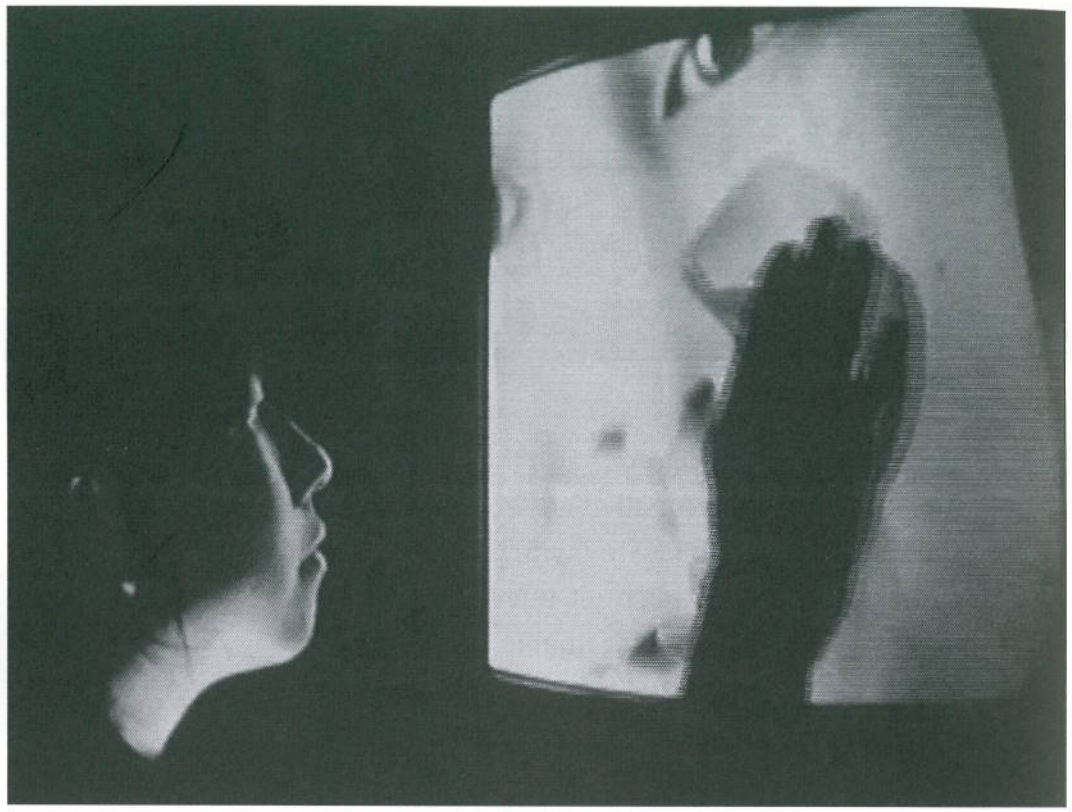

Lana Lin, *Stranger Baby* (1995), 14 min. Courtesy of the artist.

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Television, outmoded technologies, and the work of Lana Lin

Reviewed by Maeve Connolly

Lana Lin, Gasworks, London
20 September–18 November 2012

At the close of their essay 'Keeping Time: On Collecting Film and Video Art in the Museum', curators Chrissie Iles and Henriette Huldisch emphasize that film and video are 'in a critical way, immaterial forms, which exist only during the moment they unfold in time' ([2005] 2007: 82). Yet they also suggest that museums and galleries are spaces in which it is possible (and necessary) to preserve media technologies rendered obsolete on the general consumer market. In the future, they note, museums are 'likely to find themselves serving as custodians of otherwise outmoded types of media and technology' ([2005] 2007: 82). Iles and Huldisch do not explore the relationship between the immaterial and the technologically outmoded in any depth. But their discussion raises the possibility that film and video works, particularly when encountered several years after their production, unfold within a time that is somehow distinct from the sense of the present (and orientation towards the future) that characterizes the marketing of consumer technologies.

Yet even if contemporary art institutions adopt a custodial role with respect to outmoded media, they must be seen to engage with the technological present. One of the ways in which institutions might articulate their currency is by situating developments in artistic practice in relation to the broader context of technological change, as it shapes cultural forms such as cinema or television. In the late 1990s, for example, several thematic shows focused upon the past and future of cinema, sometimes alluding directly to its centenary in 1995. They included 'Spellbound: Art and Film' (Hayward Gallery, 1996), 'Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors' (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1996), 'Scream and Scream Again: Film in Art' (Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1996) and 'Cinéma Cinéma: Contemporary Art and the Cinematic Experience' (Van Abbemuseum, 1999). More recently, the relationship between art and television has attracted the attention of numerous curators, as evidenced by exhibitions such as 'Broadcast Yourself' (Hatton Gallery, Newcastle; Cornerhouse, Manchester, both 2008), 'Changing Channels: Art and Television 1963–1987' (Museum moderner Kunst [MUMOK], Vienna, 2010), 'Are You Ready for TV?' (Museum d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona [MACBA], 2010–2011) and 'Remote Control' (Institute of Contemporary Arts [ICA], London, 2012).

Many of these TV-themed shows were framed as responses to debates surrounding television's apparent displacement by newer media, and 'Remote Control' is particularly

interesting in this respect, because it was timed to coincide with the switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting in London, scheduled for April 2012. In addition to newly commissioned projects, including an installation of obsolete broadcast hardware by Simon Denny, the lower gallery (curated by Denny in collaboration with the ICA's Matt Williams) featured several canonical examples of artists' video presented, in chronological order, on a row of wall-mounted CRT monitors. In works such as Dara Birnbaum and Dan Graham's *Local TV News Analysis* (1980) and Joan Braderman's *Joan Does Dynasty* (1986) artists analyse and interpret practices of TV production and reception, and by implication differentiate themselves from ordinary television viewers.

Produced with the collaboration of the Toronto news show CITY PULSE on City-TV, Birnbaum and Graham's project was documented in a video with a running time of approximately one hour. It alternates between shots of the TV studio control room, with the production team seated at rows of monitors, and shots depicting a family of viewers in their living room, watching an edition of the show visible in a corner insert. Although the project sought to examine the form of television news, it also articulates a fascination with the domestic and familial context of TV viewing. As Manuela Ammer has demonstrated, the artists chose to work with a 'classical nuclear family' (2010: 177–78) even though this model was not necessarily representative of a typical Toronto household, with the result that it offers an unintentionally normative depiction of family life.

In *Joan Does Dynasty* (a punning reference to the 1978 soft-core porn film *Debbie Does Dallas*), Joan Braderman uses chroma-key technology to composite her own image into scenes from the 1980s primetime soap *Dynasty*. Commenting upon the characterizations, dialogue and settings, Braderman performs a feminist deconstruction of the show, focusing on patriarchy and capitalist consumption. Although she demonstrates a fan's in-depth knowledge of the show's characters and plotlines, she does not present herself as a typical TV viewer. Instead, reading from a prepared text, her speech and mode of delivery suggest a more specifically academic authority in relation to the television text. Braderman's stance seems, in some respects, to reiterate a familiar opposition between video art and television, noted by John Wyver (2009: 124) among others. Wyver argues that moving image art produced for (and with) television from the late 1960s to the late 1990s was routinely 'defined "against" television', because the 'social and critical understandings of television and its audiences with which artists and critics worked were overwhelmingly negative' (2009: 124). He suggests that works of art produced for television during the 1960s and 1970s were often premised on the assumption that artists possessed a more advanced understanding of the medium's formal characteristics and a more critical perspective on its social and political role than those working in TV (Wyver 2009: 126). Yet, when viewed in the context of the chronology of video works presented at Remote Control, *Joan Does Dynasty* may signal the beginning of change in the representation of television consumption within art discourse. This is because, unlike Birnbaum and Graham's *Local TV News Analysis*, Braderman's video clearly emphasizes the activity of reception.

Some commentators have argued that the recent televisual turn in contemporary art lacks criticality. Colin Perry, for example, suggests that a focus on issues of 'taste' has replaced examination of television's 'affective powers' and as evidence of this he cites a panel discussion at the 2011 Frieze Art Fair titled 'On Television', in which participants put forward various 'nominations for a canon of "New Television" (which largely centred on the products of the US station HBO, producers of *The Wire* et al).' (Perry 2011–2012: 14). A related critique has been advanced by Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, in an analysis of the legitimation of certain forms of television production, and their associated modes of reception. Newman and Levine argue that culturally elevated forms of television – such as HBO serialized drama – are celebrated as novel and innovative not only because of their formal qualities but also because they circulate on DVD or as downloads and are consequently easy to dissociate from traditional modes of television consumption (Newman and Levine 2012: 2–3). Consequently, it could be argued that exhibitions exploring the relationship between art and television actually serve to legitimate certain modes of reception, at the expense of others.

It is possible, however, for artists to explore television consumption and engage in practices of media analysis without necessarily reiterating familiar cultural hierarchies. Although much more modest in scale than many of the exhibitions already cited, Lana Lin's recent show at Gasworks developed a complex exploration of television as a cultural technology, attuned to questions of power and difference. The Gasworks show brought together three works realized in the 1990s and early 2000s: *Stranger Baby* (1995), *Mysterial Power* (1998–2002) and *Taiwan Video Club* (1999),[1] all of which explore aspects of Lin's relationship to her Taiwanese cultural heritage. In different ways, these works draw upon the imagining and experience of television and other cultural technologies, in a variety of historical contexts, to explore problems of translation between the 'so-called East and West' and 'between our world and other worlds'.[2] In the single screen video *Taiwan Video Club*, Lin examines everyday practices of pirating Taiwanese television, focusing on the social and cultural bonds produced through the making, watching, collecting and exchange of VHS videotapes between friends and family members living in the US and Taiwan. Lin's mother began this practice around 1994, but many of her friends had been making recordings since the 1980s.[3] Generally recorded off-air from Taiwanese TV, but sometimes sourced from video rental stores, the tapes contain material ranging from daily serials to more lavish productions including costume dramas, modern day melodramas and detective shows. Typically, when recording off-air broadcasts, the women would prioritize quantity over quality, often using long-play recording settings to extend running time and save money on tapes and postage.

In *Taiwan Video Club* Lin interviews her own mother about her collecting habits and specific interest in 'epic' dramas based upon Chinese literature and Taiwanese folk opera, intercutting between shots of her mother seated beside a large TV monitor and close-ups of videotapes arranged in stacks, covered with sticky labels that have been repeatedly altered, and handwritten descriptions of programmes. Crucially, rather than adopting the position of neutral observer, Lin uses editing and analogue duplication to accentuate the material properties of the video recordings, which are often visibly degraded, and to emphasize her own mediating role as interviewer and translator by overlaying details of TV epics with scrolling text accompanying her mother's voice. At Gasworks, *Taiwan Video Club* was displayed (from a digital source) on a wall-mounted digital flat screen television, with a black band on each side of the image, instead of the cube monitors generally used for showing video artworks with a 4:3 aspect ratio (once standard in television production). In this instance, the 'custodial' role identified by Iles and Huldisch with regard to outmoded technologies, did not seem to be apparent. Instead, the installation drew attention to innovations in broadcasting and consumer technology that have occurred since the production of Lin's video in 1999.

1. The exhibition also included two screening and discussion events. The first focused on *Unidentified Vietnam No. 18* (2007), a 16mm film by Lin and H. Lan Thao Lam, working collaboratively as Lin+Lam. The second featured a screening of *Almost the Cocktail Hour* (16mm, 1997), Lin's experimental biography of writer Jane Bowles.

2. Press release, Lana Lin, Gasworks, 20 September–18 November 2012.

3. Lin notes that her family had also used video equipment to record and share photographs of her grandmother, following her death in 1985. Details provided in e-mail correspondence with the artist, March 2013.

Taiwan Video Club employs the formal properties of analogue video, amplified by the practices of this unofficial 'video club', to question values of authenticity pertinent to the history of Taiwanese television and nationhood. Reflecting upon the development of this work in an essay written shortly after its completion, Lin proposed a parallel between the unauthorized and 'degenerated' copy and Taiwan's contested nationhood:

> The crisis of authenticity between the Republic of China, known to its people as Taiwan, and mainland China, the People's Republic of China, remains of paramount interest to its citizens. Which is the real China? Who has the claim to originality? If the Republic of China is merely a province of China, a kind of degenerated copy, then the Taiwanese identity is threatened with non-existence. (Lin 2000: 32)

This exploration of authenticity and authorship clearly differentiates Lin's approach from the analysis of media consumption found in *Joan Does Dynasty*. Instead of presenting herself (or her mother) as a model viewer, Lin uses her own role as interpreter and translator to question notions of authorship and originality, which are often integral to hierarchies of cultural production and consumption.

Taiwan Video Club can also be compared to more recent projects exploring interconnections between familial and national histories, involving material drawn from broadcast archives, by artists such as Aleksandra Domanović and Laura Horelli (Connolly 2013). Consisting of re-edited footage of a Finnish children's television programme about healthy eating and traditional food, presented by her mother in the 1980s, Horelli's *Haukka-Pala (A bit-to-bite)* (2009) develops a dialogue between public and private narratives, and between the televisual 'present' and past. This is achieved through the pausing and time-stretching of video tape at key moments, and through the interplay between the content of Horelli's voice-over commentary, excerpts from her mother's diaries (presented on-screen) and the television programme. At various moments, referring to her memories of childhood, Horelli alludes to ways in which the behaviour of her family cohered with, or differed from the norms (of eating and social gathering) emphasized in the show.

Domanović's ongoing project *19.30* (2010–), encompassing performances, video installations and online media, is more specifically concerned with practices of social exchange. Focusing on the remediation of television news idents from the former Yugoslavia in social media and dance culture, Domanović (like Lin) operates as both observer and cultural insider in relation to a specific culture of media consumption. In some respects, the strategies of sampling and mixing found in *19.30* recall both Dara Birnbaum's approach to television, in works such as *Pop Pop Video II: Kojak-Wang* (1980) and the Scratch videos of British artists such as George Barber. But unlike the earlier generation of artists working with sampling, Domanović draws attention to institutional practices (and problems) of media preservation, and the video component of *19.30* forms

Lana Lin, *Taiwan Video Club* (1999), 14 min. Courtesy of the artist.

part of a much larger project of archival research and assembly, which required her to make contact with many of the broadcasters whose material had been 'pirated'.

Even though, like both Horelli and Domanović, Lin often frames her exploration of media through reference to her own experiences and those of family members, she also engages more generally with the social history of television in the United States. In particular, her work communicates a fascination with the imagining of television in an earlier moment, and its integration into norms of domestic, familial and national life during the 1940s and 1950s. These concerns are especially apparent in Lin's *Stranger* Baby (1995), a 16mm 'mock science fiction film' that explores notions of the 'normal' and 'alien', emphasizing television's role as a conduit between fantastical and everyday realms. Filmed in black and white, it incorporates fleeting images of flying saucers suggesting 1950s sci-fi culture, an androgynous figure clad in shimmering silver, and more mundane scenes of everyday domestic rural life. The soundtrack features electronic pulses and signals, interspersed with female voices, reflecting upon personal experiences (concerning perceptions of difference and alienation) that relate loosely to the imagery. At several moments, a young woman touches the surface of a large TV monitor, displaying an extreme close up of a female face, interspersed with shots of other women. Her gesture is ambiguous, communicating both curiosity – provoked by the strange or alien – and the sense of familiarity, even recognition, implied by touch. Later, a woman is heard recounting the experience of seeing her baby brother and recognizing that he too was a 'bi-racial' being, reiterating this conjunction of the familiar (or even 'familial') and the strange, since the speaker describes viewing her brother as a kind of 'alien' being.

Television is just one of many technologies explored in this work; there are also references to computers, radar and even an answering machine. Nonetheless, *Stranger Baby* resonates with accounts of television as a domestic technology, which have proved important in the development of exhibitions such as 'Are You Ready for TV?' at MACBA. In his contribution to the catalogue accompanying this show, a version of which is presented online with video excerpts (on http://www.johangrimonprez.com/), artist Johan Grimonprez recalls early advertising for the new technology. Drawing upon Lynn Spigel's research into television and domestic space (1992), he notes that the 'new family member' was not always welcome. Grimonprez emphasizes that with its 'signals beamed in from the skies', television was regarded as 'a somewhat alien presence in the home [...] and often hidden away or disguised' (2010: 39). This sense of the TV receiver as a portal to another world is preserved in *Stranger Baby*, through the conjunction of fantastical and mundane imagery, enabling an expansive exploration of other forms of 'alien presence', in which perceptions of cultural difference are bound up with both fear and desire.

Television does not figure as prominently in Lin's *Mysterial Power*, a four-channel video installation exploring the daily routines and religious practices of her extended Taiwanese family. Instead of focusing specifically on technologically mediated forms of exchange, through which social bonds are formed and reconfigured, this work is organized primarily around several incidents involving Lin's adolescent cousin, who is believed by Lin's extended family to be able to communicate with a Taiwanese god. Presented on four small monitors, with headphones attached, the installation is characterized by a sense of modesty and intimacy. Featuring numerous shots of everyday religious observance, such as offerings and prayers to gods, *Mysterial Power* presents contact with the spirit world as a familiar, and unspectacular, aspect of Taiwanese cultural life. It offers

a marked contrast to the dramatic exploration of alien contact, and consciousness, developed in *Stranger Baby*.

When considered together, all three of Lin's works share a concern with the role of the artist as interpreter of cultural practices, and the different problems posed by notions of authenticity and objectivity. Rejecting the detached position of media analyst, Lin instead deploys metaphors of translation and exchange to communicate a rich understanding of practices of cultural production and consumption, informed by her experience of proximity and distance with respect both to the technologies and the cultural practices that figure in her work. Lin does not frame television as an irredeemably 'outmoded' medium, but rather exploits the multifaceted temporality that arises from its exhibition as a 'cultural technology'. This term is used by Raymond Williams in the introduction to *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, where it underscores the particularity of his interest in television and 'its development, its institutions, its forms and its effects' ([1974] 2003: 3).

More recently, however, the study of cultural technologies has become associated with other theorists, most notably Friedrich Kittler, whose work addresses 'the whole array of materialities of communication (ranging from media technologies and institutional frameworks to bodily regimes)' and encompasses 'in-depth discussions of sign systems such as alphabets' (Winthrop-Young and Gane 2006: 8). In a sense, the breadth of Kittler's approach seems wholly appropriate to Lin's practice, given her focus on language and practices of translation. But in proposing that she exhibits television *as a* cultural technology, I want to emphasize that she understands the technology of television to be deeply enmeshed in complex cultural practices of use and forms of imagining, through which it is both tied to the past and bound up with notions of the future. Although her practice is not exclusively concerned with the history of television – or its potential displacement by newer media – works such as *Taiwan Video Club* and *Stranger Baby* nonetheless articulate a sense of television's complex status as a cultural object that is simultaneously familiar and fantastical.

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