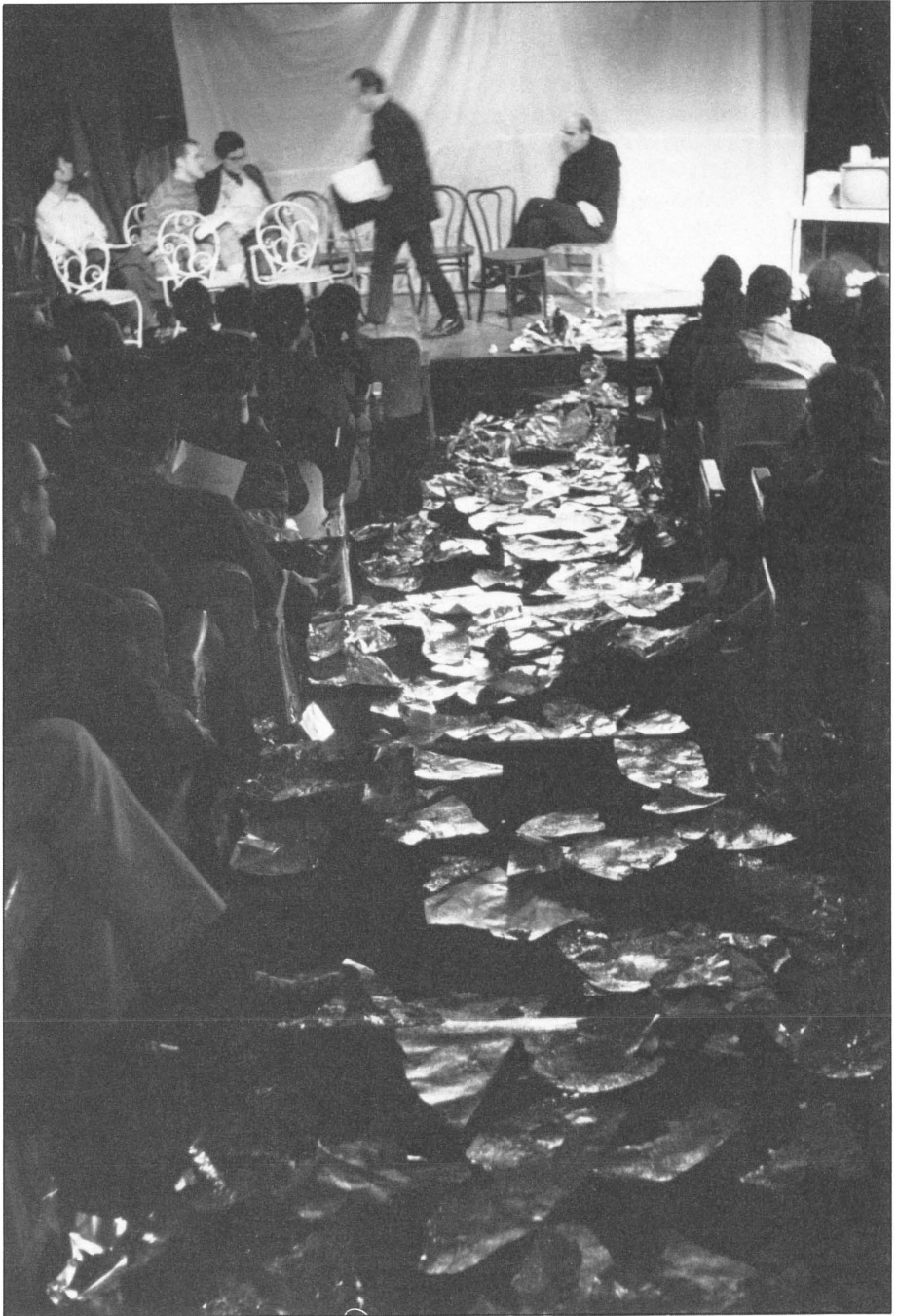


figure 11. Wolf Vostell's performance in the "You" event at Cricket Theatre in New York, 1964.

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figure 12. Wolf Vostell's performance in the "You" event in Long Island, 1964.

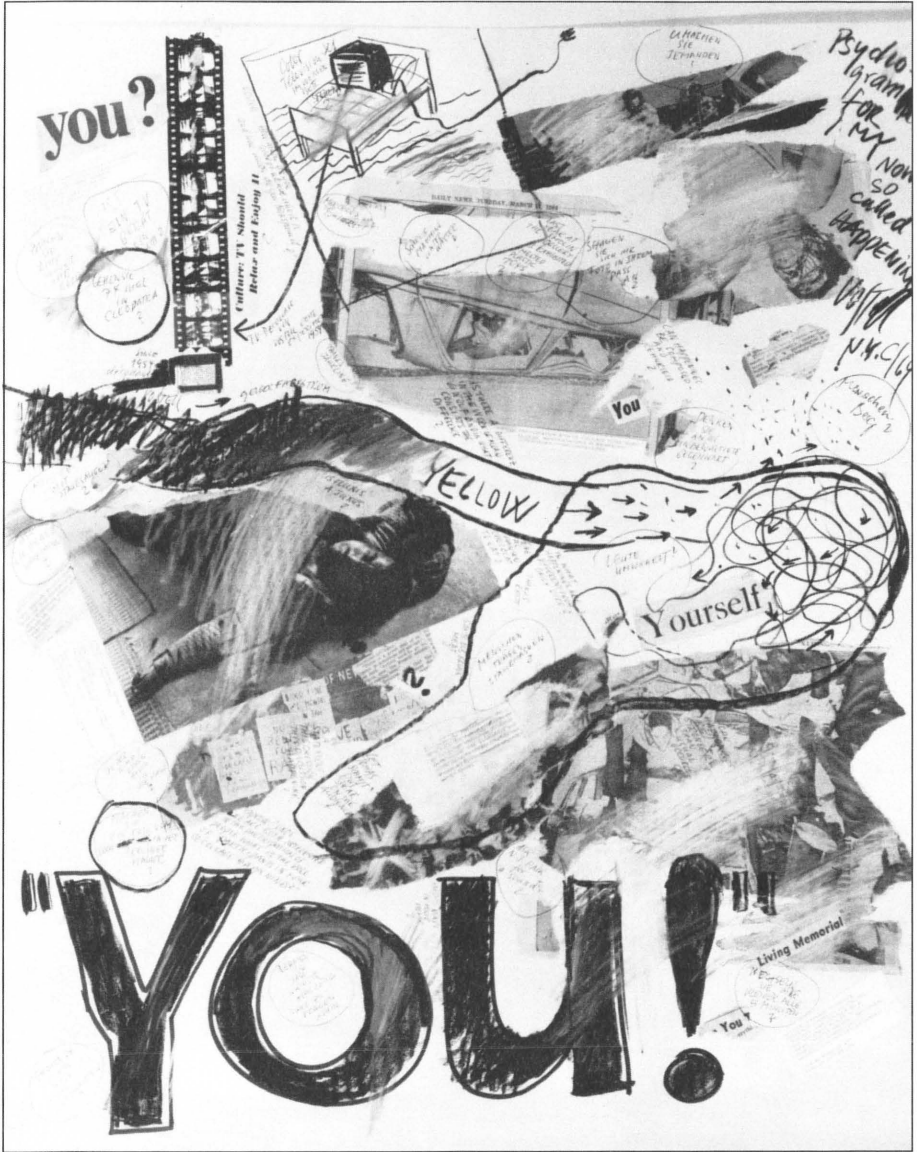


figure 13. Wolf Vostell's performance in the "You" event in Long Island, 1964.

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figure 14. Vostell installation in the "You" event in Long Island, 1964.



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figure 15. Drawing by Wolf Vostell, 1964.

image and the inclusion of that work alongside his two-dimensional artwork represent an important vision and a landmark example of the transformation of the television medium.

On May 19, 1963 at the sculptor George Segal's farm in South Brunswick, New Jersey, an "afternoon of Happenings, Dance and Music" was presented by the Smolin Gallery as part of the Yam Festival. Among the artists who participated were Chuck Ginnever, Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, Yvonne Rainer, Wolf Vostell and La Monte Young. Vostell's performance consisted of "preparing" a television: distorting the broadcast image, covering the set with barbed wire and a picture frame, and placing a music stand before the screen (*figure 1*). The television was then carried outside where Vostell used a jackhammer and shovel to dig a hole in which the set was buried.

A few days later on May 22, 1963, the Smolin Gallery, at 19 East 71st Street in New York City, presented "Wolf Vostell & Television Dé-collage & Dé-collage Posters & Comestible Dé-collage." The invitation showed a photograph of a wall of Life magazine covers and the announcement "DO IT YOURSELF! You are invited to participate in the Creation of Dé-collage at the opening. Reserve the area in which you wish to create by calling Smolin Gallery. Materials for Dé-collage will be provided." Inserted in the invitation was a photograph of a series of television screens with distorted reception. The installation in the gallery also placed the televisions with prepared and distorted reception alongside the dé-collaged walls (*figures 2, 3, 4*). The viewers were given a vial of carbon tetrachloride which, when applied to the magazine covers, smudged and distorted the photographs and text (*figure 5*). In this dé-collage installation, the artist dialectically engaged different media and materials to subvert the stable authority of news and information. In the publication produced for the Smolin Gallery's Yam Festival, Vostell graphically laid out his dialogue with television through his dé-collage strategy (*figures 6, 7, 8*).

A year later on April 19, 1964, Vostell participated in a "Dé-collage Happening" entitled "You" at the Cricket Theatre in New York. The event was organized by the owners of the theater Robert Delford Brown and his wife, Brett. The event included an "action lecture," "The Art of the Happening," by Vostell and Allan Kaprow. Vostell's performance consisted, in part, of his creating dé-collage artwork in the midst of the audience while a prepared television played on the stage. Once again television was part of the performance activity (*figures 9, 10, 11*). At this time Vostell also participated in another "You" event at the Brown's home in Long Island. As part of that program Vostell burned a television set in a fenced in enclosure (*figures 12, 13*). Inside the house, he placed televisions in beds, thus creating a persona out of the television

receiver (figure 14). His dé-collage drawing for the "You" program integrates the television and other media with the injunction "Culture: TV Should Relax and Enjoy It." (figure 15)

These images of Vostell's performances, installation and writings reveal an "anti-aesthetic" strategy which moved between media and materials as he sought to destabilize the institutionalized codes and meanings of the dominant culture. This effort by Vostell to erase and recompose imagery, both through viewer participation and the disruption of television, reveals a politics which seeks to rupture the seamless flow of information and entertainment by empowering the individual.

NOTES

¹ Hanhardt, John G.: "Video in Fluxus," in *Art & Text*, No. 37, September 1990; "The Anti-TV Set; Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell in 1963," in *From Receiver to Remote Control: The TV Set* (New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991); "Dé-Collage/Collage: Notes Toward a Re-Examination of the Origins of Video Art," in *Illuminating Video* (New York, Aperture Press, 1991).