

Is TV Art a challenging and contemporary form of artistic practice?

My desire for this work is for it to incorporate the modernity of TV Art and the practice of video art as thought-provoking forms of artistic practice. In this piece I will be mainly looking at the modern day examples of animation adverts for television channels and music videos that are shot in an artistic form. To gain a foot onto the established art ladder, however, I will also look at progressive artists such as Sam Taylor-Wood and Tacita Dean.

“...We are faced with a contradiction: on the one hand we are witnessing the demise and fragmentation of traditional notions of video art, while on the other there is an exciting proliferation and diversity in the use of video amongst both artists and institutions. [It has an] ability to challenge established parameters through a process of mutation and innovation which can be seen across the variety of its forms, from single channel work to installations.”ⁱ

At the outset, it may be useful to define the terms used throughout this essay. Philip Haywardⁱⁱ goes some way to explain what is meant by the term ‘TV Art’. To summarise what Hayward, has previously written we can see TV Art as a medium for an artist’s work on screen. This is either represented on a cinema screen, television screen or on specially constructed projection (in the case of video artist’s work in galleries). Video art is made from the ‘modernist convictions of early video artists [who] centred around intervention, materialism and form [and spans] to the post-modern pluralism epitomised by Scratch Video’ⁱⁱⁱ.

Many forms of TV art are seen by ones self on everyday television, though we do not realise this. To accentuate this point I can cite the work of Jean-Luc Godard, who was termed an auteur by *Cahiers du Cinema* in the 60’s and has made commercials for Nike during the recent years. During the 60’s many fine artists were exploring their margins, or applying a ‘cross-disciplinary approach’^{iv}, working in such areas as advertising, ballet, television, art cinema, fashion advertising and so on. In fact, still today this occurs, two of the nominees for the 1998 Turner Prize are involved in such activities. Sam Taylor-Wood has previously been involved as a fashion photographer for Prada Fashion House, Italy, and Tacita Dean, who is involved with art house cinema.

To realise the modernity of TV Art we can turn, again, to television. Commercials often have more impact than TV art, as the advertisers have had 30 years of practise in which to compress enough product information, and to manage a tight narrative, into a half minute slot, whereas the video artists have had a duration much shorter, so the conjecture of a TV Art scene is made. By this I mean that the form has not yet performed to quite its full potential. One example comes to mind, *Seven TV Pieces*, which were shown during the 1971 Edinburgh Festival, without explanation or prologue.

“To describe just one example: a household tap noisily streaming water is seen in profile – the water gradually ‘fills up’ the whole screen – as the water level engulfs the tap, the jet of water disappears as does the sound – and, once the TV set is full, the tap is removed and the water begins to

drain, very noisily, at an angle from the top, left-hand corner of the screen. Clearly, the impact of such a piece depended upon

a, its surprise value; and

b, what contrast was established which preceded and followed it.

With wit and a minimum of means, Hall challenged the normality and naturalism of a medium whose 'stream' of sounds and images are 'on tap' every day"^v

This illustration seems to appropriate the TV Art that is made to challenge the viewer. An interruption in normal service would cause astonishment, but at the same time also gain the viewers curiosity and challenge their previous perceptions of what television is capable of. This would be, in part, due to the sheer difference that the arts piece would have to the usual interruptions seen, such as the informative commercial breaks we are now so used to. But using art in this way may lead the audience to find the pieces 'either frivolous or incomprehensible'^{vi}. How art is appreciated is entirely up to the individual, so art as 'art breaks' on 'the box' would bring question to the viewer.

The most prevalent form of TV Art to date would have to be *Spitting Image*. The series makes use of caricature and puppetry and was broadcast to audiences of six to ten million viewers. The show was a facetious, burlesque, anti-establishment sweep on life during the Thatcher years. The in vogue version of this would have to be *Celebrity Deathmatch* which airs on MTV. A 'Claymation'^{vii} where celebrities fight a duel to the death in a comedy wrestling style. Each episode features three fantasy fights that poke fun at the worlds of film, television, music, and politics. All of the joking is done through the use of clay imitations of today's hottest celebrities up against each other in a live arena.

Created by Eric Fogel, the first *Celebrity Deathmatch* premiered in the fall of 1997 during an episode of *Cartoon Sushi*, MTV's animated variety series. The singular fight was a fantasy fight between Charles Manson and Marilyn Manson. Both were competing for the title of *Most Evil Man in America*. MTV went on to debut a Super Bowl half-time special, *Celebrity Deathmatch Deathbowl '98*. This time, the show featured three bouts: Howard Stern vs. Kathy Lee Gifford, Pamela Anderson Lee vs. RuPaul, and Hanson vs. The Spice Girls.

MTV has been prominent in representing TV Art to the masses. Its self - advertising animations are nothing short of amazing. During the early 90's they were the first of a kind and have since had an influence on many channels, such as BBC2, Channel 4, E4 and also MTV 2, whose current adverts employ graphics, animation and an 'art cinema looking' musical interlude/advert. The interlude achieves this through the use of grainy, worn film and a minimal use of colour, which appears to be shot just in tones of red.

The inclusion of art into mainstream broadcasting is not necessarily a bad idea, when done correctly. For instance MTV2 incorporates the directors name on the screen, for the video currently showing, thus demonstrating the youth desire^{viii} for knowledge of art, as music is an art form unto itself. Wyver is especially fond of the inclusion of TV Art into other forms of the moving image^{ix}. When Sam Taylor-Wood explains how her art would not work in the

cinema, or even on a single television screen, but how she wishes it would, as the audience is larger. Using Taylor-Wood as an example, we can see that the current strand of modern video artists are striving to achieve a balance of remaining art faithful whilst reaching the largest audience possible. This may explain Taylor-Wood's collaboration with Italian style house, Prada, for whom *Soliloquy* was produced.

To emphasize the point that music videos are indeed to be thought of as either TV art or Video art I can make an example of the Pet Shop Boys. The Pet Shop Boys are well known for a serious interest in the arts; on previous tours they'd teamed up with the late film director Derek Jarman and the young British artist Sam Taylor-Wood. Derek Jarman worked on the video *It's a Sin* and brought in many famous actors from his film *Caravaggio*, Jarman also altered the original script for the video so that 'every frame ended up looking like a painting'^x.

David Cheal summarises what Taylor-Wood achieved with the Pet Shop Boys;

“...A work of installation art. The problem was that for long stretches the visual side of the show detracted from what was surely meant to be the focus of attention: the Pet Shop Boys themselves and their music.

The action took place on a set consisting of a white cube with two doors, and two large video screens, one either side of the cube. Each screen showed a group of people lounging on and around a couch, drinking and disporting themselves languidly... Several cleverly executed interactions between the stage and the screens - the screens, while having the appearance of being "live", were actually showing pre-recorded footage.

All this was so compelling that I found it hard to drag my eyes away from the people on the screens, whose behavior became progressively more relaxed, so that at times the activities of Tennant, Lowe, backing singer Sylvia Mason-James and dancer Les Child became almost a sideshow.

The video footage for the show was shot by artist Sam Taylor-Wood, who makes a specialty of interactive video installations. In one of her works, two people are having an argument; they are in the same location but shown on separate screens to emphasize the distance between them. However, if there was a point being made in this show it was less easily discerned.”^{xi}

To isolate video/TV art from the mass media or the gallery would be pessimistic. It belongs in both, as it is an art form but is also a form of the moving image to be seen by the masses. When presented in a gallery, the exhibitions are often complex and multi-screened, with the projector often forming part of the work, as Tacita Dean makes it. To fully understand the point that Wyver is trying to make we would have to look at the issue of timetabling. Museum visits are often planned, but rarely timetabled. Example, you may check what exhibitions are currently showing and opening times. Upon the visit you may happen to walk through a video piece that is currently halfway through, thus the piece loses its impact as only half of the piece will have been viewed. Imagine seeing only half of a piece of fine art, for instance *Sunflowers*. Whereas when watching television the viewer often decides what to watch and when, so video art could be viewed as a whole and appreciated by the viewer, so long as the piece was made for single screen showings.

Word Count: 1,720

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ⁱⁱ Hayward. P 'Echoes and Reflections; The Representation of Representations' in **Picture This: Media Representation of Visual Art and Artists** John Libbey 1998 p.

ⁱⁱⁱ Opcit. P338

^{iv} O'Pray. M 'The Impossibility of Doing Away With Video Art' in J. Knight **Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art** University of Luton Press 1996 p.323

^v Walker. J **Arts TV: A History of Arts Television in Britain** John Libbey 1993 p.

^{vi} Ibid. p.

^{vii} An animation made from clay/plasticine. These are not drawn but sculpted

^{viii} MTV2 is the most watched channel by 16 to 34 year old males

^{ix} as argued in his essay 'The Necessity of Doing Away with Video Art' in J. Knight **Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art** University of Luton Press 1996 p.315

^x <http://www.petshopboys.net/html/reviews/rev6.html>

^{xi} Cheal. D **Daily Telegraph**, 12 June 1993