

## **Muse Tube: Television and the American Avant Garde**

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I should point out first of all that this is *not* a paper about video art. It is, instead, a paper about the influence of television on late 20<sup>th</sup>-century American art.

In fact, the so-called video art--- itself a complex and richly textured phenomenon—is only one of many art world movements directly influenced by television. This influence has been as broad and far-reaching as it has been diffuse--- a very difficult thread for art historians to trace and understand. So here, at least, my treatment of this vast and incompletely studied subject will necessarily be very limited and condensed.

Let me begin with a quotation from the Pop artist James Rosenquist:

“I’m amazed and excited and fascinated,” Rosenquist told an interviewer in the early 1960s, “about the way things are thrust at us, the way this invisible screen that’s a couple of feet in front of our mind and our senses is attacked by radio and television and visual communications, through things larger than life, the impact of things thrown at us, at such a speed and with such a force that painting and the attitudes toward painting and communication through doing a painting now seem very old-fashioned...”<sup>1</sup>

Let me parse this out. Rosenquist’s statement points to four things that are important keys to understanding the influence of television on artists.

First, Rosenquist does not clearly separate television from other contemporary cultural and technological phenomena--- including radio and “visual communications,” which in turn encompasses, for Rosenquist, news photography, magazine advertising, and commercial billboards.

Secondly, Rosenquist is “fascinated and excited” by these new media--- by their speed, their gigantic scale, and their aggressive force and broad impact. At the same time, he feels threatened and challenged by these developments, which seem to make his own chosen medium--- painting--- obscure, obsolete, and irrelevant.

Finally--- and perhaps most significantly--- Rosenquist has adopted a metaphor--- “this invisible screen that’s a couple of feet in front of our mind and our senses”--- that suggests that television has become the basis for *all* human perception, that we carry around within us, at all times, a kind of virtual television screen across which all the events of our lives play out.

Rosenquist's comments suggest some of the complexity of television as artists have perceived it. As an artistic influence, television is both a medium--- or set of media--- and a great big box of technical and communication tools--- everything from broadcast technologies to VCRs.

In a broader sense, though, television is a vast array of human phenomena--- cultural, social, psychological, economic, and geopolitical--- that have had major impacts on society as a

whole. It is in this larger arena--- as a symbol and a social system--- that television has had its widest impact on American art.

In actual works of art, the television influence is rarely pure or easily separated from the whole. Rosenquist's paintings, for example, combine images that he borrowed from commercial television with ads from glossy magazines, and product packaging. For television's broad impact, Rosenquist substitutes the massive scale of his paintings--- which reach more than sixty feet in length--- a monumentality also inspired by Rosenquist's moonlighting work as a billboard painter.

The airbrushed, photographic, affectless style of these works derives, in part, from billboards but also from the aesthetic qualities of television, what I will call its "electronic texture." The collage-like combination of images and symbols reflect what I will call television's "divided narrative." And the whole of these works suggests the social and political atmosphere of the television age, what critic Robert Hughes has identified as Rosenquist's subject: "the vicissitudes of a certain kind of American dream."<sup>2</sup>

In the rest of this paper, I will look at three themes that suggest, but by no means exhaust, the many ways television has influenced the American avant-garde art.

My first theme is *electronic texture*.

Commercial television has always presented itself as largely transparent--- as a kind of glass porthole opening onto reality. You are supposed to ignore those things that suggested that

television is a medium or a technology. The transient electrical interference that creates static and ghosting, the grainy black-and-white texture and crude color of early broadcast television, and the smooth, Southern Californian surface of the commercials, settings, and actors are the man behind the curtain, not the main event.

Artists were quick to pick up, however, on the fact that television really *was* a medium, not a neutral window, with its own aesthetic qualities, quite apart from the content that broadcast television tried to convey. Artists began to exploit and emphasize these qualities deliberately, much as painters have exploited the surface textures and glazes created by brush and oil paint.

A pioneer of this approach, as in many other areas of video- and television-related art, was the Korean-born artist Nam June Paik. In the early 1960s, Paik used magnets and signal amplifiers to distort television images and create purely abstract designs on television screens. As sophisticated video equipment became less costly, his efforts became more sophisticated and controlled--- and more influential. Eventually his methods spread out of the art gallery and studio into broadcast and especially cable television, where Paik-like manipulations became standard fair on, for example, M-TV.

Paik deserves further mention here for another reason--- the enormous influence he has had on and broad connections he has made within the Post-War art world. Paik was trained as a composer and musician in Korea, Japan, and Germany and thus is a living link to the avant-garde music and performance traditions of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. In Europe, Paik was associated with artists like the important German artist Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus

movement, which made direct, if vague, connections with Dada and Surrealist performance and collage techniques and with pre-War “anti-art” attitudes. Fluxus also created some of the first improvised “Happenings,” later a major part of the 1960s American art world. When he moved to the United States around 1964, Paik brought those connections to the Old World avant-garde with him.

In America, Paik has known and worked with a huge variety of performers and artists, including the painter Robert Rauschenberg, composer John Cage (whom he first met in Germany in the late ‘50s), modern dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, cellist Charlotte Moorman, and conceptual artist Yoko Ono. Thus his influence--- and his use of television and video--- extends through a huge range of avant-garde movements and techniques, including music, performance, installation art and video art proper.<sup>3</sup>

The second theme I would like to touch on is *bureaucratic control*.

For the first fifteen years or so of television as a mass medium, it was very tightly controlled by three major networks which had created their power base as commercial radio broadcasters decades earlier.<sup>4</sup> These networks were, in turn, creatures of large corporations and powerful individuals who thoroughly dominated, through patents, products, contracts, agents, and favorable government regulations, the entire broadcast world. The result was--- and still is to a large extent--- an intense concentration of media power with an equally intense need for popular content. Already in 1952, one observer noted that “the appetite of television is like the great maw of the sperm whale.”<sup>5</sup>

The view presented on broadcast television pretended to be objective truth, or, as curator John G. Hanhardt has put it, “a mirror whose content is perceived as a representation of reality, a reflection of the real world. But the ‘real’ world was merely the world that mass-media corporations chose to present...[creating] a powerful medium whose very pervasiveness rendered it almost invisible.”<sup>6</sup>

The system television networks created, closely controlled by large corporate and government bureaucracies, essentially shut out any amateur, individual, or small-scale participation in television. Artists attracted to the medium, like Rosenquist and Paik, were at first only able to work on the margins.

Three developments in the late 1950s and 60s began to chip away at this system. First was the invention of reliable videotape recording systems, which, by 1965, had become inexpensive and portable enough to be used by thousands of would-be video producers besides network broadcasters. Second was the maturing of the public broadcasting system which, by the late ‘60s, provided at least a limited alternative to the corporate control of television. Third was the development of a strong counter-cultural movement willing to oppose any sort of government or corporate control of information and media.

Starting in the mid 60s, these factors created an environment that spawned much more direct involvement in video art and television. Inexpensive video equipment and resurgent left-wing politics made the late sixties and early seventies the era of the underground “street video” and the “video collective” as the media wing of the emerging counter-culture. “Video offered an opportunity to challenge the boob tube’s authority,” Deirdre Boyle has written,

“to replace television’s often negative images of youthful protest and rebellion with the counterculture’s own values and televisual reality.”<sup>7</sup>

The artists in these collectives were dedicated to recording events and news ignored or avoided by broadcast television and they typically used a direct, on-the-spot, confrontational style. For example, Top Value Television, using portable Sony equipment, infiltrated both the Republican and Democratic political conventions in 1972, interviewing politicians and television reporters alike. The result was their classic 1972 documentary, *Four More Years---* “alternative coverage” of the major political events of the year.<sup>8</sup>

The “free television” movement first connected to broadcast television via programs at public broadcasting stations--- like TV Lab at WNET-TV Channel 13 in New York City and the Experimental Workshop at WGBH-TV in Boston. Organizers and intermediaries, like the artist-curator-producer Russell Connor, opened professional television production facilities to artists--- pioneers like Nam June Paik but also a second generation--- including William Wegman and Bill Viola--- who went on to become “video artists.”

The public television experiments of the late ‘60s and ‘70s gave artists real, if sporadic, access to broadcast television. But more importantly they provided tools, training, and a professional network to a wide variety of creative people interested in television but antithetical to its corporate minders--- people whose work and example also inspired others not directly connected to the workshops themselves.

The results of this heady “alternate television” period were very diverse. On the one hand, it spawned a whole new approach to television journalism, the techniques and practitioners of which were partly absorbed into corporate television. On the other hand, it produced “pure video artists” like Viola, who used videotape directly as an expressive medium.

Between these two was a large group of performance and conceptual artists who incorporated video in creative efforts that might also include other elements like performance or three-dimensional objects. In some cases, the video itself was virtually invisible to the viewer. For example, modern choreographer Merce Cunningham has, for decades, used videotape as a notational tool and as an aid to composition. Thus video is pervasive in his work, though it only rarely appears on stage.

Perhaps the largest group to emerge from this period were artists who used video to make explorations of personal identity, often countering media stereotypes or exploring aspects of identity ignored by commercial television. Conceptual artist Adrian Piper, for example--- an African-American woman who is also a professor of philosophy at Wellesley College--- used a television screen in her 1988 work, *Cornered*, in which she, as a talking head, directly confronted her white viewers with their racial attitudes.

Highly polished technically, “identity” video, now a major force in contemporary art, often closely resembles conventional film or television. Yet it continues to be defined as “art” and is seen mainly in galleries, art exhibitions, and museums. In the absence of a truly alternative television, art institutions continue to give this work its visibility and validation.

The third and last theme I would like to touch on is *divided narrative*.

Television is a peculiar medium in that it is constantly telling several unrelated stories at once. Commercials interrupt dramatic programs and news broadcasts alike and follow each other in random order. At the same time, since television comes into living rooms, bedrooms, kitchens, waiting rooms, sports bars, shopping centers, and other inhabited spaces, it is always being juxtaposed with conversations, meals, domestic dramas, and other moments from everyday life.

Television is thus pervasive and ubiquitous but at the same time fragmented and thoroughly inconsistent. Its broken, chance overlays of meanings makes it resemble, in conceptual terms, the collages of the Dadaists and the working methods of the pre-television surrealists. In these forms, as in television, meaning is not so much created as it emerges from the random clash of events--- overlapping images that produce, by their accidental collaging, unexpected meanings.

The resulting “divided narrative” of television has no beginning, no climax, no true direction, and no comfortable “moral.” It is instead in that flux of meaning that has come to be called the “post modern.”

The approach of divided or random meaning has been incorporated in the work of many post-War artists, including the compositions and writings of John Cage, the choreography of Merce Cunningham, and in Happenings, performances, and installations by many artists, including Robert Rauschenberg, Bruce Nauman, and the Wooster Group. The influence of

television on these works, which often incorporate video, is pervasive but only rarely focused, reflecting the diffused ubiquity of television in the world at large.

In Laurie Anderson's epic, eight-hour, multi-media performance piece *United States, I-IV*, composed as a live theatre event and first staged in 1983, television is never specifically invoked but is continuously implied. The television of Anderson's own childhood, especially, seems to replay itself---- transformed--- across the work.

With her short hair, masculine dress, stiff gestures, mannered speech patterns, and electronically lowered voice, Anderson becomes a digital age Rod Serling to the rambling narratives of her own ironic *Twilight Zone* or a punk, androgynous Ed Sullivan for her own, post-modern variety show. The lyrics of her songs quote snatches of the opening theme of the 1960s spy series *Secret Agent*. Like Jack Benny of television's classic era, she uses her violin as a comic device. Images and themes borrowed from TV election night sets, commercials and long forgot serial dramas blend with folk legends and a detached, post-modern sensibility.

Most recently, performance artist Matthew Barney's spectacular *Cremaster* cycle, centerpiece of Barney's multi-media exhibition at New York's Guggenheim Museum in the spring of 2003, exceeds the excesses of television at its most overblown moments. The cycle itself consists of five full-length films that, as the Guggenheim rather clinically describes it, takes as "its conceptual departure point... the male cremaster muscle, which controls testicular contractions in response to external stimuli."<sup>9</sup>

*Cremaster 1* opens with a massive musical review performed on the blue AstroTurf of Bronco Stadium in Boise, Idaho, filmed in part, like a Super Bowl broadcast, with two floating Goodyear Blimps. The cycle continues with episodes borrowed from tabloid television news based on the life and execution of real-life murderer Gary Gilmore, a demolition derby staged in the lobby of the Chrysler Building, and ends with a mock opera--- filmed in grand PBS-style in the Hungarian State Opera House and starring '60s film icon Ursula Andress.

With his bizarre, obsessive, and self-indulgent extravaganza, Barney seems at last to have realized James Rosenquist's dream--- to outdo, with art, the vast social and cultural impact of television. At the same time, he suggests, like others from the American avant-garde, the essential qualities of the television medium--- its ability to be everywhere and yet nowhere, its simultaneous transparency and opacity, its illusory view of reality and its realistic portrayal of illusion and, finally, its ability to both distort and sharpen our vision of truth.

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<sup>1</sup> G. R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art? Part II," *Artnews* 62 (February 1963): 63.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Hughes, "James Rosenquist," in *Nothing if Not Critical: Selected Essays on Art and Artists* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 322.

<sup>3</sup> For surveys of Paik's career, see John G. Hanhardt, et al, *Nam June Paik: Whitney Museum of Art, April 30 – June 27, 1980* (New York: Norton, 1982) and John G. Hanhardt, *The Worlds of Nam June Paik* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> For the early history of television and its relationship to radio and government and corporate control, see Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Milton MacKaye, quoted in Connie Bruck, "The Monopolist," *The New Yorker* (April 21 and 28, 2003): 140.

<sup>6</sup> John G. Hanhardt, "Paik's Video Sculpture" in John G. Hanhardt, et al, *Nam June Paik: Whitney Museum of Art, April 30 – June 27, 1980*, p. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Deirdre Boyle, "A Brief History of American Documentary Video" in Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, eds., *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art* (New York: Aperture, 1990), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup> See Michael Rush, *New Media in Late 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1999), p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Spector, "The Cremaster Cycle" *Guggenheim Guide* (January-May 2003): 5.