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Art vs. TV

A Brief History of Contemporary Artists'

Responses to Television

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Nowadays, it might seem that television has not merely been remediated but replaced by digital media, in particular smart devices. At the same time, after the Covid-19 pandemic, forms of telepresence as in video conferencing and streaming which have been inherited from TV technologies have come to dominate our daily lives and environments, raising concerns about issues such as surveillance and control (Galimi and Grespi 2024). An equally important issue is the creative use of these technologies, conducted in personal and collective ways. This question is precisely, and fundamentally, addressed in *Art vs. TV*. The book is a comprehensive history of the relationships between artists and television, especially from the 1950s to the present, when the medium has progressively occupied private and public spaces and become dominant on a mass scale. What a book like this brilliantly shows is the key role of television as "a creative medium", to quote one of the first exhibitions on television art organized at Howard Wise Gallery in New York in 1969.

Thus, *Art vs. TV* presents the multiple ways in which TV has been used mainly by (independent)

artists to decontextualize the apparatus and operate a bottom-up appropriation, calling for democratic uses and collective engagements since the early days of video art. At the heart of the book, we can find a complete phenomenology of the experiences of female, male and queer artists with television at different levels: from TV shows and broadcasting actions aimed to live appearances and documentaries, from artworks centred on TV to music videos made to be on rotation. The book's reasoning is articulated through an apparent paradox, addressed by Spampinato in the introduction: "words, every artistic commentary on television configures itself as an act of challenge to television itself" (4). This relies on the Foucauldian principle that, within dominant discourse, the seed of potentially subversive, alternative discourses can be found (Foucault 1978: 92-96). By offering this, television can become both a device and a discourse (and thus, a *dispositif*) on a mass scale, which has been constantly engaged in criticism by challenging the nature of the technology and the palimpsest. Spampinato constantly motivates and reinforces his reasoning by drawing on related theories

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that have been produced progressively over the decades by prominent intellectuals such as Guy Debord, Gilles Deleuze, Giorgio Agamben, Umberto Eco, and Jean Baudrillard.

The book is structured in six chapters. After an initial contextualization of the topic in historical and theoretical terms, the author analyses the physical and psychological relationships that artists have established with the device which is considered here as a mirror. The next chapter investigates one key form of TV, the news format. Specifically, the analysis concentrates on the ways it was appropriated and addressed by activists, most notably guerrilla television collectives, hence becoming a tool of counter-information and thus revealing its nature as anti-television ("VT is not TV"), as Sandra Lischi outlined (2005). The fourth chapter is devoted to the role of artists as "media stars", showcasing their presence in the palimpsest as a kind of "interference" in the apparatus. The last two chapters cover more recent TV formats (music videos, soap operas, reality TV), focusing on the concept of "dis-entertainment" and the advent of the Internet.

Art vs. TV highlights a set of key issues that have been widely neglected in academic literature. For instance, Spampinato underlines the pioneering role of Lucio Fontana in assessing TV as a "creative medium", far before most recognized figures such as John Cage and Nam June Paik, and recontextualizes it within an international framework ("Fontana's television event was not only the first television program ever realized by an artist but also functioned as a visual essay illustrating the materialization of a theory", 27). Furthermore, he emphasizes the role of non-American artists in experimenting with the medium. Another significant feature of the book is how it investigates the experiences of art collectives, especially those connected to guerrilla television and underground cultures on the U.S.'s East and West coasts, by reviewing also the theoretical writings originated within these practices. One example of the phenomena

analysed by the author includes how public-access TV channels enabled broadcasts of independent projects by Colab, Glenn O'Brien, and Andy Warhol, which flourished in the context of New York's Downtown Scene, which was centred on clubs as places of production (Lawrance 2016; McLeod 2018). Even when *Art vs. TV* deals with the music video, which has already been studied in the literature, it offers a clear and fresh perspective on the topic by focusing on the relations entailed by the concept of "pop", as well as on the aesthetical and cultural approaches to that specific form of video. Finally, the book offers thorough appendices that complete the picture – the most original among them being "Chronology of Exhibitions on Art and Television".

Art vs. TV captures the state of the art of the book's subject and fills what was a significant gap, inscribing this "brief history" in the realm of visual arts and culture as well as of media studies. It reconnects the history of television, art and media theory, therefore providing a valuable tool for research in media arts as much as for teaching on this topic. More than anything else, *Art vs. TV* makes visible television's key role as an instrument of the postmodern critique of modernist culture and any sorts of establishments, be they political or cultural.

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