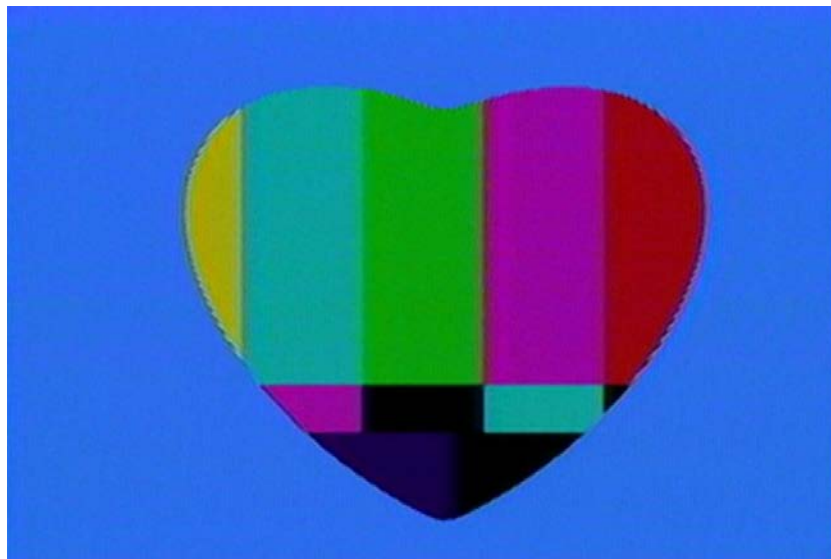


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The Avant-Garde Art That Was Made for TV

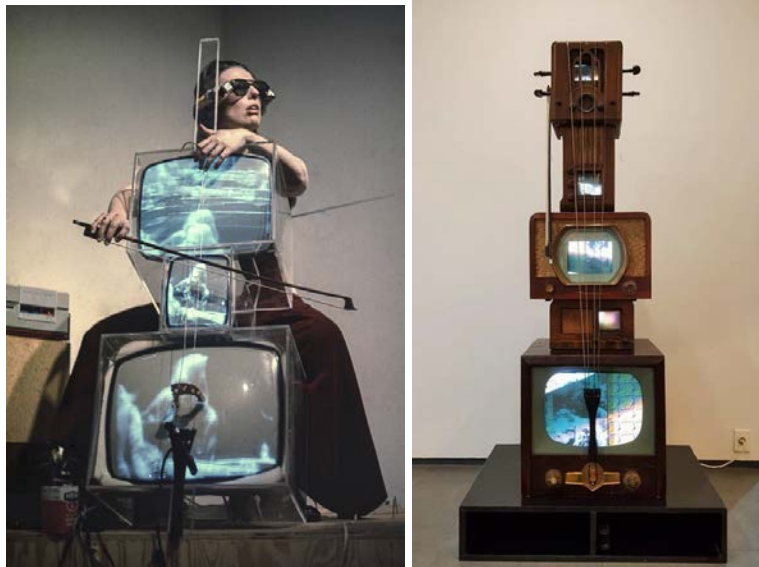
Julia Wolkoff



Nam June Paik, Rain Inside Heart (Snow), undated. Nam June Paik Art Center

In the 20th century, television became an important outlet for the boldest artists among us, who co-opted broadcast cable to experiment with new technologies, subvert the coded social messages promoted through media, and amplify their own public image—all efforts that are still top-of-mind in the 21st century.

Lucio Fontana was among the first to suggest art's performative capabilities—and TV's ability to magnify them. During television's original "Golden Age" in the early 1950s, the provocative Italian-Argentine artist appeared on Italian TV with an important message for the public. Reading from his "Manifesto of the Spatial Movement for Television," Fontana passionately advocated for TV as an artistic medium. Technologically driven artists in his short-lived Spatialist movement frequently transmitted their "new forms of art" on television, albeit to a largely unmoved audience. Still, they influenced generations of new media practitioners, many of whom found inspiration in TV—as subject, material, and medium—as it became increasingly central to our daily life and consumption of culture.



Takahiko Iimura, Charlotte Moorman performing on Nam June Paik's *TV Cello wearing...* Grey Art Gallery. Nam June Paik, *Antique TV Cello*, 1975. Galerie Bhak.

It may not be a coincidence that the rise of avant-garde Happenings—publicly staged artworks that sought to test conventional relationships between performers and their audiences—in the 1960s was simultaneous with TV's growing ubiquity in the American home. But unless you regularly hung out in Greenwich Village bars or unventilated SoHo artists' lofts, boundary-pushing performances by doyennes of the downtown New York art scene like Yoko Ono, John Cage, and Nam June Paik would have been experienced almost exclusively on late-night cable.

While the fabled Happenings had an air of trendy, insider sophistication, some artists went out of their way to also reach broader audiences. In 1973, Paik collaborated with Jud Yalkut to air a "televsual realization" of one of his performances on WNET/Thirteen TV. Manipulated and synthesized by Yalkut, 26'1.1499" *For A String Player* features Paik and "topless cellist" Charlotte Moorman playing Cage's score of the title on a collection of "instruments"—a pistol, a dish of mushrooms, and a phone used to call President Nixon.

While a broad audience might not have understood the conceptual implications of this experimental video work, other artists went with a more approachable model for their television debuts. The variety show proved a perfect format to capture the creative foment of downtown New York. As much as artists might feel pressured to "build their brand" today, the nonchalant, posturing creatives of the 1970s and '80s used live television to amplify their artistic personae, disrupting the airwaves with outlandish outfits and in-your-face, rock-star antics.



Jud Yalkut, 26'1.1499" *For A String Player*, 1973. Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI).

A slew of artist-run public-access programs—part-talk show, part-live performance, part-freestyle documentary—contrasted with what was available on the day’s “Big Three” cable networks (NBC, ABC, and CBS). The late editor Glenn O’Brien hosted one of the best-known of these efforts: *TV Party*, which ran from 1978 to 1982. With guest stars like Debbie Harry, David Byrne, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kraftwerk, Arthur Russell, and Robert Mapplethorpe, *TV Party* gave an unpredictably raucous insider’s view into the electrically integrated art, fashion, and music worlds. “It all looks glamorous now, but that’s because...television is still monitored and censored by higher powers,” O’Brien told *Vice* in 2014. “And even though we sort of invented reality TV, if anything, TV is less real than ever. So is reality. We still have our work cut out for us.”

As O’Brien suggested, television’s ability to mediate reality can be manipulative. In 1980, the Conceptual artist Jaime Davidovich—who put on *The Live! Show* (1979–84), a freewheeling cable program that similarly featured celebrity interviews in addition to sardonic comedic segments—used new technologies to exploit television as an artistic medium. He would push into territory now being revived by popular choose-your-own-adventure shows, like *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018).

Davidovich utilized the first interactive television system for his *QUBE Project* (1980), a pioneering live broadcast in which he and a co-host invited call-in audiences to “direct” the show, providing instructions to the cameramen and studio operators (home viewers could additionally vote via specially-designed remote controls). This interactive tactic became widely used by reality talent shows like *American Idol*, and my new favorite, the utterly demented *Masked Singer*.



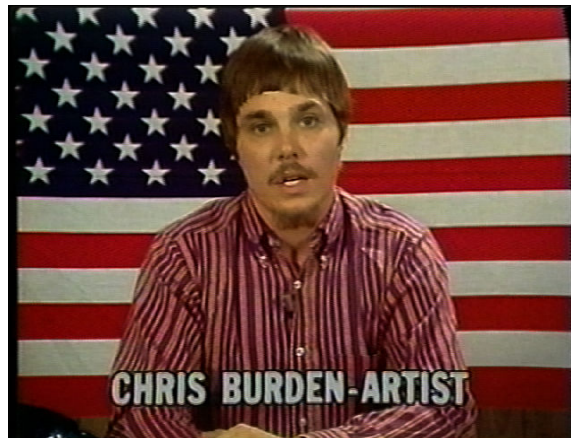
Jaime Davidovich, *The Live! Show* (January 21, 1983), 1983. *Electronic Arts Intermix* (EAI).

While Davidovich envisioned a participatory, democratic kind of television, the three dominant networks of the early ’70s prompted Chris Burden to conjure “a way to break” broadcast television’s “omnipotent stranglehold of the airwaves,” as he once wrote. The artist decided to buy airtime on various channels running in New York and Los Angeles, and from 1973 to 1977, he debuted a series of four “commercials.” In one of the tamer iterations, *Chris Burden Promo* (1976), the names of artistic greats flash on the screen as Burden reads them in voiceover: “Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso...Chris Burden.” In a way, his ironic gambit worked; the artist became a local celebrity, often recognized on the street. (It probably didn’t hurt that audiences had also watched in amused terror when

Burden performatively “hijacked” a taping of the L.A. local cable program *All About Art* in 1972, holding a knife to the host’s throat and demanding the show go out live.)

Such projects seek to disrupt our otherwise mindless consumption of media. In 1984, Bill Viola upended the traditional TV-viewer relationship with the broadcast of his *Reverse Television — Portraits of Viewers*. The series of one-minute segments, consisting of unannounced inserts in the regular programming, inverts the gaze of the television viewer: The videos feature 44 Boston locals relaxing in their living rooms, silently staring at the camera as if it were a TV.

Adopting the language—or space—of advertising helped artists subvert commercial messages or push across their own. Perhaps fed up with the proliferation of gender-stereotyped ads, various queer and feminist artists created their own commercials to social and political ends. In a live 1982 performance for Paper Tiger Television’s public-access cable program in New York, Martha Rosler flipped through issues of *Vogue*, viciously deconstructing the latent messages in its glossy pages, and drawing a hard line between the fashion world and its questionable ethics, such as the industry’s reliance on sweatshops. “It’s the new you,” Rosler intones, “the you you want to be, and can be. The one you wish you weren’t, you don’t have to be anymore.”



Chris Burden, *The TV Commercials, 1973-77, 1973-1977*. Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI).

Rosler’s video is layered but decidedly lo-fi, yet the political strength of a public broadcast relies almost entirely on simple, direct messaging (a fact that became cruelly apparent during the 2016 presidential election—#MAGA, anyone?). Tom Kalin’s *Kissing Doesn’t Kill*, produced for the activist art collective Gran Fury, caused a sensation when it aired during the height of the AIDS crisis in 1990. Referencing Benetton’s “United Colors” ad campaign, *Kissing Doesn’t Kill* features kisses between interracial and same-sex couples, as well as straight ones. To forcefully draw attention to a taboo issue then commonly swept under the rug, Kalin interspersed these playful scenes with phrases like “Corporate Greed, Government Inaction and Public Indifference Make AIDS a Political Crisis” (a slogan more potent than, say, Gillette’s recent repurposing of its long-held catchphrase, “The Best a Man Can Get,” under the guise of erasing toxic masculinity.)

Still, there is but one made-for-TV art project in recent memory that can truly claim to have infiltrated the very heart of American mass culture: primetime television. A stunningly highbrow prank by the artist Mel Chin played out on Aaron Spelling’s wildly popular soap opera *Melrose Place* (1992–99). Beginning in 1995, Chin and a team of 100 mostly unknown artists, named the GALA Committee, cold-called the show’s producers, who allowed them to begin the covert two-year project. Entitled *In the Name of the Place* (1995–97), the committee supplied the soap

opera-style drama with props layered with coded cultural messages on hot-button topics like reproductive rights, American foreign policy, alcoholism, and sexuality. In one memorable scene, when the character Alison Parker discovers she is pregnant, the GALA Committee made her a quilt adorned with the chemical symbol for the abortion pill. Their furtive project was only recently publicly acknowledged; I can't help but wonder if their props had any kind of subliminal effect during *Melrose Place's* initial run.

I hope artists with similarly subversive intentions have been hacking *The Tonight Show*, *The Simpsons*, or *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, though somehow, I doubt it. "Disruption" has become a buzzword among tech firms, but to "disrupt the airwaves" now seems old-fashioned in the crowded streaming world, where choices of channel and show are plentiful but paralyzing. While we might be watching more of it than ever, television today largely encourages experimentation in dramatic storytelling, with less emphasis on revolutionary messaging; as Burden contended before he died, the media remains under corporate control. Still, although there are many net-savvy artists taking video in new directions, there's a creeping sense that few can cut through the noise. It's more important than ever that new strategies be created if artists are to successfully permeate the deepest layers of our cultural consciousness.