Television, outmoded technologies, and the work of Lana Lin

Reviewed by Maeve Connolly

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At the close of their essay ‘Keeping Time: On Collecting Film and Video Art in the Museum’, curators Christea 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: 81). 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 technologi-cal 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 allowing directly to its centenary in 1999. They included ‘Spellbound: Art and Film’ (Hayward Gallery, 1996), ‘Art and Film Since 1945: Hall of Mirrors’ (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1996), ‘Screen and Screen Again: Film in Art’ (Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1996) and ‘Cinéma Crépuscule: 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 1965–2005’ (Museum Moderne Kunst [MUMOK], Vienna, 2010), ‘Are You Ready for TV?’ (Museu 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 summer from analogue to digital broadcasting in
London, scheduled for April 2003. In
addition to newly commissioned projects, including an installation of
obsolescent broadcast hardware by Simon
Denny, the lower gallery (curated by Denny in collaboration with the
ICAs 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
Dac Graham’s Local TV News Analysis
(1986) and Joan Brauderman’s Joan Does
Drama (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
TV studios and control rooms, 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 Dara Birnbaum has
demonstrated, the artists chose to work
with a ‘classical nuclear family’ (1990: 197-198) even though this model was
not necessarily representative of a
Toronto household, with the result that
it offers an unintentionally normative
depiction of family life.

In Joan Does Drama (a punning reference to the 1978 soft-core porn film
Daisy Duke’s Dazzle Dolls), Joan Brauderman uses chroma-key technology to
composite live action into scenes from the 1980s primetime soap Dynasty.
Commenting upon the characteris-
tizations, dialogue and settings, Brauderman performs a feminist deconstruction of
the show, focusing on patriarchy and
capitalist consumption. Although she
demonstrates a faithful-in-depth knowledge of the show’s characters and plotlines,
she does not appear present herself in 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
televisced text. Brauderman’s stance
seems, in some respects, to reiterate a
familiar opposition between video art
and television, noted by John Wyver in
his book Television and Television: A
History of Television from 1936 Until
Today. Wyver argues that
moving image art produced for
and with television from the late 1960s
and onwards was not defined as
“television”, because the social and
critical understandings of television
and its audiences were coopted by
artists and critics who therefore worked
are over time.

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, Lima Lin’s
recent show at Gasworks developed a
complex exploration of television as a
cultural technology, tradition in questions of
power and difference. The Gasworks
show brought together three works realized in the 1990s and early 2000s:
Stronger Baby (1995), Industrial Power
(1998-2000) and Taiwan Video Club
(1999), 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’. In the single video
Taiwan Video Club, Lin examines
everyday practices of printing ‘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
grew up in this practice around 1950, but
many of her friends had been making
recordings since the 1960s. Yet
gerendered off-air from Taiwanese TV,
but sometimes sourced from video
rental stores, the tapes contain material
ranging from daily serials to more
morish productions including costume dramas, modern day melodramas and
detective shows. Typically, when receiving off-air broadcasts, the women would
record 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 intersects
her own mother’s history of collecting
habits and specific interest in ‘50s
dramas based upon Chinese literature
and Taiwanese folk opera, intersecting
between shots of her mother’s
seated beside a large TV monitor and
close-ups of videotapes arranged in
stacks, covered with sticky labels that
ever been repeatedly altered, and handwritten descriptions of programmes.
Crucially, rather than adopting the
position of a neutral observer, Lin uses
ing the authentic analogue duplication to
accommodate the material properties of
the video recordings, which are often
visibly degraded, and to emphasize her
own mediating role as interviewer and
translator by overlapping TV metrics
with reading 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 ‘俑ustomed’ role identified by 
Lent’s to be apparent. Instead, the installations draw
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 discussed
Dundee University’s
JWT (1975), a seminal film by
Lent and B. R. Hartson, shown,
working collaboratively as
Lent & Hartson. The second,
consisting of Almost the
Christian World (1977),
Lent’s experimental biography of
writer Jem Bendix.

2. Free release, Luo Lin,
Gasworks, 20 November-18 December
2003.

3. Lin notes that her family
had also used video equipment to
record and share 
photographs of her grandmother,
following her death in 1969.
Details provided is a real
correspondence with the artist,
March 2003.
Taiwan Video Club employs the formal properties of analogical video, amplified by the practice of this unofficial video clerk, to question values of authenticity pertinent to the history of Taiwanese television and nationalhood. 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 nationalhood.

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 2002: 32)

This exploration of authenticity and national identity clearly differentiates Lin's approach from the analysis of mass media consumption found in Juan Donne 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 national identity 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 the intersection between familial and national histories, involving material drawn from broadcast archives, by artists such as Aleahmen Dimovski and Laura Hordi (Connolly 2010). Consisting of re-edited footage of a Finnish child's television programme about healthy eating and traditional food, presented by her mother in the 1980s, Hordi's Finnish: Fika (A Bit to Bite) (2008) develops a dialogue between public and private narratives, and between the television 'present' and past. This is achieved through the pacing and time-stretching of video tape at key moments, and through the interplay between the content of Hordi'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, Hordi alludes to ways in which the behaviour of her family adhered with, or differed from, the norms of eating and social gathering emphasized in the show.

Dimovski's ongoing project, (2010-), encompassing performances, video installations and online media, is more specifically concerned with practices of social exchange. Focusing on the remediation of television news images from the former Yugoslavia in social media and dance culture, Dimovski's (like Lin's) 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 it recall both Dara Birnbaum's approach to television, in works such as Pop Pop Video (1999) and the Scratch video of British artists such as George Barber. But unlike the earlier generation of artists working with sampling, Dimovski draws attention to institutional practices (and problems) of media preservation, and the video component of it's 30 forms 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 'printed'.

Even though, like both Hordi and Dimovski, 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 imaginary of television in an earlier moment, and its integration into notions of domestic, familial and national life during the 1940s and 1950s. These concerns are especially apparent in Lin's Stranger Baby (1999), a short 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 footage of flying saucers suggesting 1950s sci-fi culture, an unrecognizable figure clad in generation silver, and more mundane scenes of everyday domestic rural life. The soundtrack features electronic pulses and static, 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 '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.johnangpeters.com), artist Jan Van Cauwelaert recalls early advertising for the new technology. Drawing upon Lynn Spigel's research into television and domestic space (2010), he notes that the 'new family member' was not always welcome. Cauwelaert emphasizes that with its 'signals beamed 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 Material 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 mystery and intimacy. Featuring numerous shots of everyday religious observance, such as offerings and prayers to gods, Material Power presents contact with the spirit world as a familiar, and unsurprising, aspect of Taiwanese cultural life.
a marked contrast to the dramatic exploration of alienation, and consciousness, developed in Deleuze’s work.

When considered together, all three of Lui’s works share a concern with the role of the artist as interpreter of cultural practice, and the different problems posed by notions of authenticity and objectivity. Rejecting the detached position of media analysis, 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 irrevocably ‘mediated’ 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 (1972: 1983: 1).

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 alphabet’ (Winthrop-Young and Game 2009: 8). In this sense, the breadth of Kittler’s approach seems wholly appropriable to Lui’s practice, given our 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 reimagining, 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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