

**Author** Andrew V. Uroskie  
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# *Uncanny Machines and Philosophical Toys: The Animation of Paik's Early Sculpture*

## Colophon

**Editor** Jihoon Kim, Kyunghwa Ahn  
**Translation** Yung Bin Kwak, Min-kyung Kim,  
 Jawoon Kim, Jihoon Kim,  
 Hannah Peck, Gyung Eun Oh,  
 Im Sue Lee  
**Designer** Gyeongtak Kang, Yoonjung Jang  
 (a-g-k.kr)  
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Uroskie

1 John Cage, "On Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film*," in *John Cage: Writer: Selected Texts*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2000).

The moving image *takes place* in a double sense, it both *occurs* in time and *inheres* in space. This "discovery," if we can call it that, might very well have found its most essential articulation within Nam June Paik's early work, *Zen for Film* (1964). Like so many of Paik's early works, a certain simplicity of form and material facticity induces an effect of obviousness that works to conceal a latent conceptual sophistication. An argument that I won't have the room to substantiate here, but which formed the central thesis of my recent book *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art*, was that the expanded cinema that emerged in New York in the 1960s can best be understood as an emerging consciousness of the paradoxical site-specificity of cinematic practice: a growing awareness of the institutional conditions through which art's exhibition was structured, and the concomitant understanding that a reinvention of these institutions would run parallel to any possible postwar rejuvenation of the avant-garde project. Despite their formal diversity, these artists shared a common desire to understand, articulate, and ultimately reimagine the institutional situation of cinema—the literal and figurative "place" of the motion picture—within the increasingly interdisciplinary spaces of contemporary art.

In other words, the movement of the moving image became something to be explicitly *staged*, drawing attention to the theatricality implicit in its presentation and spectatorship. Just as minimalist sculpture's interrogation of the gallery space would lead to sculpture's expansion into the landscape, thus changing our ideas about the nature and possibilities of sculpture, so did the expanded cinema's interrogation of the *theater* of cinema, in the sense of both its physical, institutional situation, and in the performative and durational event involved in its instantiation. It is within this larger aesthetic and conceptual history that Paik's *Zen for Film* (*Fluxfilm #1*) should be understood—and was understood by leading practitioners in its time—as something of a foundational manifesto.

A moment ago I used the term "discovery." This is an admittedly odd term to apply to something so superficially obvious. And yet many discoveries have less to do with the addition of new information than they do with the reframing or reconceptualization of information already at our disposal. Cage's infamous "silent piece" of 1951, *4'33"* was such a reconceptualization, and it was one that heralded the kind of discovery that would power several generations of international students and followers over the decades to come.

*Zen for Film* thus was and was not a film. Containing no photographic imagery, Paik did not shoot it with a film camera, nor did he even use photographic film stock. The film was rather unmanipulated leader—the advance, preparatory material whose function is to assist threading the projector, and might essentially be considered part of the apparatus of projection. This was a film without film, a cinema whose sole character was the *dispositif* of the cinematic event.

"My *4'33"*, the silent piece, is Nam June's *Zen for Film*," John Cage would write, "the difference is that his silence was not sounds but something to see."<sup>1</sup> Cage understood Paik's work as forming a kind of degree-zero conceptual trilogy with Robert Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* of 1951 and his own composition *4'33"* the following year. Recalling Moholy-Nagy's reading of Kasimir Malevich's *White on White* within his 1931 work *The New Vision*, Cage had previously characterized Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* as a kind of temporal event or performance, a kind of filmless cinema in which the canvas becomes a screen for the projection of lights, shadows, and particles.

Cage saw that the absence in these works was conceived as an opening up to the outside, to a modality of perception fundamentally rooted in the experience of process. Dust—whose insignificant materiality was normally imperceptible—became

the evidence of process, the figuration of an ongoing temporality within a form of spectatorship now conceptualized as an event. As complement and antipode to the human, dust was like the high and low sounds Cage heard in the anechoic chamber: a perpetual background hum of life unframed and unframeable. By contrast, the aesthetic event is always framed, and what these three “silences” all produced was a consciousness of that framing as such. Channeling his interest in Henri Bergson's philosophy of process and creative evolution, Cage described how in watching *Zen for Film*, one was “seeing something that won't exist again, but that also will exist again – in another form. In fact, it will never not exist. It's like the silent piece, which you can always hear.”

Cage here refers to his “silent” piece as something one can *always* hear, just as Paik's *Zen for Film* is understood as a piece that one can *always* see. Clearly, we are not meant to understand the works as isolated aesthetic performances but rather as loadstones for more fundamental conceptual reorientation, a cognitive-perceptual “paradigm shift” whose implications lay far beyond either individual work.

One fundamental aspect of this “paradigm shift” lay in the idea of Cagean “theater,” and the challenge it posed to artist's thinking about medium, discipline and institution. As Branden Joseph has carefully described, the postwar avant-garde did not simply abandon the notion of medium for some “boundless dissolution of any and all distinctions” as Michael Fried's trenchant critique of theatricality in “Art and Objecthood” implied.

Rather, as Joseph writes,

Cage's theater opened onto a situation in which the *certainty* about the disciplinary status of the aesthetic object (even that it was necessarily ‘aesthetic’) was effectively dissolved. . . . Disciplinary and medium-based distinctions between the arts as traditionally handed down could no longer be received as akin to ontological facts or even mutually accepted conventions, but had to be reiterated in each instance. . . . The very notion of being ‘advanced’ meant that the status of work . . . was not only constitutively problematized, already *in* question, but had to take up that question and keep it in question. Not eradicating, but continually questioning the notion of medium or disciplinary specificity was, in other words, a primary condition of being ‘advanced’ after Cage.

Joseph articulates well how the idea of medium within post-Cagean aesthetics was understood as a field of ongoing conflict and renegotiation between and among specific differing institutions of the aesthetic. This is quite different than a generalized condition of “multimedia,” in which all technical and material specificity is smothered under the phenomenology of received spectacle, or even of “intermedia,” in which the disciplinary conventions are ahistorically fixed and immutable so as to establish a supposedly novel bridging space “between” them. At issue was neither simply a conjunction of disciplines, nor the rise of new practices in the space between established disciplines, but rather a series of disciplinary cross-fertilizations that would leave no parties unchanged.

In my own work, I have tended to follow Joseph's lead in tracing these complex negotiations of medium and discipline, exploring how the work of the postwar avant-garde effected lasting transformations in our understanding of the institutional spaces of the art gallery, movie theater, and performance stage, giving rise to new exhibitionary contexts between the traditional opposition of the “black box” and the “white cube.”

- 2 William James, "The Confidences of a 'Psychical Researcher' (1909)," *Essays in Psychological Research* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), pp. 374, as cited in Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, "Mind the Gap: Spiritualism and the Infrastructural Uncanny" – *Critical Inquiry* 42.4 (2016), pp. 829-925.
- 3 Geoghegan, *ibid.*

Yet my interest in the conjunction of object, audience and environment within these works has led me to reconsider whether, beyond the idea of cross-fertilization, we might begin to understand this transformation at the more infrastructural level of systems and processes, of dynamic machines, assemblages or dispositifs both preexisting and newly invented.

The formal reduction of *Zen for Film* should be understood not simply as a reflexive investigation of the essence of film as material, but as a foregrounding of the particular situation of the event-structure of cinematic spectatorship. This event is durational, processional – it takes place, temporally, within an infinite continuum of life processes insistently foregrounded by its magnification of dust and scratches as the figuration of a natural and universal entropy. Yet this event-structure also takes place, spatially, within a delimited environment – a specifically constructed location – within the life-world. Like Francis Picabia's audacious set design for the ballet *Relâche* (1924), in which hundreds of stage lights shockingly illuminated the audience rather than the dancers, *Zen for Film* effected a complete *reversal* of perspective, the brilliant light of Paik's projection illuminating the spectatorial environment as an essential force in the production of cinematic meaning. In other words, it opened up of narrow aesthetic confines of the cinematic *image* to the much larger field of the cinematic *dispositif* as a kind of experience-machine.

While the idea of medium remains focused on the negotiation of a particular aesthetic tradition or traditions conceptualized as operating with at least relative autonomy, the model of the *dispositif* seeks to understand a model of the artist as a kind of engineer-seeking to engage with the production of experience at what we might term the infrastructural level.

By infrastructure, I mean to connote not the macroscopic scale of roads and bridges, railways and airports which have enabled ever greater human locomotion within ever shorter periods of time, but a more finely individuated, microscopic and often unconscious level in which our built environment ringfences our thinking, our choices, and our actions. It is what the American pragmatist philosopher William James described as that great "continuum of cosmic consciousness against which our individuality builds but accidental fences," those ubiquitous and intertwined networks of communication built up by largely unconscious signaling – not just that of other human subjectivities in our local vicinity, but by the whole rich diversity of nonconscious and nonliving entities involved in shaping communications landscape within which we have to operate.<sup>2</sup>

As Bernard Geoghegan has recently described this "infrastructural uncanny,"

our thoughts and our desires coincide with the imperatives of a nonhuman world around us. We can now see that the fencing of individuality is not a construct of our mind alone but is instead continuous with the physical world. Streets and villages, pipes and prescription pills, churches and coffee shops, algorithms and aggregations: these, too, cultivate the borders of the individual self, conditioning its emergence and reappearance where it is expected, consolidating the ruptures, and containing the gaps where another kind of mind might appear.<sup>3</sup>

Geoghegan's point is to point us beyond the now routine assertion that our conscious, rational, decisive mind is but a small part of our overall functioning in the world – the psychoanalytic revolution precipitated by Freud over a century ago. It is a claim that we can begin to account for an ever larger portion of these unconscious motivations

- 4 Ina Blom, "Signal to Noise: John Cage and 'The Anarchy Of Silence'" *Artforum*, February 2010, pp. 173-174.

by specifying the interworkings of this non-living infrastructural background and the complex affordances to which they give rise.

One of the most powerful and compelling aspects of recent infrastructural analysis has been the way in which it seeks to move between the macroscopic and microscopic, refusing to remain on one level or the other, but attempting to trace pathways or networks between them.

Ina Blom has recently described how the Cagean emphasis on relinquishing of authorial control led many of his students and followers to effectively begin an interrogation of the structures and mechanisms of control more generally. Thinking and working in terms of generative structures made it possible for artists to move beyond "a dialectics of spectacle and transgression, abstraction and representation, and to start seeing artworks in terms of codes, diagrams, and the productivity of forces." Countering the longstanding denigration of Cage—and, we might add, of Paik—as quietist, apolitical, or even regressively libertarian, she reads both artists' deep-seated engagement with these generative processes as being inextricable from the biopolitical organization of late capitalist modernity. She writes,

biopolitics as derived from the writings of Michel Foucault, hinges on the idea that Western modernity posits life itself as the key object of politics... the concept of sovereign power—the legislative power of the few over the many—must be modified by taking into account the myriad of instances and institutions that form and control life processes and that are formed by them in turn. ... Modern power cannot be fully understood without attention to this radical dispersal of effects or without microscopically zeroing in on the very differences between such life-forming processes. Put another way, power is enacted in an *immanent* field of complex interactivity—a definition that bears a striking resemblance to Cage's compositional principle through which sounds are given the status of beings.<sup>4</sup>

Paik's turn towards what we might broadly call "machines" was not principally about creating novel images or sounds, but rather about following his intuition about what Blom, after Foucault, describes in terms of this "biopolitical model"—the cybernetic imbrication of technological media and human subjectivity at the beginnings of a computational era.

In the larger project of which this paper forms a part, I am interested in exploring how Cage's non-anthropomorphic model of nature's "manner of operation," which he consistently described, following the process philosophy of Bergson in France and Whitehead in England, as both radically nonhierarchical and ateleological, might allow us to bring together a range of seemingly disparate, interdisciplinary endeavors in the postwar period—from kinetic sculpture and op art, to process art and structural film—under that curious conjunction of movement and life which undergirds a rhetoric of *animation*.

Writing for Suzanne Buchan's 2013 collection *Pervasive Animation*, film scholar Tom Gunning describes a "Copernican revolution" that he sees as having taken place in recent years in attitudes towards animation—a change exemplified, possibly even triggered, by a striking claim made by Lev Manovich within his 2001 book *The Language of New Media*.

Manovich claimed that animation, far from being a marginal topic in

- 5 Tom Gunning, "The Transforming Image: The Roots of Animation in Metamorphosis and Motion" in Suzanne Buchan, ed., *Pervasive Animation* (Routledge, New York: 2013), p. 52.

media theory, of interest mainly to children and few devotees, should be recognized as the super-genre of moving image media, of which cinema, understood as the photographically-based form of moving images, could be seen as merely a subgenre. This bold statement has the freshness that seminal insights should always possess, calling received opinions into question, disturbing previously unquestioned hierarchies, and simultaneously initially counter-intuitive, and yet ultimately – almost obvious.<sup>5</sup>

Gunning contends that this methodological inversion necessitates two significant revisions for film theory: first, a demotion of the idea of photographic indexicality, which has long been viewed as something akin to a master key for understanding the ontology of cinema as such, and second, an acknowledgment, or rather reacknowledgement – since it was actually present at the origins of the discourse only to be neglected and forgotten – of the aesthetic and philosophical stakes of *movement* as both experience and idea.

There has been an incredible surge in interest in the broad topos of animation and animism across within contemporary art, film and philosophical thought. Over the last decade, established film and media scholars such from Tom Gunning, Siegfried Zielinski, and Scott Bukatman, to Karen Beckman, Gerturd Koch and Thomas Elsaesser have sought to revisit its aesthetic and philosophical dimensions within the moving image media, past and present. Curators, critics and art historians from Anselm Franke, Spyros Papapetros and Birgit Doherty to Dietrich Dietrichson, Mark Nash and Marina Warner have mobilized this rubric to open up received histories of artistic modernism and its afterlives in the present. And within contemporary philosophy and critical theory, Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton and Judith Butler are just a few of the many voices working in a broad reevaluation of materiality, objecthood and process philosophy, in ways which problematize and sometimes openly defy longstanding distinctions between organic and inorganic, living and nonliving systems.

Emerging out of this vast and somewhat daunting set of contemporary discourses, my own, much more delimited interest lies in the idea of a broad-based "animation of the object" in postwar art, a "kinetic imaginary" imagined somewhere between aesthetics and epistemology that came to underwrite a widespread interest in movement, in temporality, in the event, and in process across a diverse range of artistic disciplines and practices in a particularly frenetic period from the mid-50s to the mid-70s. My gambit is that if the familiar rhetoric of aesthetic "dematerialization" helped to foreground a certain loss of solidity within traditional models of the art object, the metaphor of animation can help us dig deeper into the kinetic and temporal dimensions, of this transformation and the new conditions it produced.

Within such a narrative, postwar art did not simply abandon the solidity of the material object for the fluidity of the performative event, any more than it simply exchanged the art gallery for the concert hall or performance stage. Instead, familiar models of object and material were pressured through novel explorations of liminal states and zones of transition: between the cinematic and the sculptural, between stasis and duration, between object and performance, and between the still and moving image. These hybrid objects were neither precisely sculpture nor performance, machine nor instrument, but gave rise to a certain material encounter within which literal and virtual forms of movement were enfolded in a delimited form.

This animation of the object was understood both in the physical sense of the

object being placed in motion, but also in the sense of the spectator acquiring or being motivated into a new relationship with the object, and ultimately of the object becoming somehow something other than mere object, that the object and subject becoming hybridized, confused, imbricated with one another, encouraging us to reimagine the idea of sculpture along the lines of the instrument as both purposeful and purposeless tool – a serious object of play, a playful tool for a kind of experiential knowledge.

These concerns can easily be seen within Paik's first solo exhibition at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal. Originally titled, "Austellung Musik" – or an "Exposition of Music" – the show occupied an ambivalent space between a gallery exhibition and a limited performance engagement. Open only in the evenings, for only for 2 hours at a time, and charging an admission fee, it was structured more akin to a concert than a museum exhibition of painting or sculpture. Paik had gained his initial notoriety in Germany in the late 50s as a performer of so-called "action music" – a more aggressively theatrical take on Cage's generalized principle of theatricality, and one to which Paik had gained significant notoriety in 1961 performance of "Originale" by his then mentor Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Yet the "Exposition of Music" was not an concert in any normal sense, and what music it contained was largely limited to the quasi-sculptural display of modified instruments of one sort or another.

While Cage had developed the "prepared piano" in the 1940s by inserting various percussive instruments into the strings, thus ensuring that new and different forms of attack, pitch and timbre would transpire at what, from the audience's perspective, would seem like random intervals, Paik transformed his pianos into machines for triggering all different manner of events. Fluxus impresario George Maciunas recalls how a certain key on one caused a radio to turn on, while another turned on a vacuum cleaner. A third set of keys, covered with postage stamps featuring Fascist dictators Francisco Frano, Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini, caused the lights of the room to be completely extinguished.

Yet the most radical departure from Cage's aesthetic was that the pianos were not instruments of performance at all – they were not played by the artist, nor delegated to a specific interpreter charged with performing a predetermined score, but were instead installed – like sculpture – in the gallery for the various spectators to themselves become performers.

Robert Breer's folioscopes and mutoscopes of the mid – to late – 50s had ushered in a similar delegation of activity. While any film seen through a projector must unfold at a strict and predetermined temporality, Breer's works remained lifeless objects until animated by spectatorial engagement. Only by leafing through the pages, or slowly turning the crank, did these still images come to life. And even then, their life was entirely dependent on the desire of the engaged spectator-cum-operator. Images moved faster or slower, came to a halt or were subsumed in a continuous animation – all at the whim of the spectator who, try as she might, would likely not be able to imitate the utterly regularized and predictable tempo of the machine. As such, the movement of Breer's quasi-moving images – could not be experienced as anything but utterly subjective, their fragile life utterly dependent upon the participant's attention.

In his letter to the gallery director Rölf Jährling, Paik stressed that the work was "neither painting nor sculpture but rather a "Time-Art." As Paik would later describe his *Robot K-456* (1964), they were considered less artistic works than "tools" of a specific and peculiar kind. Tools or, perhaps "toys."

I have elsewhere described how the historical recovery of Marcel Duchamp's



6 Andrew V. Uroskie, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2014), pp. 128-169.

experiments in “Precision Optics” in the 1955 “Movement” exhibition in Paris would be pivotal to the emergence of the Victorian philosophical toy as a kind of aesthetic and conceptual paradigm for a postwar generation struggling to articulate an idea of movement as a crucial aesthetic and epistemological problem – one which necessitated a bridging of the traditionally disparate domains of art and science, philosophy and technology.<sup>6</sup>

In diametric opposition to the austere maturity and seriousness of midcentury high modernist art, these particular machines recall a fascination with the image of the toy as a childlike thing of wonder that haunted the early modernist aesthetics of Charles Baudelaire in the 19th century, and Walter Benjamin in the early 20th. It also reflects on animism’s origins as a term coined by Europeans to reflect their encounter with the so-called “primitive,” pre-modern world-systems of their colonial subjects. Within classical psychoanalysis, the orthopsychic developmental teleology running from childhood to maturity mimics the world-historical progression of the “developing” world of cultures and their nation-states. Yet modern art persistently questioned and problematized this developmental telos-turning time’s arrow around, or questioning the unidirectionality of movement altogether.

Just as “time’s arrow” is commonly seen to move only in one direction, our commonplace understanding of so-called “time-based art” is almost inevitably unidirectional. Jean-Luc Godard may have quipped that his films “had a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order,” yet despite their disruption of narrative conventions, Godard’s cinema does have a beginning and an end that are as fixed, immutable, and the result of his authorial intention as any standard Hollywood fare.

Yet the idea of “time-based art” Paik developed in a work like *Random Access* (1963) was of an entirely different order. *Random Access* was a sculpture, of sorts. It was also a work of music and kind of total media environment. One component, subtitled, “record skewer,” fixed a number of records irregularly stacked atop a standard record player whose stylus had been disconnected and lengthened. Held in the hand, rather than mounted on the machine, the spectator not only became participant rather than observer, she in effect became a “extension” of the machine – a literalization of the widely influential idea media theorist Marshall McLuhan had only recently brought into public consciousness.

Furthermore, the tactile quality of this interface – that the hand might actually quiver imperceptibly with the gyrations of the needle in the groove – physicalized the technology of playback and grounded it in a particularly haptic manner. Paik’s own performance during the exhibition, “Listening to Music through the Mouth” seems to extend this haptic suggestion – the bone conduction of the jaw providing a surprisingly canny analog for the actual process of acoustic transduction, while grounding the haptic qualities of music itself – especially, the pop music of the day – in a blatant appeal to sexuality.

While the sexualized dimensions of musical performance would become a standby of his collaboration with Charlotte Moorman in America in the years to come, the second installation featuring magnetic tape, gestured perhaps in a more conceptual, even institutional direction. There, prerecorded strips of magnetic audiotape were cut from their reels and glued directly to the wall of the exhibition space. These strips formed a series of overlapping stripes, radiating outward from an amorphous center.

When visitors entered the exhibition space, they were invited to pick up a small magnetic tape head, both of which had been detached from the tape recorder and mechanisms and soldered to an extended wire. In taking this tape head and wire in

hand, the viewer-cum-operator again became the literal “motor” of playback, the physical mechanism for temporal progression. Like Breer's folioscopes and mutoscopes, the tempo of the perceptual encounter was now dictated by the spectator's physical manipulation. While film projector, record player, and tape recorder were all industrial technologies, and thus necessarily sync to a given speed, *Random Access* “subjectified” the operation of playback—rendering mechanical consistency impossible through their dependence on human locomotion, and in so doing, effected a curious hybrid subject conjoining human, media, and machine. Furthermore, in the case of Paik's mounted tape strips, there exists no single, linear path on which to methodically advance. Paik thus succinctly defies the processional linearity of audio playback by extending the audiotape across a two-dimensional surface—the directionality and even the precise content subject to spectatorial volition. The viewer is solicited to choose—and choose again, every few inches—ever new pathways along this complex and intersecting web of connections. At each juncture, the decision produces its own feedback loop, as the viewer reacts to the soundtrack she herself is producing.

Art historians have long noted the ways in which postwar art of this period, specifically but not exclusively evidenced by the minimalist “specific object,” sought to confront its physical and cultural territorialization within the white cube of the gallery space in a set of aesthetic strategies that would eventually come to be understood in terms of a “critique of institutions.” In light of this history, it seems crucial to point out that the collaborative act of creation to which Paik's work gives rise is not one that takes place just anywhere, but rather, it takes place on a wall—the wall of the white cube itself, as both phenomenological boundary and structural support of the space within which the work resides and the encounter takes place. To operate the piece, viewers must press their hands against the wall, which is to say, literally push against the barrier securing interior from exterior space. Paik made it so that *at the precise moment* a viewer's hand presses against that boundary, the phenomenal and ideological experience of the white cube is rent asunder. The contact induced between hand and wall immediately summons up a time and space disjunctive yet coextensive with that of the immediate environment. The time and space indexed by the magnetic recording may be separated from the present time by hours or months or from the present site by inches or miles. Yet this “other” space and time immediately comes crashing into our own, entering into our present phenomenal experience of the gallery site. Unlike virtually any other form of audio art taking place in this period, the sounds that Paik here effects are entirely voluntary and incumbent on the viewer. We are given an opportunity for exploration, but we are not forced to endure an ultimately untenable experience of spatial and temporal bifurcation. It is left entirely to the viewer whether to be a spectator or a participant, whether to remain wholly within the space of the white cube or to take an active role in its supersession.

While television, or at least video, would constitute the mature aesthetic for which Paik would be best known, *Random Access* effectively brings together his early study of experimental music and performance and his profound debt to Cage's ideas of process and indeterminacy, but it does so by gesturing towards fundamentally a new model of construction rather than composition. It is the model, I would argue, ultimately indebted to Duchamp's rehabilitation of the philosophical toy as that curious instrument of experience capable of scrambling established cultural codes of art, science, philosophy, technology, education and play through a new model of haptic interface. And while Paik's Fluxus colleagues would similarly make much of the involvement of the spectator/performer in this model of haptic experience, it was Paik alone who seemed best to grasp the nature of modern media technology in actively

reshaping human experience with or without our conscious involvement, and thus the necessity of deconstructing technologies, subjecting them to alternative modes of encounter and exploration, lest the agency in this newly cybernetic man-machine interface become wholly one-sided.

Andrew V. Uroskie is Associate Professor of Modern Art and Media at New York's Stony Brook University, where he directs the MA/PhD Program in Art History & Criticism. His work broadly concerns the impact of durational media in reframing traditional models of aesthetic production, exhibition, spectatorship, and objecthood. Essays on experimental film, video, sound, performance and installation have been published in numerous journals (including *October*, *Grey Room*, and *Journal of Visual Culture*) and anthologies worldwide, and have been translated into five languages. His monographic study, *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art*, was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2014.