

# Representations of the Worlds of Contemporary Art on French Television from 1960 to 2013: From Media Representation to Mediation

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This research in the field of Information-Communication Sciences has been conducted under the supervision of Professor François Jost at Paris III Sorbonne-Nouvelle and was presented on 29 November 2017. Its aim is to determine how French television has been representing the worlds of contemporary art from the 1960s to the present day, and to define the implications of this representation in regard to culture and the evolution of media in general. Here we define contemporary art through a historical and sociological approach in the field of visual arts, with the works of Catherine Millet, Philippe Dagen, Howard Becker and Raymonde Moulin.<sup>2</sup> The research is based on a semiological and pragmatic analysis of a corpus of archives of television programs about contemporary art. I used the methodology of François Jost,<sup>3</sup> taking into account their context of production and reception for each time period.

I observed a continuous decrease in the percentage of television programs about the arts in general, and contemporary art specifically. These programs are also relegated to less favourable hours of programming since the 1980s, being aired mainly late at night. Even though the volume of television programs in general has never ceased to increase since 1960, programs about contemporary art have been less and less visible.

Furthermore, the way that television tries to transmit the artistic experience has also evolved. Whereas the programs from 1960 to 1980 aimed to transmit the aesthetic experience of the artworks as seen from the field, with numerous close-ups and slow camera movements, the programs between 1980 and 2000 were more dialogical and hosted discussions between experts and artists in the television studio. Showing very few negative critiques, they fell under the discourse of cultural promotion and did not encourage the discussion of the

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Millet, *L'art contemporain en France* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015); Philippe Dagen, *L'art dans le monde de 1960 à nos jours* (Paris: Editions Hazan, 2012); Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Raymonde Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et le marché* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> François Jost, *Introduction à l'analyse de la télévision* (3e édition) (Paris: Ellipses Marketing, 2007).

contents of the artworks themselves. Rather, they often focused on emphasizing the role of public arts institutions. Since the 2000s, as the competition between the French public and private television sectors grew stronger with the launch of the Télévision Numérique Terrestre in 2005 and the rise of digital platforms, television shows about contemporary art have been taking on the entertaining forms of reality shows. This reality television of contemporary art, for example *Tous pour l'art!* (Arte, 2012), now proposes new frames of productions for artworks, created under the eyes of the camera, with specific constraints set up by the production team. Ideological contradictions arise between the cultural mediation mission, carried on by the Office de Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française and later public channels, and those new narratives of competition that tend to celebrate individual success. Contemporary art then finds itself at the heart of conflicts regarding the definition of culture.

First, the evolution of contemporary art on television since the 1960s in France shows important sociocultural issues. Its media coverage reveals a hegemonic world of art where sociocultural inequalities are legitimated and even sometimes celebrated. Only the most successful artists can benefit from high visibility, making precarious artists, women artists and non-white artists nearly invisible on television. The cultural legitimacy of this televised world of art is hierarchical: institutions and museums benefit from the largest amount of legitimacy, whereas the audience seems to be considered illegitimate in knowing and understanding contemporary art.

Another significant point is that the evolution of the notion of contemporary art in the programs follows the visions of the successive Ministries of Culture since 1959, in accordance with the missions of cultural decentralization in the 1960s, cultural development in the 1970s and later of cultural democracy since the 1980s that were carried on by each government over the years. Thus, a hegemonic institutional vision of contemporary art seems to perpetuate, with public channels and public policies aiming at the same cultural goals. Surprisingly however, few direct collaborations were found between the Ministries of Culture and the ORTF or later the public audiovisual sector to produce shows about art.

Second, the analysis has shown that television programs about contemporary art create different narratives about art as a way to connect with and appeal to an audience. Two main types of narratives can be recognized: first the programs promise an ideal of democratization of contemporary art through narratives of accessing knowledge, presenting itself as a source of emancipation and equality for the collective good. This comes into contradiction with the second type of narrative, which is competition-oriented and highlights the values of singularity, innovation and originality in the most recent programs influenced by reality television. It appears that the narratives of contemporary art on television follow both collective or individual purposes, and those two often impede each other.

Lastly, the audiovisual mediation of the artworks has evolved, over more than fifty years, from the filmed exhibition to a 'curatorial' television, where the programs organize exhibitions for television only, for example in *L'Exposition*

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*impossible* (France 2, 2004 to 2006). Public channels continue to claim their role of bringing the experience of the artworks to the audience together with knowledge about those works, but the artworks themselves are now rarely shown on camera, as programs are shorter and the editing increasingly faster than in previous decades. On the television set, the artworks seem to be used only to signify their own authenticity and originality rather than to be observed or discussed. Moreover, today, shows about contemporary art promise more immediacy — the promise of giving direct access to the artworks without any mediation — while multiplying the *dispositifs* of mediation. This multiplication of the frames of mediation of the artworks and of discourses about them — from channels, institutions, experts, mediators, journalists, television hosts — lessens the role of the audience who is supposed to receive those works but who is not invited to participate in this discourse.

It is within this impossibility to decide what their purpose is — to create a relationship between artworks and audiences, or to incite the audience to consume cultural products and participate in cultural promotion — that television programs about contemporary art cannot seem to hold their promises. In this way, this research opens not only many new questions for the arts on television in general, but also for the cultural role of French television today and the challenges it has to face.