Meeting 2:
The Urge To Destroy

The urge to destroy has been part of the development of the media arts from the early 20th century. The idea of destruction was built into the ideology of modernism: old culture and its arts have to be destroyed to make room for the new: modernism wants to begin from ‘tabula rasa’, ‘point zero’. This was the credo of Le Corbusier and many others.

The ideal was already present in Cubism (Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque): destroying the monocular point-of-view, and the painting as an illusion of reality; replacing this with multi-perspective, simultaneity, materiality and tangibility of the artwork.

For the early modernists, old artforms represented an obsolete society, made irrelevant by new technology, science (theory of relativity!), media, urbanism, mass society. To find a new harmony, destruction of the old was seen as inevitable.

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Futurism

A passionate (paradoxically: romantic?) attack on “passeist” bourgeois society and its values. Began in Italy (I manifesto 1909), spread to other countries, like pre-revolutionary Russia. Ideological and aesthetic leader F.T. Marinetti (1876-1944), Italian poet. Other central figures: Umberto Boccioni, Antonio Sant’Elia, Giacomo Balla.

Totalistic goals: replacing existing art and society by futuristic forms. From painting, sculpture and poetry extended to theatre, music (“Art of Noises”), fashion, cinema, architecture, urbanism, radio art, aerial theatre.

The most radical futurist ideas existed only in manifestos, projects and plans rather than as realized creations. Cinema seemed to be in line with the Futurists' veneration of speed, but few Futurist films were made (the most important, "Vita Futurista", has disappeared.

Veneration of war led Marinetti and the other Futurists toward Fascism (another ‘totalistic’ - or totalitarian - solution). Paradox, because the fascists were mostly interested in monumental neo-classicism, that was alien to the Futurists.

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The 1st Futurist Manifesto, Le Figaro (Paris), February 20, 1909

A plea for the renewal of the arts, made public in mass media (on the front page of a newspaper), not in the art world, written by F. T. Marinetti (1876-1944). This was an important gesture for the future development of the media arts.

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“We declare that the splendour of the world has been enriched by a new beauty - the beauty of speed. A racing car with its bonnet draped with exhaust pipes like fire-breathing serpents - a roaring racing car, rattling along like a machine gun, is more beautiful than the winged victory of Samothrace.”

From The First Manifesto of Futurism, 1909

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”We will destroy all museums and libraries, and academies of all sorts; we will battle against moralism, feminism, and all vile opportunism and utilitarianism.”

From The First Manifesto of Futurism, 1909

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The “Art of Noises” was one of the most influential futurist contributions to experimental art. It was initiated by painter Luigi Russolo: he wanted to extend music just like Marinetti’s “words in freedom” and “destruction of syntax” had extended language and poetry.

-Aimed at embracing the wealth of sounds, including “noise”. To achieve this, created special instruments, “Noise intoners” (Intonarumori) to explore the field of noises. These noise machines, as well as Russolo's manifesto on the Art of Noises have become founding moments for experimental sound art.

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Balla and Depero: manifesto “The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe” (1915).

Considered one of the minor Futurist manifestoes, but interesting and refreshing. Futuristic universe run according to the principles of the Futuristic toy. Construction of “Plastic Complexes”, toylike machines in different sizes and forms. With mechanical motions, emitting light and noise. Also decomposing machines, appearing and disappearing machines (fire, water, smoke..). Such art will make adults and children escape from dull conformism via laughter, agility, imagination, sharpened senses; give “physical courage to fight and WAR (by means of huge outdoor toys, dangerous and
aggressive).” Artificial Landscape will replace boring nature, populated with millions of Metallic Animals that will bring about “the greatest war...which will undoubtedly follow the current marvellous little human conflagration”.

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Dadaism

Began during World War I among refugee artists in Zurich Switzerland; reaction to the madness of war and mass destruction; protest against the (ir)rationality that had led to the war. Original venue Cabaret Voltaire, opened February 1916 in Zürich. Participants: Hugo Ball, Marcel Janko, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Richard Huelsenbeck, Emmy Hennings. Influence soon spread elsewhere: Paris, Berlin, New York. Berlin dada was the most political, work of many participants later ridiculed and destroyed by Nazis as “Degenerate art” (Entartete Kunst). Attack against reason, motives originally political; Dadism has also seen as “anti-modernism”; it was about negation of the negation, etc. It turned against the futuristic ideology of the modernists; avoidance of definitions, polar oppositions “anti-anti etc.”, clear definitions was essential.

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The First Media Artist, Another Candidate:
Marcel Duchamp
(1887-1968)

Duchamp was interested in machines, media, optics, language games as possibilities and channels for art. Roleplay with his female alter ego “Rrose Sélavy” was the first media performance (also form of ‘life art’). Simultaneously Duchamp created another alter ego as the “Precision Oculist,” a self-made optical scienist / optician engaged in experiments with illusions created by spinningb optical discs (powerd by a machine, which was a breakthrough. A machine as a artwork had earlier been considered an impossibility.

Created a subversion of Mona Lisa, titled Marcel Duchamp: L.H.O.O.Q. (Paris 1919) The title is an obscene pun: Elle a chaud au cul ("She has a hot ass"). It is important that Duchamp used a mass-printed image - not the original painting - as his starting-point. While it was a dadaist provocation, the work also raised issues about the relationship between art and mass-reproduced media imagery. This has provided the model for countless later examples of ‘appropriation art’.

Marcel Duchamp: Rotoreliefs (Disques optiques), 1935: Series of optical illusion discs meant for the mass market. Although this failed, it provided the origin for "Device Art", art sold as multiple copies on the mass market (at the moment, it is particularly popular in Japan).
Surrealism

Heterogenous movement, first manifesto in 1924 (André Breton). In many ways an offspring of Dadaism, although claimed to represent a break. Used automation and chance as creative methods (like dada), but focus on the surreality of the human mind. Central technique "automatic writing", influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Breton, the rational consciousness should interfere as little as possible to the spontaneous creations of the unconscious. In reality surrealist works often contained much conscious structuring and composition.

Political elements: subversive events in public places, products as deliberate provocations to “shock the bourgeoisie”, bizarre lifestyles as an artform (Salvador Dali).

One of the most notorious acts of public provocation: le film Un chien d’Andalou (Andalusian Dog, 1928) by Luis Bunuel and Salvador Dali; “Hit in the face of the bourgeoisie”; followed by L’Age d’Or (Golden Age, 1930), considered even more shocking: erotic desire + anarchism + blasphemy of christian doctrine and values.

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Situationism

Avantgarde movement founded in 1957 of the union of two earlier groups, Imaginist Bauhaus and Lettrist International. Ideas expressed in Internationale situationniste (journal), books, various art activities. Influenced by surrealism.

“Purpose to create situations, constructed encounters and creatively lived moments in specific urban settings, instances of a critically transformed everyday life.” (Peter Wollen)

Looking for new perspectives to the dullness and alienation of everyday reality: “faced with the alternative of love or a garbage disposal unit, young people of all countries have chosen the garbage disposal unit.”

Later aimed at creating a political theory and strategy to free people from the grip of the “Society of the spectacle” (Guy Debord)

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Situationist Tactics

Goal to create artistic / political strategies that would make it possible to reclaim individual autonomy for people living under the condition of spectacle (Debord).

Main ideas: situations, psycho-geography, play as free and creative activity, dérive ("drift") and détournement ("diversion", “semantic shift”)
Dérive is a way of re-defining and re-appropriating the city: “attempts to discover lost intimations of real life behind the perfectly composed face of modern society”. Can be expressed in charts of ‘psycho-geographies’. Later manifested in GPS-based work by artists like Blast Theory and Masaki Fujihata, although these did not necessarily consider Situationism as their model.

Détournement: turning the signs of power against themselves; interfering with seemingly innocent everyday reality, revealing its alienating and subordinating structures.

Especially since the late 1960s, Situationism became a major influence for radical arts. Its influence could also be felt in the way how Malcolm McLaren, the manager for the notorious punk band Sex Pistols, manipulated the British media (newspapers, TV), by organizing event that echoed throughout the mass media. One of these was the signing of a record contract in front of the Buckingham Palace.

Guy Debord (1931-94)

Ideological leader of Situationism: books, articles, films (mostly using found footage). Main work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967): “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was lived has moved away into a representation.”

The spectacle is a social relation between people mediated by images: “The spectator feels at home nowhere because the spectacle is everywhere.” The typical condition in the society of spectacle is alienation. A society organized as appearance can be disrupted on the field of appearance.

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Scratch Video

Movement in the early 1980s, particularly strong in England. Influences: punk, John Heartfield, Situationism, early scratch music (Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry, etc.) Communal video workshops, new editing tools that enabled “repeat-edit” (typical feature), political demand: early Reaganism and Thatcherism, social struggle Makers often groups: Gorilla Tapes, Duvet Brothers, etc. Appropriating TV images, ‘scratching’ them to make them reveal their true meanings; as with Heartfield, leaving the seams of manipulation visible

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The Emergence of Destruction Art in the 1950s and 60s

The post WWII situation; memories of war; sense of guilt; sense of rupture
Reactions against the social and economic developments of the post-war era: consumerism, the formation of the ‘Society of the Spectacle’ (Debord), automation, cybernation, new militarism, Cold War, the fear of nuclear holocaust. Also new sense of liberation from the dead-hand of the past (also felt in the new ‘rebellious’ youth cultures). Abstract expressionism and drip painting as liberating forces; the influence of John Cage. Connection with the ruptured traditions of the past, in particular dadaism (the emergence of ‘Neo-Dada’).

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John Cage (1912-1992)

One of the most influential innovators of the media arts; composer, philosopher, visual artist


"Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise...Whether the sound of truck at 50 mph, rain, or static between radio stations, we find noise fascinating." Intention to "capture and control these sounds, to use them, not as sound effects, but as musical instruments"

A review of Cage's concert in 1942 (Chicago Daily News): "People Call it Noise - But he Calls it Music". The musicians 'played' beer bottles, flowerpots, cowbells, automobile brakedrums, dinner bells, thundersheets and "anything we can lay our hands on" (Cage)

More about Cage later.

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Other influences for ‘destructive’ media arts

Jackson Pollock: action painting, drip painting

A liberating act. Influenced not just painters, but performers. Attention from art object to art as a process, an action. Big influence on Happenings (Allan Kaprow). Influence felt even in Japan - Gutai artists applied it in their radical actions, painting by bicycles, etc.

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Yves Klein (1928-1962)

- French; radical, non-conformist innovator
- associated with Nouveau Réalisme (New Realism, manifesto 1960): assemblages of everyday objects, primacy on performative actions, sophisticated use of mass media - obsession with space, “void” ("Evolution of Art Towards the Immaterial", 1959), with all its connotations (IKB = International Klein Blue)
Fluxus
Loose international movement / group often characterized as “neo-dada.”

Formed in the early 60’s, leading figure poet George Maciunas; name coined in 1961 by poet, activist George Maciunas for an anthology with work by Dick Higgins, Al Hansen, Yoko Ono, La Monte Young, etc.

Influences: Dadaism, Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Black Mountain College, popular culture...

“Fluxus is not Dada or neo-Dada in its intentions. Dada was explosive, irreverent, and made much use of humor, as Fluxus has also done. But Dada was nihilistic, a millenarian movement in modernist terms. Fluxus was constructive. Fluxus was founded on principles of creation, of transformation and its central method sought new ways to build.” (Robert Filiou, 1962)

Some Principles of Fluxus

Globalism
Unity of Art and Life
Intermedia
Experimentalism, research orientation
Chance
Playfulness
Simplicity, parsimony
Implicativeness (implies many other works)
Presence in time
Musicality (based on ‘scores’, instructions)

Nam June Paik in “Neo-dada in music”

Paik (1932-), born in Korea, began as an experimental composer. Electronic music with Stockhausen in Cologne, met Cage in 1958 (Darmstadt). Active member of Fluxus since 1961. Became one of the most influential media artists so far. Main “medium”: television, video. Paik’s “prepared televisions” influenced by Cage’s “prepared pianos”

Nam June Paik: Exposition of Music, Electronic Television (Galerie Parnass, Wuppertal, Germany 1963), legendary event. ‘Prepared TV-sets’ shown for the first time together with other works.
Wolf Vostell

German Fluxus and happening artist
symbolism based on the conjunction of destruction, violence and sexuality, especially represented in the media.
Coined the concept “dé-coll/age” - emphasized the difference and continuity of creative and destructive processes (”coll” for collage, or construction, and “dé” for disassembly or deconstruction.”
With Paik, one of the first to use television sets as an element/material/target of his art.
Treated them more aggressively than Paik; burying them alive, ‘killing’ them by shooting -work reflects traumas of the nazi era and the holocaust.

Guns as an artyistic medium

Niki de Saint Phalle with rifle at the opening of her solo show, Paris 1961.

Also Robert Rauschenberg created his Tirs, shooting paintings with a .22 rifle, 1961.
Most famous event: Chris Burden's Shoot, Los Angeles, 1971. Burden actually shot in the arm as part of the performance.

Auto-Destructive Art

Founder, theorist artist Gustav Metzger. Organized Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) in 1966; Vostell in committee.
Influences: Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism, Russian Revolutionary art 1910-20
The Second World War and the holocaust (Metzger’s family was killed in a Nazi concentration camp; Vostell, a Jew, escaped the nazi persecution), the Cold war, the threat of Nuclear War, pollution, etc. Critical political stance: in a self-destructing world the artist can re-enact its destructive methods and processes.
Form of public art (self-destructing monuments, computer controlled): “lifetime varying from a few moments to twenty years”

Jean Tinguely: destructive / self-destructing machines

Member or Le Nouveau Réalisme, close friend of Yves Klein.
Influenced by dadaism, surrealism, the tradition of “bachelor machines” (absurd, often erotic and conceptual machines as artworks described by artists and writers: Duchamp, Raymond Roussel, Frank Kafka, Jonathan Swift).
Humor meets subversion in varying degrees in Tinguely’s works. Close collaborator Niki de Saint Phalle: became notorious for her tirs, shooting actions.

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John Latham: Art & Culture, 1966-69 (MOMA, NYC). Famous work that documents the destruction of Clement Greenberg’s book *Art and Culture* by chewing (performed by Latham and his students). The “brew” then turned into a liquid and returned to the library in a bottle. The work cost Latham his teaching job.

John Latham: Burning of a Skoob tower, series of book-burning performances 1964-.

“It was not in any degree a gesture of contempt for books and literature. What it did intend was to put the proposition into mind that perhaps the cultural base had been burnt out.” (Latham)

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Mark Boyle & Joan Hills
Also at DIAS. Slides, being destroyed by acid or burned, projected on performers. ‘Pealing layers”. Later made multimedia light shows (Pink Floyd, Cream...)

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Smashing and burning the guitar - Pete Townshend and Jimi Hendrix - how should we interpret this gesture?

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Wiener Aktionismus

Extremely subversive avantgarde art movement started in Vienna in the late 1960s Exposing and attacking all the tabus and perversions of Western societies; simulating and sometimes realizing extreme actions.

Reaction to the Nazi past and the holocaust, also the conservativeness of the Austrian society.

“Material-actions”, films, mixed media.

Main representatives: Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Gunter Brus, Kurt Kren...

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Continuities: destructive tradition in media arts
Ant Farm: Media Burn, 1974
Kain Karawahn, Germany: fire actions, explosion art, the ‘death’ of a burning video camera flattened by a steam roller (Death of a Video Camera)...
Flatz, Germany: “Disassemblies” (www.flatz.net)
Interactive ‘destruction’ with humor: Perry Hoberman’s Cathartic User Interface (1995)
Decaying film and video works (Bill Morrison: Decasia, 2000)
Christian Marclay: Guitar Drag, 2000
Survival Research Laboratories (SRL), San Francisco. Founded by Mark Pauline. Large-scale destructive robot performances, often with subversive allegorical content.