



## AN INTERVIEW WITH WOLF VOSTELL: fluxus resean

Editor's note: This is the transcript from the videotape made by artist, Jeff Perkins, while Wolf Vostell was in Los Angeles for his exhibition at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art. Many thanks to Vostell and Perkins for permission to print this. Vostell was on the grounds of California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California when he made this tape. When he is not in Valencia or Los Angeles, he usually is in Berlin or in Barcelona.

**What is Fluxus?**

Yes, look at this highway. The highway for me is a Fluxus stream, a Fluxus concept, and all this multiple activity from the people driving their cars, hearing the noise, seeing the light, being aware of the accidents which can happen, covering miles—all this is a contemporary piece, the light, the noise and time and space—it is a real Fluxus piece you're looking at.

**What is this word accident? How does it pertain?**

"Accident" came from my philosophy of the De-Collage events—events in modern life which involve situation-changing forms. The car is driving, and if there is an accident, the car is the opposite of a car—it is no longer car, it is a wreck. So the wreck makes a lot of psychological and economical troubles. So the objects of today, a car and an airplane, and a television set, you have implicated the positive and negative ways of behavior, a constructive and a destructive. You cannot do anything today without the destructive moment behind the event.

**So did you think about this event in 1959-60?**

No, when I was in Paris in 1954, when I was walking as a young artist through the streets, the street life and its complexity were more interesting to me than any other painting at that time. I knew a little about Dadaism, but for us in Europe, in Germany, especially in West Germany, there was a date which was very important, it was the first Dada retrospective show in Dusseldorf in 1958. There we really saw for the first time the originals. Before we only saw the things in books. Schwitters, Duchamp, Max Ernst—everybody, a complete retrospective! Paik told me he was very shocked and influenced by this exhibition! I mean, my concept has come from the fascination of the material involved in daily life. And the fascination of the life of objects. That means when I began to see that a turned down poster is more interesting than a new poster, then immediately I also liked more a distorted television program than a real program. At the same time, it was also a comment on abstract art and at the same time something very new to get to a secondary reality. It



Photo: Sandy Bernstein

means that all the meaning which have the objects like car, airplane and television sets after they are normal news, where they are prepared for—so the artist, and myself, have given them a second reality, a second news, which is an anti-news, something which gives a final destination to the objects. And man, dealing with those objects, in time, when we began to use the time, with the object, the action-music, the event, the performance, and the happening were born. To me, the Happening was some years before Fluxus. Fluxus is a second union of American and Western European artists, who were interested in the phenomenon of acoustic produced through the body and through objects.

**What is that word "acoustic?"**

Acoustical production—noise production, music done by the human body and music produced by objects. So there we have the same thinking, the same base and everybody did it differently. You see, danger music produced by Dick Higgins, produced and shown and performed in Wiesbaden in 1962 was just putting his hand in 20 kg. of butter and moving the butter as a material—nothing else than moving butter for ten minutes. So this is a very new concept as La Monte Young's idea of feeding a paino with hay—the same thing by Paik, putting water over himself during his painting the floor with his necktie. For example, I called my Fluxus piece, *Kleenex*. It was in front of the audience, erasing with a liquid, tetrachloride, double page of *Life* magazine, and the audience could see how the image was erased by my hand. And in my hand I had a microphone, so when I was erasing,

the sound of making the image disappear was augmented to the audience. Then suddenly, I jumped up and threw around a hundred light bulbs against a huge glass which was held in front of the faces of the audience. It was a dialectic, a tautology of two disappearing elements, the disappearing of the image was again shown as the disappearing of the light bulb, because when a light bulb gives noise, it is no longer a light bulb, but a light bulb when it doesn't give noise, gives light. So you can decide whether it should give light or noise. This is typical of a de-collage music and a de-collage event. When an object changes its form, becoming something else and doing something during the transformation.

At the same time as the process of the disappearing image in *Life* magazine, the audience could see the explosion of the noise of the light bulb and hear the noise at the same time as the explosion.

**You were talking about the first Fluxus concert in Wiesbaden in 1962.**

Yes, September 1962.

**And during the concert, George Maciunas was there?**

Maciunas came in 1962 to Cologne—in April or May—to see Paik first, and then we met. Ben Patterson was living in Cologne, and then there was a young assistant of Paik's, Tomas Schmit, who also lived in Cologne. So Maciunas met four people upon whom he could count for organizing the concert. Emmett Williams was living in Darmstadt, Spoerri came from Paris, and Addie Koepke: from Denmark. Dick Higgins and Alison Knowles came from New York. And we all gave a performance not only of our pieces, but of the others' pieces. Phil Corner came too for the piano activity. You see, Paik organized, in the middle of the year, in Düsseldorf a concert which was called *Neo-Dada in Music*, in a theater, and there Maciunas also did pieces of his own. Then, simultaneously we all did our pieces.

This was three months before the real Fluxus concert in Wiesbaden, which was poorly organized by Maciunas. So the press was confused because the concert in Düsseldorf was called *Neo-Dada in Music*, so they thought the concert in Wiesbaden was the same thing. It was the same thing, but Paik intended that the concert in Düsseldorf be called *Neo-Dada in Music*, but in Wiesbaden the struggle went on. The whole German press called us the "neo-dadaists." That Dadaist aspect did not disappear for a long time—it hurt and created confusion, because Fluxus, of course, was a completely new idea of music, of behavior, instead of the music then going on, electronic music. You must know that Cologne's radio station was very important with Stockhausen and Kagel doing electronic music festivals. You see, we were on the opposite side of the coin. For the public, it was absolutely the most opposite form you could get at that time—I mean, music produced by computers, and by machines. On the other hand, young artists even not trained as composers, making music with their bodies and with objects. So you could imagine the kind of discussions that were going on. Many of the journalists at this time could say, "Oh, they're only making music, even not being composers, so maybe this will be for a few years and then go away." They were absolutely not interested in seeing that each of us had already a history of performance of our own, even before Fluxus, and exhibitions too. They were absolutely not used to artists who did

objects, multiples, silkscreens, and music, and performance, and environments. You, from another generation, may feel that in 1980 the Fluxus aesthetic is not explained very well, because it is so complex to understand.

**I think it works for individual artists in a personal way, who are doing things now—very Fluxus-like things—The activities of performance artists today are very akin to what Fluxus artists did then.**

For me, Fluxus and happenings cannot make a school, because it is too radical, it depends upon the personal engagement of the artist, so there are very few artists who can have this aesthetic radicality. It leads to performance, which is again something like a theater form; a performance is slightly easier organized and executed. A happening, for example, is a very strong thing to organize; it depends upon the whole life of the artist.

**You're a visual artist, but you are still continuing as a performance artist doing environments—more than a conventional artist.**

I came to the conclusion that the most radical thing I can imagine will happen in the future. There will be entirely new art forms. For example, when the scientist can put a television camera, a television screen, directly onto your memory, onto your brain. Now the media are manipulated by many individual persons or artists or journalists. So it's a classical form. But a very new form would be if you can register what an artist or even a normal man can think about—this mental, this psycho-aesthetic production. I think someone can misuse this, but I believe in the future that this direct form of thinking and seeing the thinking visualized on the screen will happen. This is a very new art form. The thinking of an artist has to be visualized. It becomes visualized by hand until now. But the future is that everything a man does will be shown in an electronic way. And I also believe that to humanize life through art philosophy is that a man himself can become a unique artwork himself—the quality as an artwork. Then if he gets an artwork, or if he feels like an artwork, he still has the capacity of making art. Let's say, to become an artist shall be fantastic, but I think the most important thing after Picasso, during the second half of the twentieth century, is to have shown to the public that art is discovering yourself, talking with yourself and making yourself a piece of art.



Photo: Sandy Bernstein