GOOD EVENING EVERYBODY!

Thank you for coming.

And thank you very much, Dr. Hugh McCarney, for inviting me to WCSU.

As Dr. McCarney mentioned, I am best known in art history for Avalanche magazine (1968 to 1976). Avalanche was the incubator and launching pad for post-modernism. Avalanche was a series of 13 curated catalogues devoted to the pivotal works and spoken thoughts of the leaders of the art movements that then established the avant-garde: Earth Art; BodyWorks; Post-Studio Sculpture; Conceptual Art; Performance Art; Minimalist Music; Judson Dance Theater; and Video in its 3 main aspects – Videotape; Video Installation; and Videoperformance.

The artists that Avalanche either “discovered” or gave first in-depth broad public exposure to, constitutes a veritable Parthenon of the 20-century’s “most valuable”:
Robert Smithson; Yves Klein; Joseph Beuys; Gordon Matta-Clark; Robert Wilson; Bruce Nauman; Phil Glass; Hannah Darboven; Richard; Chris Burden; Jack Smith; Bas Jan Ader; Mike Heizer; Yvonne Rainer; Jannis Kounellis; Dennis Oppenheim; Keith Sonnier; Terry Fox; William Wegman; Jackie Winsor; Lawrence Weiner, among others.
Before I published Avalanche, I curated two important exhibitions. The first was “Pop Art”, in (March 1964) at Columbia University where I was an art history doctoral candidate. It was the first art exhibition with that title. The show was conceived before the words “Pop Art” came into usage to designate this American art movement. Each of seven artists were represented by two life-sized works. I considered Rauschenberg and Johns Pop Art predecessors and necessary for inclusion in this exhibition.

A few weeks after my show, I was happy to pick up a copy of the Village Voice and see that Lichtenstein, Oldenberg, Segal, Wesselman and Warhol were depicted as “the” Pop artists.

In the Fall of 1964, I curated a 60-work “mid-career retrospective” of Robert Rauschenberg at Germany’s Krefeld Museum. While curating this show during that summer, I had the pleasure of traveling through Europe and England with Rauschenberg, John Cage, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. In Dusseldorf, I first met the co-producer of Pop Art USA, Wolfgang von Chmielewski. Having spent almost 10 years in Dusseldorf, by then I was relatively high-profile. I worked with the ZERO GROUP, particularly Gunther Uecker. When Gunther and I did a “Kinetic Performance” at Rosenthal House on Koenigs Allee, Wolfgang filmed it as a short subject for “WDR News”.

The genesis of “Pop Art USA” is simple. Wolfgang worked at the WDR (West-German television station) under the Director of its Cultural Channel, Third Program, Dr. Wibke von Bonin. Wolfgang’s father was a previous WDR director and Polish nobility and his son was an emerging “star” filmmaker. Wolfgang’s parents had divorced by 1966 and his mother migrated to Hollywood, California where Wolfgang later moved and managed to get cast in several small roles, such as an “extra” in the original “Poseidon Adventure” (1972).
In early 1966, he wanted the WDR to pay for a visit to USA so that he could visit his mother in California. He needed a “subject” for a new feature film project and he knew about the importance of Pop Art from me. Consequently, he got permission and a substantial budget from Dr. von Bonin to start working on a black and white “documentary” devoted to the “new” New York artists in the mid-sixties, Rauschenberg, Warhol, et al.

Early one morning, while I was literally about to go on-press in New York with my first book, a monograph on the German Kineticist, Gunther Uecker, Wolfgang telephoned me out of the blue and asked to meet me immediately. Wolfgang scarcely knew who the Pop artists were. Neither did he know how to get to them. Therefore, he needed me to collaborate on this project. I was already beyond Pop Art and deeply devoted to Kineticism, “The Movement Movement”.

In our hastily arranged coffee-shop brunch that day next to my printer, Wolfgang realized that I was very reluctant to commit to his Pop project. But Wolfgang offered me a deal that I couldn’t refuse: If I agreed to do “Pop Art USA” with him, he would try to convince the WDR to do the feature film I wanted to do on Kineticism in 1967.

I agreed.

That afternoon, I picked up the telephone and told my friend, Leo Castelli, the world-famous art dealer, who basically controlled Pop Art because he represented most of the Pop Artists, that I was starting to shoot this film. Graciously, Leo, based on our friendship of many years, immediately swung into action: he started calling many of the artists. When I later reached them on the telephone, I made appointments for us to work with them in their studios. Nobody refused. Rauschenberg, indeed, got out of a
sick-bed on one of the last days of being in his lower Broadway studio to talk to us.

Wolfgang hired a pick-up crew of a dozen freelancers. Ken van Sickle was chief cinematographer who shot 16mm black and white footage with his Bolex camera. He brought in a man who did the sound, someone who did the lighting, and a bunch of people who helped us with the sets, the transportation of the equipment and the rest. Wolfgang hired a few black limousines – he was always concerned with image – to get us around town. Everything considered, this rag-tag team worked fairly well together principally owing to the fact that Wolfgang’s imperialist directorship and my relatively soft-spoken interviewing techniques were strangely complimentary.

By the spring of 1966 when we started to shoot, I was already well-known in the microcosm of the New York art world which then consisted of fewer than 200 “regulars”. I had not, however, made the commitment to visit any of these artists in order to get a deeper understanding of their work. Consequently, when Wolfgang talked me into doing the film, I had to quickly figure out what I wanted to accomplish.

It was simple. The concept was to get answers from the originators of this movement to answer the question: “What is Pop Art?” Basically, I was just my copious curiosity as a “cultural catalyst”.

Like in Avalanche a few years later, the only reasonable procedure was to get the artists to explain (as deeply and clearly as possible) what they were about. That was my basic concept, one I have stuck until the present. Normally, I step out of the reference frame in all my work with media – film, video, and transmission arts -- and instigate a more-or-less stream of consciousness monologue from artists or my media collaborators.
As a “filmmaker”, I had no previous prototypes to consult. Indeed this was my first film, and I still do not know to what this work can be compared.

As students of film, perhaps this is something we can discuss after the work is shown.

Now, sit back and enjoy the “American Premiere” of “Pop Art USA” which was last publicly screened at the invitation of Professor Joseph Beuys at the Dusseldorf Art Academy on September 25, 1966 -- almost 40 years ago to this day.

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