FRANCESCO SPAMPINATO

ART VS. TV

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS' RESPONSES TO TELEVISION

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Francesco Spampinato

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in the United States of America 2022

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Cover design: Eleanor Rose
Cover image: *The Palace at 4 A.M.* by Jon Kessler, 2005. Installation view, Sammlung Falckenberg,
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Spampinato, Francesco, 1978- author.
Title: Art vs. TV : a brief history of contemporary artists' responses to
television / Francesco Spampinato.
Description: New York : Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. |
Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021023756 (print) | LCCN 2021023757 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781501370571 (hardback) | ISBN 9781501370564 (epub) |
ISBN 9781501370557 (pdf) | ISBN 9781501370533
Subjects: LCSH: Television and art.
Classification: LCC N72.T47 S63 2021 (print) |
LCC N72.T47 (ebook) | DDC 791.45–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021023756
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021023757

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-7057-1
ePDF: 978-1-5013-7055-7
eBook: 978-1-5013-7056-4

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.

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To my father, Santi, for his
unconditional support, with love

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CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Prolegomena to the Study of the Relationships Between Art and TV 1
The Body Split to Travel in Space 3
Art Reflecting Tele-Vision 6
Artists as Prosumers 8
Synopsis by Chapter 10
TV in the Postmedia Scenario 12

1 Historical and Theoretical Frameworks 17
1.1 1920s–1950s 17
The 1920s: The Age of Radio-Television 17
The 1930s–1940s: Utopia or Dystopia? 20
The 1950s: Reality and Its Duplicate 22
The 1950s: Television and Spatialism 24
1.2 1960s–1970s 27
The 1960s: Television as an Extension of Man 27
The 1960s: Situationism and the Society of the Spectacle 29
The 1960s: Early Application of Semiotics to TV 31
The 1960s–1970s: The Birth of Video Art 33
1.3 1970s–1980s 35
The 1970s: The Flow 35
The 1980s: Hyperreality 37
The 1980s: Neo-Television 39
The 1980s: Pastiche and Schizophrenia 41
1.4 1990s–2010s 43
The 1980s–1990s: A Sociological Viewpoint 43
The 1990s: The Body Split 45

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The 1990s–2000s: Television and Post-Fordism 47
The 2010s: From Convergence to Circulationism 49

2 TV as a Mirror: Manipulations and Re-Presentations 53
2.1 Artists Familiarize with the New Mass Medium 53
Early Acts of Manumission of the TV Set 53
The Rise of Artists Television: Germany 56
The Rise of Artists Television: United States 58
Nam June Paik's Video-Synthesizer and TV Programs 60
2.2 Performance, CCTV, and the Narcissistic Impulse 63
The First Exhibition of Television Art 63
Performing CCTV 66
Video as a Definition of the Self 69
The Audience Is the Product: Richard Serra 71
2.3 The TV Set and Its Double 73
TV as a Living Organism 73
Interruptions: The TV Set Literalized 76
Commercials and Zapping 78
Two Cases of Metatelevision 82
2.4 Tele-Pictures 84
The Allegorical Impulse of the Pictures Generation 84
Feminist Approaches to Media Fantasies 87
The Video as a Poststructuralist Visual Essay 89
Function Is to Perform Fiction 92

3 Breaking News: Television Between Art and Activism 95
3.1 Guerrilla Television 95
The Rise of the Guerrilla Television Movement 95
The Theories Behind Guerrilla Television 97
Guerrilla Television and the 1960s Counterculture 100
The Professionalization of Guerrilla Television 103
3.2 Community Television 105

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Community Television: Videofreex's Lanesville TV 105
The Legacy of Guerrilla Television: PTTV 107
The Personal Is Political: AIDS TV 109
Grassroots Television 111
3.3 Mediated War 113
John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "Bed-In for Peace" 113
War and Remoteness 115
From the Gulf War to the War on Terror 117
The Electronic War 119
3.4 Break the News 124
The First Global TV News Event: The JFK Assassination 124
The News Anchor 126
The Domestication of Fear: Johan Grimonprez 130
Live on BBC: The Yes Men 132

4 Artists as Media Stars 135
4.1 The Artist as a TV Personality 135
The Surrealist Persona: Salvador Dalí 135
Television Happening: John Cage 138
A Shy Apathetic Star: Andy Warhol 140
The Artist Diva: Charlotte Moorman and Cindy Sherman 142
4.2 The Artist as Intruder 146
Violence and Disclosure: Chris Burden 146
Space Invaders 148
Art, TV, and Mysticism: Christian Jankowski 150
The Bad Girl: Tracey Emin 155
4.3 Representations of Art and Artists in TV 157
The Loss of the Aura: TV Shows About Art 157
Stereotypes Exposed: From General Idea to the Internet 160
Downtown Television 163
The East Village Heterotopia: Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party* 166

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4.4 Andy Warhol's TV Programs 169
The "Superstar" as a Dysfunctional Replica 169
From Pop to *Fashion* (1979–80) 171
Andy Warhol's T.V. (1980–83) 175
Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes (1986–87) 177

5 Disentertainment: Music, Kids, Fun, and Soap Operas 181
5.1 The Art of the Music Video 181
Birth and Evolution of the Music Video 181
Music Videos Directed by Visual Artists 183
Artistic Parodies and Appropriations of the Music Video 185
Music Videos by Visual Artists/Musicians 189
5.2 Kids Shows and the Aesthetic of Failure 191
The Abused Child: Mike Kelley 191
Dysfunctional Kids 195
The Troubled Girl: Alex Bag 198
Surreal Children's Shows and Cartoons 201
5.3 Comic Personae 204
Absurdist Humor: Ernie Kovacs 204
Satire and Argentinean Conceptualism 206
Fun TV: New Wave Vaudeville at Club 57 209
The Inadequate Spectator: Michael Smith 212
5.4 The Semiotics of the Soap Opera 215
Infiltrating the Soap Opera 215
The Double on the Screen 217
A Postcolonial View: Bruce and Norman Yonemoto 220
Identity and the Telenovela: Phil Collins 223

6 The Age of Prosumers: Reality TV and the Internet 227
6.1 Processing Reality TV 227
Early Artistic Responses to Reality TV 227
Emotions for Sale: Artists' Reality Shows 229

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Italian Love Meetings: From Pasolini to Vezzoli 233
Reality TV and the Collective Unconscious: Gillian Wearing 236
6.2 Performing Selves 239
Imitation of Life: The *Truman* Effect 239
Video Performance as Identity Research Practice 242
The Schizophrenic Prosumer: Ryan Trecartin 244
Identity Politics and the Melodrama: Kalup Linzy 249
6.3 Art After Reality TV 254
TV and Participatory Art 254
Talent Shows for Artists 257
Live from the Art World 261
Video Art and Edutainment 264
6.4 Remediation, Rematerialization, Abstraction 267
Artists' TV Series, Sharing Economy, and Biopower 267
TV, Accelerationism, and EDM 270
The TV Stage Abandoned 273
Television and Abstraction 276

Chronology of Exhibitions on Art and Television 281
Bibliography 285
Works Cited 311
List of Figures 333
Acknowledgments 339
Index 342

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Introduction

Prolegomena to the Study of the Relationships Between Art and TV

Downgraded and "expanded" since the mass diffusion of digital technologies and the internet, television in the twenty-first century has lost the predominant position it held, roughly from the 1950s through to the turn of the millennium, as the most authoritative and persuasive mass medium. If television cannot be declared dead yet, then it has certainly mutated in a drastic way, having been forced to abdicate in favor of a new ungraspable media scenario governed by on-demand criteria and user-generated content, distributed by video-sharing platforms and streaming media services. Most of the content that circulates online today, even that resembling traditional television formats, is, in fact, indicative of an epochal change not just in terms of media production but mostly of their fruition, as media are accessed through portable computers and pocket-size devices by users belonging to increasingly atomized, globalized, and nomadic societies.

The power that television acquired and maintained for about half a century originally came from the vertical dynamic it established with viewers, chiefly enacted by the positioning of the actual TV set in the home: the way it reinforced the temporal structuring of daily life with its schedule; and its role as a "talking head," on a human scale, that did not give viewers a right of reply. Viewers would passively absorb whatever television broadcast, their only form of control being the possibility of changing channels, and ultimately turning the set off. Experiencing television was primarily an act of physical indoctrination: a metaphorical procedure of imprisonment of the viewers' body that turned the home into another of those power systems that Gilles Deleuze—tracing an evolution from Michel Foucault's

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idea of disciplinary societies to his own concept of contemporary societies of control—called "environments of enclosure."[1]

In his seminal book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison* (1975), Foucault described the society that formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a disciplinary society: that is, a social order based on a program of disciplining individuals enacted through power systems, such as the family (and by extension the home), the school, the factory, the prison, and so on, that indoctrinate the citizens in physical terms through the mechanization of their activities and surveillance. The primary aim of the disciplinary society was to produce individuals that would obey and adhere to a determined status quo. A pioneering example identified by Foucault of how disciplinary societies refer to "the body as object and target of power […] the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained,"[2] were the new protocols, adopted since the seventeenth century, for training soldiers to coordinate with one another with the precision of a mechanical instrument. From there through to his more famous discourse on the architectural model of the "panopticon"—a circular prison where inmates are constantly surveilled by a watchman at the center—Foucault pointed out to what he defined as "docile bodies,"[3] or the embodiment of the disciplinary logic.

The major shift that Deleuze identified from disciplinary to control societies coincided with the rise of neoliberalism in the global market from around the 1970s. This, in turn, produced a new social order in which people are no longer kept docile through confinement within enclosed spaces, such as homes, factories, and prisons, but on a more subtle level, being controlled as they embrace the new virtual open-ended networks brought forth by the mass diffusion of computers and the internet. It is perhaps no coincidence that Deleuze wrote his essay in 1990, the same year that Tim Berners-Lee set up the World Wide Web. As the numerical language of control—made up of codes—replaced discipline, the body rhetoric mutated. From mechanized bodies controlled through confinement to environments of enclosure, we now have individuals who "have become 'dividuals,' and masses, samples, data, markets, or 'banks.'"[4]

The citizens of this interconnected, technological, globalized, and surveilled world are deluded of being freer than before, when, in fact, each single action they perform is instantly transformed into a pack of data. Compared to the television age, the new mediascape is certainly based on more horizontal dynamics into which viewers have apparently acquired an

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[1]Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, Vol. 59, Winter (1992): 3.

[2]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 136.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Deleuze, 5.

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active role. However, as Deleuze had already anticipated in a lecture he delivered at FÉMIS film school in Paris in 1987: "Control is not discipline. You do not confine people with a highway. But by making highways, you multiply the means of control. I am not saying this is the only aim of highways, but people can travel infinitely and 'freely' without being confined while being perfectly controlled. That is our future."[5]

As the mass medium par excellence of the late twentieth century—although not addressed specifically by either Foucault or Deleuze—television incarnates elements from both disciplinary and control societies. Its transformation from the domestic "fireplace" to a multifunctional apparatus with attached peripherals and internet connectivity is testament indeed to the metamorphosis of the role of the viewers and the definition of their body. The transformation from the docile, torpid body sinking into a sofa to the athletic body of the new, always-on-the-move "prosumer," is also exemplary of the shift from nuclear to atomized families and, as a consequence, of the lifestyle migration from houses to increasingly smaller apartments. At the same time, television prefigured the electronic highway Deleuze talked about, offering a fictional reality—specular to factual reality—to which the viewer was irresistibly attracted, and into which he or she was deluded to be immersed, only now surfing in cyberspace while the body stayed put.

The Body Split to Travel in Space

This book aims to map and condense the history of contemporary visual artists' responses to television during the half century or so in which television maintained its position as society's quintessential mass medium. The study will take into account video artworks, installations, performances, interventions, and television programs made by artists as forms of resistance to, and appropriation and parody of, mainstream television. Apart from a few interventions in major TV channels, most of the works discussed herein are intellectual productions destined for the art world, small television networks, or the internet, that oppose, simulate, or make fun of television in the attempt to expose the mechanisms through which the mass medium influences our perception of both reality and ourselves: the way we mold our identity, how we relate to one another, and how we develop certain preferences and make certain choices in life. Aside for a few case studies from Argentina, former-Yugoslavia, and Japan, most of the artists discussed

[5]Gilles Deleuze, "What Is the Creative Act?," 1987 in *Gilles Deleuze: Two Regimes of Madness—Texts and Interviews 1975–1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 322.

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are from the United States and Europe. The reason is not only that most researches for this book have been conducted in the United States and Europe but also to highlight the predominant role of television in Western societies from an insider perspective, having lived in Italy most of my life and in the United States for almost a decade.

The many works surveyed in this compendium are manifest forms of opposition to television genres, languages, formats, and phenomena. Moved by the utopian desire to develop alternative forms of cultural production that would potentially affect larger and more generic audiences, the artists that realized these works are prompted by an irreverent poststructuralist approach to television, either in literal or in figural terms, in an attempt to reveal its subliminal power or to exorcise our saturated media existence. In both cases, these works and phenomena elicit a tension between art and television, exposing an incongruence; an impossibility not only to converge but at the very least to open up a dialogical exchange. Indeed, even the television programs made by artists end up exposing the coercive nature of the medium itself, and the fictional apparatus on which its very raison d'être is based. In other words, every artistic commentary on television configures itself as an act of challenge to television itself.

What emerges, in particular, is that while functioning as a window into another virtual reality that supposedly replicates surrounding reality, television also produces a sensation of physical displacement in the viewer; the perception of being at home one minute and immersed in whatever televisual space is broadcast the next. A parallel can be traced to the neurophysiological syndrome of the so-called phantom limb, which manifests when an amputee feels sensations in a limb that no longer exists. For the TV viewer it is not a question of perceiving physical feelings such as touch, temperature, pressure, vibration, and so on (an effect that can be achieved, instead, during more immersive media experiences such as virtual or augmented reality) but of having the illusion that his or her whole body has actually travelled in space or, vice versa, that the body on screen has travelled through space and entered the living room to talk with the viewer.

One of the most acute thinkers to have discussed media in relation to aesthetics, American literary critic and philosopher Samuel Weber condensed his thoughts on television in the essay "Television: Set and Screen" (1996), which revolves around the presupposition that the specificity of television as a medium is that it allows the viewer to "see at distance"—a function epitomized, after all, in the very combination of the terms "tele" and "vision." However, unlike other devices whose noun incorporates the prefix "tele," and which allow to overcome distance (such as the telegraph, the telescope, or the telephone), with television it is not distance per se that is overcome but the body itself. If a body is defined by the determinate extent

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of the space it occupies, and the fact that it can occupy one place at a time, according to Weber:

> Television thus serves as a surrogate for the body in that it allows for a certain sense-perception to take place; but it does this in a way that no body can, for its perception takes place in more than one place at a time. Television takes place in taking the place of the body and at the same time in transforming both place and body.[6]

Weber identifies three places where television occurs: where the images and sounds are recorded, where they are received, and the place in between, or else the ether through which they are transmitted. All three converge in the TV set. "What it sets before us, in and as the television *set*," continues Weber, "is therefore split, or rather, it is a *split* or a *separation* that camouflages itself by taking the form of a visible *image*."[7] By standing between the viewer and the viewed, the television screen is the materialization of this split between these three locations which also constitutes a triple split of the body. Various science fiction movies have also played on the idea of the TV screen as a window or door into another dimension—a liminal boundary through which bodies from both factual and televised reality can pass. This happens to Max Renn, the protagonist in David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), whose surrounding reality is affected by the actions performed in a television program (with the same title as the film) that induces hallucinations to such a degree that as he approaches to kiss a mouth on the screen, his entire body is eaten up and transported to the other side.

Following Weber's reasoning then, one can assume that, much more than being a device, "tele-vision" is, in fact, a scopic system that, while allowing the viewer to see at distance, simultaneously reiterates and negates the very idea of visual perception as being that sense that allows one to detect and interpret visual information so as to build a representation of the surrounding reality. If the only sense that proves reality as being factual is touch, more than the amputee who feels a non-existent phantom limb, the TV viewer perceives a reality that is both visible and audible, yet is not properly there. This ambiguity is proven by the fact that, unlike Max in *Videodrome*, the viewer who will try to interact physically with the televised reality will be confronted with the screen: no warm lips to await, only a dusty, cold, and hard surface. Therefore, as Weber concludes, what is placed in front of the viewer is, after all, the very power of vision to create a representation of reality.

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[6]Samuel Weber, *Mass-Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 117.
[7]Ibid., 120.

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Art Reflecting Tele-Vision

Voluntarily confined in the environment of enclosure, chiefly the home, the viewer opens up, through the television set, to a phantom reality. While his or her body relaxes in a comfortable seat, sensory processing is stimulated and altered by increasingly advanced systems of audiovisual reproduction, be it high-definition screens able to display information that the human eye wouldn't otherwise see or Dolby Surround audio systems giving the enhanced impression of being truly immersed in whatever manufactured reality is being broadcast at the moment. For the viewer is not only disinterested in confronting the idea of "tele-vision" as a scopic regime but is also totally unaware of the implications that television as a system of representation may have on his or her psyche, and how it can influence his or her individual and social life.

As for Max, the degree of mimesis of factual and televisual reality is so high that the viewer might even decide to stand up at one point, approach the TV set, and decide to interact with the person on the screen. Now, for many that would certainly be ascribed to a pathological condition, but how many Maxes wouldn't kiss someone on the screen in the privacy of their own living room where nobody can see them? A recent example of mimesis gone wrong, albeit not in such literal terms, occurs in a scene of a popular Italian TV series based on the story of Rosy Abate—a fictional ex-mafia queen who tries to change her life. A character who plays the role of a criminal hands the protagonist a note with his telephone number in open sight. This doesn't seem strange, except for the coincidental fact that it happened to be the real phone number of a carpenter from Domodossola, whose Sunday night turned into a nightmare as viewers kept calling and threatening him to leave Rosy alone.

To display a real phone number in a television show was certainly an oversight by the production team, but who would ever have thought that viewers would bother to take down the number, call it, and, most of all, think they were talking with the TV character in question as if he were a real person? Well, an artist definitely would—and that is when art joins in the game. Being itself a system of representation, art has proven to be a privileged context in which to measure the psychological impact of television and rethink its social role. Since the dawn of civilization, art has traditionally performed a social function, be it to serve as décor or illustrate hierarchical power structures under the commissions of kingdoms, governments or religious orders. Of course, that did not stop artists from treating art as a free expression of human intellect and spirit, using metaphor and allegory as instruments to develop subliminal commentaries on life, politics, or culture itself. By embracing these rhetorical figures, art became independent from the "functional" constraints of society—be they ethical or political—and

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began to serve "as a mirror held up to nature," as Arthur Danto wrote in an influential essay, "to catch the conscience of our kings."[8]

Allegory, in particular, has proven to be an efficient avenue to expose the misconduct of a given social order. As industrial production and the economic interests it gained became a state's priority along with traditional geopolitical concerns, art has employed allegory as a proper weapon to expose, criticize, or challenge the anti-democratic and coercive nature of the new disciplinary societies that formed with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. This explains why artists started to imitate the language of mass consumerist culture, overidentifying the work of art with an industrial object, both through acts of literal appropriation—from Marcel Duchamp's readymade through to collages and simulation—and through the adoption of techniques and tools proper of industrial production, such as the screenprint, video technologies, and, more recently, computer software and web applications.

Along with traditional mediums, such as painting, drawing, and sculpture, artists adopted and learned how to use a new array of mediums through which they could elaborate more subtle and efficient commentaries, and sometimes even assaults, on society and its "kings." Being power systems at the core of disciplinary and later control societies, mass media became a recurring subject—and sometimes also the medium itself—for artists who could now fight their enemies on equal terms, so to speak. This is particularly true of video art, which arose in the 1960s and developed initially in open opposition to television. If early visual technologies, from the camera obscura to photography, allowed to measure and so reorganize reality in the form of an image, their development in film and television allowed to recreate reality. Just as artists began to challenge the film industry as soon as they had access to the technology, so too with the emergence of video technology on the market, or through collaborations with TV networks, television became their prime target.

Video art's confrontational approach to television is well summed up by Philippe Dubois when he argues:

> It is not a question of simply *turning over* the television, but of *reflecting* it, of staging (in image and in device) the image *and* the device that it is. The video can thus appear not as another form (the form of the other)—the anti-television, but as the very form of a thought *of* the television. Something like an analytic metalanguage. Video is the formal and intellectual material in which reflection on/from/with television flows, or even better: which generates it, which invents it, which gives it body and

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[8] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19 (October 15, 1964): 584.

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ideas. There is a kind of 'power of thought' in and through the image, which seems to me at the heart of the video form. 'Video' would be, in this sense, quite literally, a form that thinks, that is to say, a thought *of* the image. In general, not just of television.[9]

Artists as Prosumers

Dubois' discourse confirms that video art is the artist's favorite genre when it comes to reflecting upon television, and the sensation of body split that it produces. When used to address television, however, video is rarely employed by artists as a technology that only reproduces vision; rather, it is often in reference to the body—be it the body of the television viewer, the body represented on screen and its social implications, or the body of the visitor or beholder of the artwork the moment it is displayed or performed in an exhibition space or other venues. Therefore, it is the body, more than video, which is employed as a proper medium, while video subordinates to performance either as a mere tool for documentation or as a referent in relation to or against that which a performance is structured on. This also includes real-life events—that is, public or TV interventions, or proper TV programs directed, hosted, or featuring artists, and thus automatically transformed, or at least seen as works of art in their own right.

The artists discussed in this study belong to different generations: those emerged in the 1960s in association with art movements such as Pop Art, Fluxus, and Happening—whose work explored the implications of television becoming a ubiquitous presence in all homes; those emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s in association with video and performance art practices, as well as counterculture and Conceptual Art, who employed video as a mirror—either in psychoanalytical or in social terms; those appearing on the scene in the 1980s, whose work aimed at deconstructing media representation in line with postmodernist theories; those emerged in the 1990s, who reacted to the coeval convergence of art and entertainment, politics and spectacle; those arriving in the 2000s, an era in which, through reality shows and the Internet, anybody could potentially become a media personality; and finally those emerged in the 2010s, whose work reflects on how old media like television has definitively vaporized through the electronic highways of cyberspace (borrowing a retrofuturistic vocabulary from the age when personal computers entered our homes, notably the 1980s).

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[9]Philippe Dubois, *La Question Vidéo: Entre Cinéma et Art Contemporain* (Crisnée, Belgium: Éditions Yellow Now), 109, my translation.

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The most popular television genres and formats to be targeted through artistic acts of resistance, appropriation, and parody include: news, commercials, sitcoms, soap operas, talk shows, children's and youth programs, music videos, reality and talent shows, edutainment, and TV series. While endeavoring to chart a diachronic development, the present study has also been structured by areas of interest, into which some of the aforementioned TV formats have been referred to as connecting threads; to group and compare works that would otherwise have been looked at from a distance, since they often pertain to different tendencies or moments of contemporary art practice. Although contemporary art is the main field with which they are associated, some of the works discussed also come from parallel and occasionally tangential spheres, such as cinema, music, design, activism, and television itself.

Far from being willing to reinforce obsolete distinctions between disciplines—not to mention establishing hierarchies between high and low culture—the various techniques or tools employed, and the works and phenomena taken into consideration are approached from an expanded, transversal, and transdisciplinary perspective. After all, being homologous to the evolution of television and its role in society, they reflect not only a change in terms of contents and production, but mostly of distribution and fruition. As noted before, a determining element to signal the passage identified by Deleuze, from disciplinary societies to societies of control, is the user's new approach to media since the advent of digital technologies. Exemplary of this change, the term "prosumer" was coined to denote the shift from consumers into producers; a groundbreaking transformation that began in the 1960s with the diffusion of portable video cameras, and which continued over the decades with the introduction and development of the computer market, advanced digital technologies, and later the internet; the latter allowing anyone without proper expertise to produce media products.

The introduction in the 1960s of portable video cameras, such as the Sony Portapak, triggered the rise of bottom-up video productions as well as video art practices, but it also signaled the beginning of the story of the relationships between art and television that is about to be outlined. When it comes to "reflecting" and reflecting upon television, both artists and prosumers embraced video technologies with a similar metalinguistic approach, which resulted in works that ultimately exposed—even though inadvertently for the most part—the very ontology of vision and the mechanisms of image-making and distribution. More than in art historical terms, the examination of these works will be undertaken from an expanded approach to visual culture; one that, as Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini argued in their primer on the topic, assumes that "images and vision are not abstract and supra-historical entities. On the contrary, they are always something concrete and historically conditioned. They are material images and incarnate looks that circulate in a context whose coordinates are defined

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by a whole series of factors at the same time technological and media, social and political."[10]

Therefore, along with contemporary art history and visual studies, both standing as the main disciplines of reference, the works to be taken into account will also be of interest to such academic fields as media studies, cultural studies, and critical theory, as they are forms of artistic expression that comment on the tectonic cultural shifts brought on by the social role of images and the mass diffusion of visual technologies. Television may no longer be society's quintessential mass medium, but it certainly continues to exert a huge amount of power even in today's cross-media scenario. Its long-lived authority does not depend only upon its omnipresence, now moreover global, but by having worked as the bridge that transported viewers from disciplinary societies to societies of control. Apparently, prosumer technologies and the internet allow viewers to develop more horizontal and transparent relationships with media, but dynamics of control, mechanization, and stereotyping are still at stake. Initially perfected by television, these dynamics have simply transmigrated to the new media as a reminder that, after all, although feeling emancipated from television, many of us grew up as docile viewers in front of it.

Synopsis by Chapter

The first chapter sums up the theoretical substrate through which artists and thinkers shaped the discourse on television as an aesthetic and cultural form in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The first part, charting the period between the 1920s and the 1950s, presents the pioneering ideas of László Moholy-Nagy, Dziga Vertov, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Rudolf Arnheim, Sergei Eisenstein, Martin Heidegger, Theodor W. Adorno, and Lucio Fontana. The second focuses on the 1960s and 1970s media theories of Marshall McLuhan, Guy Debord, and Umberto Eco. The third expounds the postmodernist ideas of Raymond Williams, Jean Baudrillard, Eco, and Fredric Jameson. The last one encompasses the main sociological viewpoints of the 1980s and 1990s: Neil Postman, Karl R. Popper, Pierre Bordieu; the illuminating theory of Samuel Weber; the thoughts on TV in relation to immaterial labor by Maurizio Lazzarato and Jonathan Beller; and considerations on the internet breakthrough by Lev Manovich, Henry Jenkins, and Hito Steyerl.

The second chapter revolves around the idea of TV as a mirror, beginning with pioneering acts of manipulation of the TV Set by Wolf Vostell and Nam

[10] Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini, *Cultura Visuale: Immagini, Sguardi, Media, Dispositivi* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016), XIV, my translation.

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June Paik. It then moves on to early utopian artists' TV programs: *Black Gate Cologne* and Gerry Schum's *Fernsehgalerie* in Germany, and KQED, WGBH, WNET, and KGW in United States. The second part looks at the first exhibition of "television art," *TV as a Creative Medium* (1969); the TV-related works by American conceptual artists Dan Graham, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra; the psychoanalytical dimension of Andy Warhol's *Outer and Inner Space* (1965); and the works discussed by Rosalind Krauss in her seminal essay *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism* (1976). The third part presents various speculations on the TV set as a domestic living organism, and artists' attempts to break the television flow through metalinguistic commercials and programs. The final part explores the allegorical impulse of Pictures Generation women artists Judith Barry, Gretchen Bender, and Dara Birnbaum, as well as of James Coleman and Stan Douglas.

TV news is the theme of the third chapter, which opens recounting the genesis of the guerrilla television movement, an offshoot of the 1960s American counterculture—from the early street tapes to either its professionalization (e.g., TVTV) or the development of community television projects (e.g., Videofreex). The legacy of guerrilla television is the topic of the second part, which looks at Paper Tiger Television, AIDS-related TV productions and videos, and the subsequent uses of camcorders in the name of social justice. The third part centers on the forms of representation of war, with a focus on US-driven conflicts (i.e., the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War on Terror), encompassing the work of artists and writers, including J.G. Ballard, Harun Farocki, Sanja Iveković, Jon Kessler, John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Susan Sontag, Paul Virilio, and Peter Weibel. The last part centers, instead, on works investigating how news manufactures reality, as in Johan Grimonprez's sampling of TV reports of airplane hijacks, and the Yes Men's prank live on the BBC—the most successful ever act of artistic intervention in the TV apparatus.

The fourth chapter explores how TV reinforces stereotypes of the artist as an eccentric, outsider, or troubled human being through caricature or degrading representations. The first part examines the cases of Salvador Dalí, John Cage, Andy Warhol, Charlotte Moorman, and Cindy Sherman, all of whom variously employed self-parody to expose television's stereotyping mechanism. Unlike them, Chris Burden, Mathieu Laurette, Christian Jankowski, and Tracey Emin (discussed in the second part) enacted metalinguistic forms of intrusion, ranging from violent through to disrespectful to zany, which ultimately overturned media entertaining logic—pushing the audience to confront the very meaning of art. The third part focuses on the 1980s TV programs through which New York-based artists emphasized the blurring of art and life, as in Colab's *Potato Wolf* and Glenn O'Brien's *TV Party*. The last part is devoted entirely to Andy Warhol's approach to TV, from his early filmic proto-reality shows to his own TV programs of the 1980s—*Fashion*, *Andy Warhol's T.V.*, and *Andy*

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Warhol's Fifteen Minutes—through which the artist elicited a metalinguistic exploration of celebrity culture.

The fifth chapter focuses on entertainment, the TV genre that most often becomes the subject of artists' acts of resistance, appropriation, and parody. The first part investigates the music video, both as a commercial art form and as a field to which artists have contributed, either through commissions or by embracing this format in their work. The second part examines TV's negative influence on children and teenagers as it emerges from the work of Mike Kelley and Alex Bag, as well as an array of artists who have depicted dysfunctional youth and associated symbols in their films, videos, and animations. The third part looks at how absurdist humor, pioneered on TV by Ernie Kovacs, informs video performances by the likes of David Lamelas and Michael Smith, as well as some 1980s TV programs by East Village artists like Jaime Davidovich or those associated to Club 57. The final part focuses on forms of appropriation of the soap opera genre by artists including Joan Braderman, Mel Chin, Julian Rosefeldt, and Richard Phillips, through to the postcolonial views of Bruce and Norman Yonemoto, and Phil Collins.

Following a diachronic criterion, the sixth and final chapter focuses on artistic responses to TV genres emerged from the 1990s to the late 2010s; a time frame characterized by the emergence of reality TV and the internet. Reality shows are the subject of the works discussed in the first part, by artists like Phil Collins, John Miller, Christoph Schlingensief, Francesco Vezzoli, and Gillian Wearing. After a discussion on the 1998 movie *The Truman Show*, the second part explores how artists embraced video performance to enact identity search processes, as in the cases of Bjørn Melhus, Shana Moulton, Ryan Trecartin, and Kalup Linzy. The third part looks at the impact of reality TV on the art system, including discussions on TV-related participatory art projects, talent shows for artists, artists' establishment of TV channels in art venues, and the adoption of edutainment in self-representational videos. The chapter closes with the examination of art projects that reflect on the transformation of TV in today's interconnected mediascape, with considerations on such issues as sharing economy, biopower, social networking, and "accelerationism," through the work of such artists as Tauba Auerbach, Keren Cytter, Simon Denny, Michel François, Melanie Gilligan, Ken Okiishi, Cally Spooner, and Hito Steyerl.

TV in the Postmedia Scenario

To introduce what he defines as today's "postmedia condition," Italian media scholar Ruggero Eugeni recounts the television commercial with which

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Apple launched the Macintosh computer on the market. Scheduled for maximum impact, it was aired in United States on January 22, 1984, during the live Superbowl telecast—the most watched media event in America's broadcast calendar—to an estimated audience of over 77.6 million viewers. Filmed by acclaimed *Blade Runner* (1982) director Ridley Scott, the one-minute ad—which depicts a sci-fi dystopia, loosely based on George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)—proved prophetic of what media were deemed to become with the diffusion of personal computers. Set in a grayish industrial complex, it opens with a line of uniformed workers-cum-prisoners with blank expressions, marching in unison through a tunnel punctuated by television screens, transmitting the speech of a Big Brother-like figure. The group converges in what looks like a cinema theater filled with hundreds of other seemingly lobotomized "slaves," all sitting dazed in front of a giant screen broadcasting the same speech, whose content is epitomized in the homologizing statement: "We are one people, with one will, one resolve, one cause."[11]

In plain contrast with the brainwashing atmosphere, typical of a disciplinary society, a blond woman athlete in colored sportswear runs from a group of guards in riot gear. As she approaches the talking head, she hurls a big hammer against the screen that explodes in a blinding flash, releasing a gust of white smoke, which sweeps across the faces of the gobsmacked "viewers." At that point, a portentous voice-over, reiterated by a scrolling text, announces: "On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce Macintosh. And you'll see why 1984 won't be like 1984."[12] Clearly, the commercial ironizes upon Orwell's dystopian prediction, by promoting the end of the social order imagined in the novel: one in which media were employed by a totalitarian regime as tools of both propaganda and surveillance. As Eugeni notes, the object of the commercial, the computer, is not even shown, but is "represented only metaphorically through the young athlete who breaks into the cinema theater and shatters the screen. One thing, however, is clear: the moment it appears on the court of nineteenth and twentieth century media, the computer decrees their destruction. Not, mind you, an economic destruction but mostly a cultural and political vaporization."[13]

Symptomatic of these vaporizations are the last works discussed in this study, in which TV sets and television images are treated almost as relics from a previous civilization—as with the arrival of prosumer technologies and finally the internet, media as we knew them underwent processes of

[11]Apple commercial introducing the Macintosh personal computer, directed by Ridley Scott, 1983. Retrieved from YouTube, accessed April 24, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q7iX0QWaTg.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ruggero Eugeni, *La Condizione Postmediale: Media, Linguaggi e Narrazioni* (Brescia: Editrice La Scuola, 2015), 9, my translation.

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remediation, rematerialization, and abstraction. Ultimate indicators of this postmedia condition can be found in the recent installations by New Zealander artist Simon Denny and German artist and theorist Hito Steyerl. Denny challenges the illusionistic dynamic of television by displaying rows of freestanding printed canvases reproducing TV sets, thus reducing the televisual illusionism to a bulk of still frames serving as collapsible props. In contrast, Steyerl's futuristic theaters are faux stages in which mesmerizing videos display sampled media according to a logic that the artist defined as "circulationist"[14]—or else, an artistic act of acceleration to investigate and eventually expose processes of image-making and circulation in today's postmedia scenario.

In presuming a type of viewer who interacts with the surrounding mediascape only through screens that he or she is deluded to be in control of while in fact ignoring their codes, works like these warn about the dangers of today's postmedia condition as being symptomatic of what Deleuze called societies of control, or else another Orwellian dystopia. As this might be the subject of a possible follow-up investigation—also in light of the impact of the recent Covid pandemic and its related crisis—this study has focused instead on the phase that ushered in the current postmedia condition: one in which television was society's most essential mass medium, a phase whose genesis is exemplified in the works highlighted and the types of viewers they implied. Just as the athlete in the Apple commercial challenges the unilateral power system of a media-based Big Brother regime through a physical act of rebellion, many of the artists surveyed, whose work has been discussed, have enacted a performative dimension too—either through performances, events, and installations or in conjunction with the use of video technologies, as in video works and the TV programs they produced, hosted, or appeared in.

Organized as confrontational acts that challenged the coercive nature of television, these artistic forms of resistance, appropriation, and parody may not have always achieved the instant success of a hammer shattering a screen, but they have certainly contributed to a slow and efficient process of demystification and deconstruction of television as a scopic regime. If it is true that video, as noted by Dubois, has been employed by artists as a form to rethink vision, and so "reflect" television, then it is also true that performance has been employed as a complementary practice to investigate the effects of media on the psychology of the viewer. By often using their own body as a medium or offering audiences the chance to rethink their role as spectators, artists have explored the uncanny feeling of displacement

[14]Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?," *e-flux*, No. 49 (November 2013). Accessed April 24, 2021, http://www.e-flux.com/journal/49/60004/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead/.

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produced by tele-vision. Indeed, what the examined works attempt to overcome is precisely that split between the factual and televised bodies that Weber indicated as the specificity of television, which is also a split between reality and representation.

Seen from today's perspective, that is, from an era in which media are accessed on mobile devices as body appendages by users in their atomized and nomad existences, television is increasingly regarded as an obsolete medium. Likewise, in comparison with the subliminal media dynamics enacted today by governments and corporations—harder than ever to be distinguished by users—the retrofuturistic appeal of television is often the subject of mockery or of nostalgic views of a bygone collective unconscious. That doesn't mean that the power television held for around half a century should be underestimated. On the contrary, a study such as the one that has been conducted here aims to show precisely that some dynamics perfected by television have, in fact, transmigrated to and have been reinforced by new media. If the artistic commentaries on television have some reactionary power, it is to reveal to viewers that television offers no more than an illusionistic travel in space in exchange for our docile immobility: a physical condition from which derives our implicit consensus to a given status quo.

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