

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Title | TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television, by Maeve Connolly |
| Authors | Levin, Erica |
| Publication date | 2015 |
| Original Citation | Levin, E. (2015) TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television, by Maeve Connolly. Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 10. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.10.14 |
| Type of publication | Review |
| Link to publisher's version | http://www.alphavillejournal.com/Issue10/HTML/ReviewLevin.html - https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.10.14 |
| Rights | © 2015, The Author(s) - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/ |
| Download date | 2024-04-25 13:22:05 |
| Item downloaded from | https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5991 |



UCC

University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

***TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television.* Maeve Connolly. Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2014 (332 pages). ISBN: 9781783201815.**

A Review by Erica Levin, Ohio State University

In 1984, on the eve of Ronald Reagan's re-election, television coverage of the US presidential race was suddenly interrupted by a breaking news story: Soviet arms were reportedly on their way to Nicaragua. Moscow, it appeared, had orchestrated this carefully timed manoeuvre to upset the delicate balance of power in the region. Network broadcasters and other media outlets reported on this crisis for days, despite the fact that no evidence of the shipment had surfaced beyond a few grainy satellite pictures. The story was based entirely on leaked intelligence reports, which ultimately turned out to be false. Even after they were discredited, however, the media frenzy around these reports helped to bolster support for continued US intervention in Central America during Reagan's second term in office.

In Martha Rosler's video, *If It's Too Bad to Be True It Could Be DISINFORMATION* (1985), intermittent bouts of static render television coverage of this developing news story nearly indecipherable. Produced in early 1985 as an urgent response to these events, Rosler's video depicts a broadcast signal under duress. It stages the destabilisation of a media apparatus implicated in an ongoing war of information. That same year, Rosler also published a now widely read essay entitled "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment", in which she complained that "museumization" had contained and minimised "the social negativity that was the matrix for the early uses of video", erasing the critical significance of artists' engagements with broadcast television, a tactical approach vital to her own political art practice (72).

In *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television*, Maeve Connolly reassesses the place of television in art as it intersects with new institutional pressures on museums of modern and contemporary art to negotiate their own relevance within a broader cultural field dominated by the experience economy. If thirty years ago Rosler could argue that these institutions had little need to acknowledge television's significance in the development of new art practices, Connolly demonstrates that today museums are in the throes of a "televisual turn", evinced by a pronounced interest in television on the part of the contemporary art world, both in its past and in the social imaginaries it continues to animate. Today, however, she observes, television does not appear in art primarily as a target of critique. For Connolly, the significance of television to contemporary art is instead bound up with the recuperation of unexplored possibilities and nearly forgotten promises as the medium confronts its own obsolescence and reinvention. Television appears as both subject matter and a model for collective production in

contemporary art, a phenomenon that her study reads against the backdrop of institutional pressures to redefine the place of the museum within the public sphere.

Connolly dates the televisual turn in contemporary art to 2002, citing the inclusion of two signal works as installations in documenta 11: *Handsworth Songs* (Black Audio Film Collective, 1986) and *Suspiria* (Stan Douglas, 2002). *Handsworth Songs*, a richly layered experimental video essay, was originally commissioned for Britain's Channel 4. Like Rosler's video, it also dates back to an important news story of the mid-1980s—the riots that erupted in Birmingham, UK and London in response to police brutality and increasingly aggressive anti-immigration policies. Connolly reads *Handsworth Songs*' inclusion in the exhibition as a sign of the increased importance of the gallery for artist-produced television in the face of declining support for public broadcasting. Exhibited as a video installation for documenta 11 in 2002, *Handsworth Songs* recovers a fading electronic memory from television's archive that might otherwise slip from view. *Suspiria* brings past and present together differently through the staging of a live closed-circuit television feed. The title of the work references Dario Argento's Technicolor film of the same name. In Douglas's installation, distorted colour footage of scenes adapted from Grimm's fairy tales bleeds into live black-and-white surveillance footage of the dungeon-like interior of an eighteenth-century monument recorded off site. Connolly reads Douglas's work as a technological ruin, an incomplete process serving as an analogy for television's unresolved status in the Internet age. Together these two works figure television both as an apparatus for the creation of social meaning and a mode of mediatised production. Over the course of the book's seven tightly focused chapters, Connolly elaborates this dual approach to television as it pertains to individual artworks, exhibitions and museum programming more broadly conceived.

The book begins by exploring how the siting of television as an object of display within the museum gallery intersects with the evolving social function of the museum as a site of cultural production with a mandate to engage a public more broadly defined than in the past, pressure which, Connolly argues, increasingly invites new forms of institutional self-reflexivity. Connolly draws productively on the work of Anna McCarthy, whose theorisation of “ambient television” clarifies how television participates in the production of social space within the everyday. As online streaming video has encroached upon older modes of broadcasting, museums have taken a retrospective interest in the history of artists' engagement with the medium. Connolly's analysis highlights how television has become an “object of cultural memory” for many artists rather than a “platform for social or political reform” (52). Rather than lament this state of affairs, she reads it as a symptom of the pressure that the Internet has placed on museums to explore new modes of engagement, display and knowledge production.

In addition to treating television as an object of cultural memory, Connolly argues, artists now approach television as a resource. The second chapter analyses how works that adopt references from sitcoms and soap operas explore the production of social identities, relationships and spaces. Museums have a stake in showing works that exploit television's place within the popular imagination as they reconceptualise their own strategies of publicity and public engagement. Rather than simply legitimising the televisual as a category worthy of artistic interest, Connolly shows how museums seek to participate in television's negotiation of cultural meaning. She explores the performative dimension of this negotiation in more depth in the third chapter, assessing the relationship between artworks and television shows that employ

nonprofessional performers, understood as stand-ins for larger social groups. Connolly argues that contemporary forms of mediated performance draw upon television's history of framing individuals as representatives of a larger social body with distinct ideological roles to play. She traces the decline of the democratic ambitions that fuelled guerrilla television throughout the 1970s and the rise of the more normative impulses at work within confessional daytime talk shows and reality television. Contemporary artists such as Gillian Wearing and Phil Collins, she argues, exploit reality television's promises of self-transformation, however suspect, by soliciting the participation of nonactors in performances framed as fraught exercises in discipline, therapeutic self-discovery, or self-exploitation.

The role of television in the production of collective memory is one of the primary themes at the centre of the book. In the fourth chapter Connolly focuses on contemporary works that leave behind an earlier generation's fascination with the media event, focusing instead on the way younger artists are drawn to "elisions and gaps in television memory" (141). Such works respond to the conditions of television's ongoing redistribution and remediation online, without engaging in nostalgic recuperations or critiques of media events that are made to stand in for some greater possibility of collective experience. Instead, television's public status, Connolly concludes, is temporarily redefined by contemporary artists' embrace of disorientation and displacement within the archive of the everyday.

TV Museum pursues this line of inquiry into television's role within everyday experience through a discussion of works that produce ephemeral monuments to broadcasting in the public sphere. Looking back to critiques of media policy or urban redevelopment issued by artists in the 1970s and 1980s, Connolly finds artists today more attuned to the instability of publicness itself as a spatial category. Thomas Hirschhorn's *Bataille Monument* (2002) at documenta 11, for example, incorporated daily local cable TV reports of activities at an improvised installation set up in a Turkish neighbourhood in Kassel, Germany, some distance from the site of the primary exhibition. Though the monument was conceived as a space of public engagement and social interaction, Connolly reads these television broadcasts as compensatory signs of the attenuation of the public sphere highlighted by the difficulty of accessing the work directly.

Television in the form of streaming media is now commonly employed by art institutions to address audiences remotely. Chapter Six looks at the way television inflects the publicness of the museum directly. It considers a range of museum-produced television projects, exhibitions and performances at various institutions across Europe and the United States. Programming initiatives, such as the Hammer Museum's Hammer Forum, adopt the format of a televised public-interest talk show in response to changing expectations around accessibility. Artists, on the other hand, are more likely to scramble the historical codes of the talk show format. Dora Garcia's *Die Klau Mich Show* (2012), for example, stages a discussion of the social history of the antipsychiatry movement on set that includes kitschy items reminiscent of 1960s talk show decor. Such works, Connolly finds, do not propose familiar television formats such as the talk show as models of an idealised, but now foreclosed public sphere of rational debate. Instead, through scripted performance, they betray ambivalence about the role of rational discourse within the public sphere, uncertainty that art institutions, in her view, are less likely than artists to acknowledge openly.

Connolly focuses on the parallels between changing conditions of labour in television and in contemporary art in the book's final chapter, looking at artworks that involve the participation of television workers or reality television shows that feature artists as participants. Her comparative analysis of these two production cultures highlights the growing significance of immaterial and affective labour across both realms. If the first generation of artists to take up video as an activist tool developed nonhierarchical production practices as part of their critique of media industries, then artists today, Connolly argues, are more likely to explore the similarities between contemporary art and commercial TV production, especially where precariousness, publicity and self-promotion are at play.

TV Museum weaves together arguments drawn from discourses that often do not intersect: television and media studies, communication studies, and contemporary art criticism. It asks questions equally relevant to artists, curators, art historians and theorists of media. Given the book's interdisciplinary ambitions, it is perhaps inevitable that its methodological strategies will not always conform to the codes of different fields. The specific artworks and exhibitions that are the focus of each chapter are presented as representative case studies. Connolly's approach is comparative, even curatorial, without being totalising or synthetic. At some points, rather than focussing on critical analysis of individual works, the book considers them in their contexts. However, Connolly resists drawing conclusions about what makes one artwork or exhibition more historically significant or compelling than another. Her aim is to elucidate a contemporary state of affairs, which she does by making arguments that hinge on generalisations about generational shifts carefully supported by a wide-ranging discussion of research and criticism by an impressive number of other theorists, historians and critics. At times these syntheses, while illuminating, can arguably obscure the book's original contribution to the field. Nonetheless, it speaks to a growing interest in the place of the moving image in contemporary art, seen for example in recent publications by Erika Balsom on exhibiting cinema in contemporary art and Andrew Uroskie on the place of expanded cinema in the museum. This recent scholarship has done much to bridge the gap between Film Studies and Art History. Connolly's cross-disciplinary approach furthers this essential effort, and offers a perspective that would be valuable above all to students of curatorial practice, especially given her focus on the pressures institutions face to broaden their audiences and resituate their offerings within a rapidly developing cultural sphere. Her compelling account of the televisual turn in contemporary art provokes important evaluative questions about the kinds of works that find a home in museums and global exhibitions today, and the kinds of critical televisual practices that persist elsewhere in the media sphere, beyond the bounds of these institutional spaces. Connolly is interested in how and why the contemporary art world has colonised television for its own purposes, but refrains from defining evaluative criteria by which to assess the proliferation of televisual references and practices in contemporary art. Her work demonstrates that television is no longer the target of critique, as it was for artists such as Rosler at an earlier moment. *TV Museum* lays the groundwork for a critical project that would consider not only how the significance of television in art has changed, but what we stand to gain or lose as a result.

Works Cited

Balsom, Erika. *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2013. Print.

Douglas, Stan. *Suspiria*. 2002. Video installation.

Garcia, Dora. *Die Klau Mich Show*. 2012. TV and performance.

Handsworth Songs. Dir. John Akomfrah. Black Audio Film Collective, 1986/2002. Broadcast/Installation.

Hirschhorn, Thomas. *Bataille Monument*. 2002. Installation.

If It's Too Bad to Be True, It Could Be DISINFORMATION. Dir. Martha Rosler. 1985. Video.

McCarthy, Anna. *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space*. Durham: Duke UP, 2001. Print.

Rosler, Martha. "Video: Shedding the Utopian Moment." *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975–2001*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004. 53–85. Print.

Suspiria. Dir. Dario Argento. Seda Spettacoli, 1977. Film.

Uroskie, Andrew. *Between the Black Box and the White Cube*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2014. Print.

Suggested Citation

Levin, Erica. "TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television by Maeve Connolly." Book review. *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 10 (Winter 2015). Web. ISSN: 2009-4078.

Erica Levin is an Assistant Professor of Art History at The Ohio State University. Her current book project focuses on practices of cinematic assemblage and mediated performance identified by the artist Stan VanDerBeek in 1974 with the rise of "a new social media consciousness". Her writing has appeared in *World Picture*, *Millennium Film Journal*, and *Discourse*, as well as in the collected volume, *Carolee Schneemann: Unforgivable* (Black Dog, 2016).