

Some notes on 'An Ephemeral Art'

Tamara Krikorian

"Does a painting come into existence at once? No, it's built up piece by piece, not different from a house. When a point becomes movement and line, it takes up time. Similarly, when a line pulls itself out into a plane. And the same when a flat plane becomes a three dimensional enclosure. And the viewer, does he(she) respond to the work as a whole? Often yes, unfortunately." (1)

Since the early seventies, I have been aware of the impact of popular culture on our expectations as an audience. Television has played a major role in this and, through subtle manipulation created an uncritical passive approach. If you confront the average person with a critical view of television, the response is likely to be 'you can always switch it off' or 'why worry, its just entertainment or even it keeps the children quiet'. This attitude is all the more surprising when one realises that television is the most powerful medium of our age. The assumption that because it is entertainment it does not need to be challenged, is absurd, when one reflects on attitudes towards other forms of entertainment, music, theatre, cinema, football and most maligned of all the visual arts. I suspect that this passive viewing of television has played a key role in this conditioning. The constant bombardment of sound and images in television and indeed in all popular culture has created an impatient audience, for whom time is an expensive commodity and impact must be immediate. Popular culture is for consumption. This is where it is important to consider Walter Benjamin's (2) statement, that mechanical reproduction of art changes the reaction of the masses towards art and that painting is unsuited to being viewed by a large public as in a public gallery. It suggests that the crisis in painting in the 19th century came not only because of photography but because up till then painting had been produced for patrons, private, ecclesiastical or state, whereas later in the century artists move towards the notion of "art for art sake", that is turning in on themselves and becoming less concerned

with their audience. Benjamin stresses that "painting invites the spectator (2) to contemplation, before the spectator can abandon himself to his association. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. It changes". Georges Duhamel said (3) "I can no longer think what I want to think, my thoughts had been replaced by moving images". They were both talking about the cinema, but these comments would seem even more appropriate to television where the picture is not a single frame as in film, but a series of dots, thus even more fragmented and ephemeral. Television in fact, flows leading the viewer through a series of ideas, and images.

Raymond Williams has described "Distribution and flow" (4) in television and points out how programming is now prepared as a sequence of items or a flow of matter and images. He shows how before broadcasting, the essential items in all communication systems were discreet—a book or pamphlet was read as a specific item. A meeting occurred at a particular date and place. A play was performed in a particular theatre at a set hour. In the 18th and 19th century with the development of the newspaper and the magazine format, the miscellany of unrelated items, photos, anecdotes, drawings and advertisements—led eventually to a greater variability in public communications and this system was eventually taken up in broadcasting. At first the broadcasters, used the discreet event, a concert, a speech, a sermon, and broadcast them, and increasingly these were assembled into programmes, and the programmes were later linked which led to the sequence of programming and thus to "flow".

Another aspect of broadcasting, which should be considered is that of mediation, it is important to be aware that the 'real world' which television portrays is an edited highly illusory representation of it. Television is not 'the window on the world' (subtitle for *Parovoz* when it first came out). One might go further than mediation and use a stronger word, manipulation. The broadcaster manipulates our responses and reactions through the form of television. The emphasis on personality and presentation covers the underlying mediation. The news reader, announcers, presentators and reporters like Angela Rippon, Anna Ford and

Richard Baker are groomed to establish a feeling of well-being, of equanimity, of reassurance. These people are 20th century icon figures, equivalent of Greek household Gods, with the same elaborate formal packaging and stylisation. Behind the cosmetic glare, one is aware of a vast political structure controlling both the means and the content of communication. As has already been discussed, in dominant cinema and television the viewer is normally passive. Through an expectation of narrative structure, there is an identification with the characters-the same could also be said of figurative painting. But, it seems as if the preoccupation with narrative is taken a step too far, through the presentator in television, who rather than allowing us to follow the narrative and discover the story for ourselves, introduces a story and attempts to reassure us that the next programme is worthy of our attention.

Through the installation 'An Ephemeral Art', I have attempted to challenge certain formal structures and to analyse some of the responses to both television and art and to prove that television has conditioned our cultural responses. For those who may seem surprised that artists should turn their attention to television, one might point out that video is simply a tool, like the brush, or the chisel, and while the painter and sculptor must use his tool at the same time as being aware of a historical past, artists working with film or video must also take into account the dominant industry.

My only interest in video, and indeed in television, stems from a formalist position, a formal analysis/decoding/deconstruction of the medium, but as I have already said it is not possible to consider television without taking into account its structure, not just in terms of technology but also in terms of politics. This led me to realise that the reference points in working with any medium must come not only from the medium itself following the modernist approach of 'pure art', but from relationships between types of work, painting and sculpture, sculpture and video etcetra. The references must also come from the artist own experience as a mediator between what has gone before and the raw material and idea, constantly restating and confronting

the spectator with a discussion between the new and the old.

Tamara Krikorian, April 1979

(1) From "Creative Credo" Paul Klee, originally Published in Schopgerische Konfession ed. Kasimir Edschmid (Berlin Reiss, 1920) Tribune der Kunst und Zeit No. 13.

(2) Walter Benjamin: The work of art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction

(3) Georges Duhammel: Scenes de la vie future Paris 1930 p.52

Quoted in The work of art in the Age of Mechanical reproduction Walter Benjamin

(4) Raymond Williams: Television·Technology and Cultural Form. Fontana 1974.

Tamara Krikorian has lived in Scotland since 1966. She studied music and worked first in theatre and later in the visual arts. In 1973 she started working with video. After the Video Symposium and the Third Eye event 'Video towards defining an Aesthetic' in March 1976 she became a member of the Steering Committee of the "Quality of Life" (Dumbarton) TV project and a founder member of the Scottish Photography Group and of London Video Arts. She has taken part in numerous video shows both in Britain and abroad. In 1977 she started work on a long term project which refers to 'Vanitas' objects, symbols of transience in Dutch 17th century Still Life painting. This piece is to be presented at the Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh in October of this year.