

Television by Artists

by Philip Monk



Robin Collyer

Diet by Ian Murray

"The artists selected for this series are all concerned with television broadcast as an object/event. As these artists work within the limitations and potentials of television broadcast they present their forms and concerns for you the television audience. . . . This series is the presentation of art through the corporate broadcast media (Rogers Cable TV) into the personal reception space of Metro Toronto homes."

Statement by the artists during program credits

The potential of a television audience, the conventions of television and its conditions of access have always been reasons for working in video.

Because of lack of funds or access video artists have rarely been able to work on television; thus video is usually seen in the context of "exhibited" art in which the viewer goes to a space for a closed-circuit viewing. This necessity has shaped video production. The major public art galleries have grudgingly given video minor display as a "marginal" art activity. The Canada Council, while funding equipment and spaces (the two being coincidental in development), promotes video as an export commodity. Its active material support has the effect of absolving the public galleries from the responsibility of acquisition and display of video; consequently, the real subsidy has come from artists' unpaid labour.

Given access to broadcast television, the artists in this series have taken television as their subject. *Television by Artists*, however, is not video, but works conceived for television broadcast; and

not all the participating artists work primarily with video. The distinction between video and television may not be immediately obvious; after all, video shares conditions with television, and is not video that is broadcast on television, in effect, television? Yet for the nine artists in the series, the distinction is fundamental to the production and distribution of their work. Because the works were specifically conceived for broadcast, television does not serve for neutral transmission of video tapes that could be played elsewhere without detriment to their subject or form. The conditions of production, distribution — and reception — cannot be separated from the concept, subject and form of the actual work broadcast on television. Display of the works' own conditions cannot but help reveal those of television.

Part of artistic practice of the last decade in Canada has been to develop artist-run spaces, distribution networks and publications where artists represent themselves in all aspects of production and distribution. *Television by Artists* was sponsored by one of these non-profit, artist-run organizations, A Space, which also distributes the series which was first cable-cast on Rogers Cable TV between May and July 1980. The series was produced by one of the artists, John Watt, and the Fine Art Broadcast Service, a group of artists. Production facilities were provided by Trinity Square Video, an open access production centre and A Space Video, an artist post-production facility. So while these artists examine the production and distribution of television, the production model is their own.

Video developed in the media positivism of McLuhanism. Television, for McLuhan, formed new perceptual habits, and art was perception's training ground. According to McLuhan, television had no content; or rather, as the "content of any medium is always another medium," another perceptual form, the movie, was the "content" of television. With its instantaneity and simultaneity, the "mosaic" of television was more important for its overall form than for whatever images or representations might be created by its light and transmitted.

Aside from a few artists manipulating the electromagnetic waves of video/television's "mosaic," most artists first used video as a simple recorder, as a

structure to investigate, or, finally, as a non-neutral transmitter. The recording *time* of video was suited to recording a process, documenting an activity or unravelling an (auto)biography. The structure of its closed circuit and the delayed mirror of its playback, allowed artists to investigate or project constructions of the self. Finally, when video approached popular media for subjects and analysis, the image of the self gave way to the study of the ideological constructions of the social subject, and television became the context of analysis. Artists were concerned, not with the "form" of television, but with its image-practice, with its ability to form an image or representation and to reproduce that image/form/representation in the viewing subject. In *Television by Artists*, contemporary art practice controlling production and distribution — which display the hidden conditions of television — combines with an analysis of the image-practice of television.

The politics of this work, then, divides between artists' control of production and exhibition/distribution, on the one hand, and the display of television's means of production and the social activities and relations it promotes, on the other. Its display, however, is not didactic content. Usually, two questions are asked of this art: how is it political? and how is it effective? Both break down the question of theory and practice. On the question, how it is political, two forms usually are permitted — either the art should be ideologically analytical according to a predetermined "deconstruction"; or, it should be socially realistic — which means "a human being presented with dignity." Both demand that the work be measured against an idea of representative correctness: ideologically/theoretically correct, or socially realistic. But the work of art, aware of its own consequences, follows different strategies to escape these traps of representation. The art work does not give a referendum response, a correct yes or no. In fact, its effect is to delay referendum response.

Perhaps the least successful of the series was the most obviously analytical — Dara Birnbaum and Dan Graham's *Local Television Analysis*. On the same night, they set up cameras in the City Pulse News' studio (Toronto) and in the home of a family watching the news. In the same sixty minutes of the news, they explored the conditions of production in the studio and those of reception in the home. But the program failed because it was only a presentation of structure overlaid with a weak and infrequent analytical text; its juxtapositions and foreground of studio technique could not produce an analysis when it maintained the real time of the television it tried to analyse.

Going beyond what is directly given on television, some artists analytically re-

produce television's effects within their own constructions, or inhabit one of television's formats. Tending on the one hand to modes of entertainment and on the other to "fictional" narratives, inhabitation ironically masters, resists or disrupts its chosen/imposed conventions and structures. It is in this sense that Randy and Berencci's *Lost City Found* can be seen, not as an analysis, but as an inhabitation, for its own ends, of one of television's genres — the anthropological/archaeological special. Their program mocks television's presentation of the exotic for consumption and defamiliarizes our own culture. In reality the abandoned city of apartment and office towers is Toronto on an early morning without people. Everyday life, reduced to its static material forms, is made as exotic as the mythic structures and ritual customs of primitive peoples. This form of presentation allows every social institution to be seen as a construction in the mock anthropological/archaeological text that rolls over the images.

Robin Collyer and Shirley Wiitasalo's *Darn These Hands* is a collage of the



Robin Collyer

Local Television News
by Dara Birnbaum/Dan Graham

conditions of television. In this tape, the rapid changing of channels aggravates the effects of television, reduces everything to equal value and subsumes the whole under a generalized exchange. Game shows and commercials rely on the same tactics and promote the same responses; an exchange takes place between viewer/contestant and product. As is pointed out in Richard Serra's videotape, *Television Delivers the People*, "You are the product of television. You are delivered to the advertiser who is the customer."

Collyer and Wiitasalo built a set of two adjoining apartments whose inhabitants live in a world of television constructed from the game shows and commercials of constantly changing channels. In the shows, individuals immediately react to words promoting ideological images of economic and social relations; in the commercials, a referendum response of yes or no is all that is permitted to an image associated with a word: one commercial consisted of a rotating detergent

box with "yes" or "no" printed on either side.

Within the tape, the time of competing, the bells and buzzers, the words and images, the commands "Do not adjust your set," and the hails "Hey you" accelerate the effects set in motion by rapid channel changing, and are all moments that exemplify Althusser's statement "ideology interpellates the individual as subject." The artists demand that this fetishized production and the instances of time consumed be visible and recognized.

The time television takes or wastes is a concern Tom Sherman shares with the other artists; all have ways of making the viewer aware of time. Sherman's constant references to the time of making and the time of viewing are more than realistic details of day and season; they lead us to question our belief that the artist is speaking directly and sincerely to us. After all, the autobiographical sincerity of his statements is directed only to a camera or cameraman; the time of making and the time of viewing are only assumed to be the same. Besides, discrepancies develop in the course of his monologue.

Sherman's assertion that he'll be dead by the time the program is aired reinforces both recognition of this gap and our belief in his sincerity; he doesn't like television; he doesn't want to make this tape. These statements also function to express the difficulty of making a tape when the artist knows the ideological and even physiological conditions of television and wants to make the viewer recognize them. Sherman assumes the form the viewer is most ready to believe — autobiographical confession.

John Watt's *Two-Way Mirror* likewise attempts to undermine our, at times automatic, belief in the reality of television. A man sitting on a sofa faces the viewer, as if the viewer were a conversant or a television set, and relates the history of a soap opera he has been watching for years. Above his head, the "two-way" mirror flashes edited stills showing the characters named as if they were family slides. Beside the alternating images and reflections, the objects on the wall begin to change. What at first appear to be bad edits show the program to be a construction; throw the truth of the narrator's statements into question — for instance, it is not his living room, but a set; and demand that we "pay attention" as our minds slip away from this impossibly boring monologue of a supposedly seamless soap opera. This type of program is seamless because it never ends; it has been given reality by its insertion into people's daily lives; and it reflects the viewers' desires. As the opening and closing shots conflate the mirror and our television sets, television becomes that two-way mirror; it

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popular audience. And from all reports, the film has achieved this goal.

But what is happening in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*? What are the audiences seeing? It is beautiful, everyone says, and very funny. It is indeed an uncertain world that can offer this response to such a film.

On one level, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* is the finest con job in the history of the cinema. People flock to see it because they don't know what it is. Embarrassed by the verbosity of its sexual explicitness (for everything that is troubling happens off frame), they assume it is funny. In an important way it is.

It is funny that audiences who rejected the direct, personal enquiries of both *Pierrot le fou* and *Deux ou Trois Choses* should be accepting this film. It is funny that critics who talked about Godard's rejection of narrative should accept this film which has, on analysis, no narrative at all. But Godard is very cunning. He knows what he is doing. Since the film looks as if it has a narrative, people assume that a narrative must be there.

It is extraordinarily beautiful, and in its visual clarity it is very Swiss. In this way, for untutored audiences, it must be a feast for the eyes. But this delight is deceptive, and in masking a world devoid of human beauty, is the compensation for actions that lack coherent sense.

Paul Godard (Godard, the person who shattered conventional cinema), separated from his wife, is being rejected by his mistress, Denise Rimbaud (Rimbaud's the person who shattered conventional poetry). Denise is also attempting to reject both her television career and the city by moving to the country where she can cycle about the numbingly beautiful Swiss countryside. She meets up with an old friend, Michel Piaget (Piaget, the person who shattered the conventional hierarchies of learning), who suggests she might earn some money writing articles for him. While these surnames are scarcely present in the sub-titled print of this film, they are crucial to our understanding of its subversive sub-text. They are part of a world in which all established values have crumbled away.

Like *Numéro Deux* before it, *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* is about impotence. None of the characters can love and no one is free to lead a meaningful life. And as in *Numéro Deux*, nature is contrasted with industry. The stop-action cycling in the mountains that arrests Denise in her motion is contrasted with the stop-action movement of cars in a city street. Trucks abound everywhere (and train-cars carrying canons), while we return continually to shots of a serene countryside, emptied of human presence.

Sexual contact is no more than frictional lickings, whether delivered by a cow or by the servile employee of a fat-faced capitalist who calls all the shots. "Only

banks are independent," the prostitute star of this film (Isabelle Huppert) is forced to exclaim. Everything that one does is in the service of commerce. Everything else is either a self-deception or a lie.

Both the women in the film have access to imagination. Denise is compiling notes, which may become a novel, in which she can assert that she is not a machine; and while Isabelle is offering her body to the most impersonal encounters, she retreats into a reverie which declares what, in another kind of world, she might be able to feel. Like Marguerite Duras, apparently both his mentor and his friend, Paul Godard makes films for only one reason: he lacks the courage to do nothing at all.

"What's that music?" several characters ask at various points in the film. The question is received as a joke. It is the background music to which these characters refer. Even a humdrum audience can pick up on that gag. But in *Numéro Deux*, music was described as that which allows one "to see the incredible." In *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*, in a world so subjected to the



Jean-Luc Godard

enslavement of commerce, the incredible no longer exists.

The film's four, titled sections — The Imaginary, Fear, Commerce, and Music (the first three of which are loosely linked to the three main characters) — are preceded by the major title of the film which is split in two. "Sauve qui peut," is followed by some scenes of Paul in his grand hotel before we see "la vie" on the screen, over which is superimposed a zero. In this film, life adds up to nothing. For all its stop-action analysis of the details of movement, for all its arrested beauty, life equals zero.

Sauve qui peut (la vie) is Godard's most desperate film. More nihilistic than *Weekend* and more hopeless than *Numéro Deux*, it must both please and perplex Godard that it has achieved a cultish success. Godard has returned to the theatres. For this, we can all be pleased. But he has returned with a statement so devastatingly negative that audiences must assume it is a joke. But the joke is on us.

Less an analysis of this film than an agenda for discussion, this short piece can only suggest that there is something happening in this film that is both wondrous and sad. We will have to wait until Godard's "third" first feature to be sure if this extraordinary man of contemporary cinema can once again attack us with venom and despair yet still manage to give us the illusion of beauty.

Godard still lives. It is the cinema that is dead. How can that relationship manage to continue? □

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lets us see through and reflects our image — attentive or inattentive; but it is not yet two-way television.

In *Diet*, Ian Murray displaces television watching onto the content of another medium — a subliminal control diet record. The content of the record is supported by a whole audio technology analogous to television, and the listener/viewer is supported both by the message of the record and by the demands of the technology.

Throughout the play of the program a message is run across the bottom of the screen; but it isn't completed until near the end of the program; in full, it reads: "Warning: certain messages and behaviour modifying cues are not visible or audible to the viewer." While we take this as a comment on television in general, by the end of the tape we are shown that a woman has been directed through her headphones by someone off set. The warning obscures, but also states the conditions of its obfuscation. Even when the conditions are dismantled and displayed, technology complicates comprehension. In the "narrative," technology asserts its mastery, constricting behaviour to a few manual operations, and camouflaging response to other messages outside it: through the headphones, the woman/character cannot hear the door or phone. The amplification of technology through visual close-ups and audio effects makes us question where the message/effect is — in mood music or technology.

Neither dogmatic nor didactic, with neither technological fascination nor media terrorism, the artists "present their forms and concerns." They effect the conditions of television, its regulations and controls, and display their own works' making. □

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