

AR695GV Independent Study
Specialization Research

THE TELEVISION SET AS SUBJECT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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INTRODUCTION

“How much does television reflect reality
and how much does it create reality?”¹

In my own graduate work I incorporate TV as subject matter. As I started to explore the reasons for this, I experienced some curiosity about how other artists have incorporated television in art. Whether it meant discovering inspiration or just basic comparative information, I thought research on this topic would prove valuable to me and my work.

Over the course of six months I collected sources, combing through books, periodicals and museum shops. I found TV art work printed on postcards and gallery announcements. I interviewed fellow artists and peers to collect their knowledge of television art or artists. My search turned up many artists who use TV sets, in a variety of ways.

A television set is not a traditional art object, like a bouquet of flowers or a bowl of fruit. It is an electrical and geometric box that, to most viewers, cannot compete with the classical aesthetic of more organic and natural visual content. The fact that it is used in recent and current art makes some sense, though, for several reasons. TV, in its sixty years of existence, has become pervasive and unavoidable in contemporary culture, and art is a reflection of that culture. Also, the television may represent a more conceptual vehicle to the expression of political opinion and social comment. To the artists assembled for this

¹ Caryn James, “The Medium That Defies Sharp Focus,” The New York Times (Sunday, July 7, 1996), 27.

research project TV is now a feasible art object which carries across many individual messages.

Watching TV may cause mixed feelings in the viewer. Some feel guilty, as if television is worthless and lures them away from other activities. Conversely, others feel comforted, allowing the glow to envelope them in an escape from reality. These feelings show up in the art work. Some pieces have a frivolous tone, others exude anger. Some are subtle and meditative, others are deliberately confrontational and boisterous.

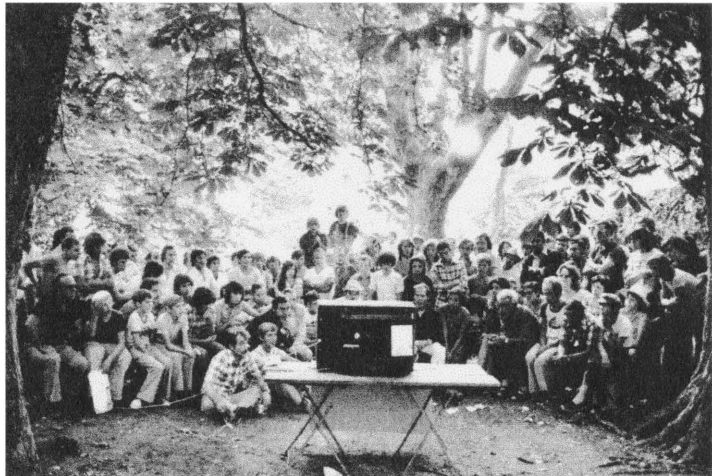
The work that I found fell into three main categories or ways that television is used in art. The first category I named “Using the Box Itself.” This pertains to art that uses the TV set as a piece of furniture or a box, a sculptural element. Second is “Screen as Canvas”—using the television screen as the pertinent surface of the artwork. Video art, which stands on its own as an art movement, fits this category.² “Representations of the Set” is the third category, where media is used to paint, draw, weave or sculpt the TV set as the content of a piece.

Even today this research is ongoing. I continue to add to my collection of TV artists as their work enters my field of vision.

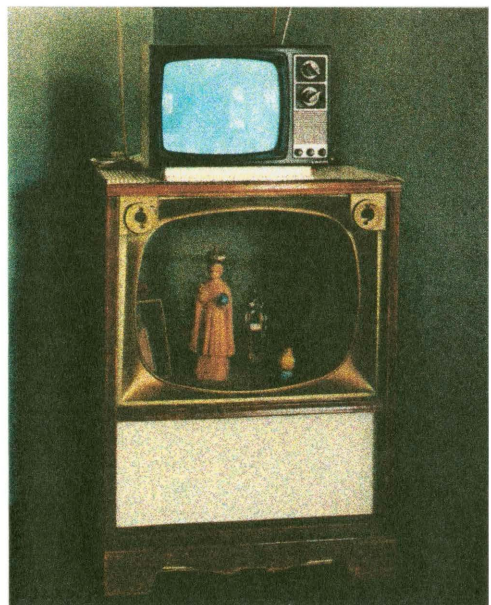
² Since Video Art is such a large movement in itself, I concentrated on video installation, where the TV set is used within the piece.

USING THE BOX ITSELF

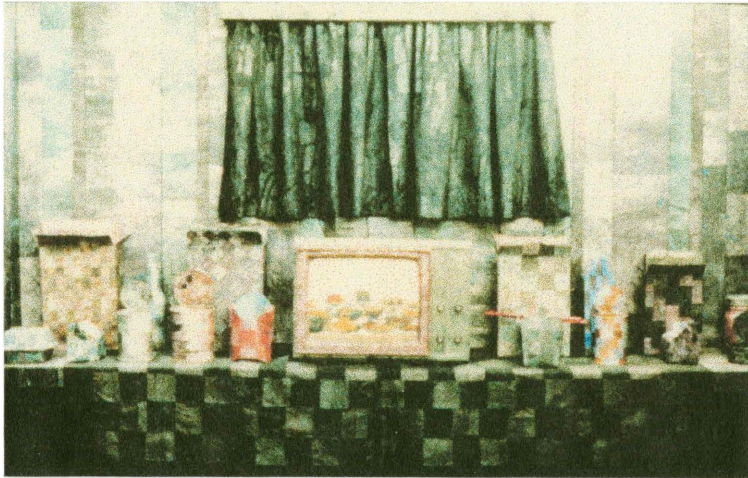
➤
Martine Franck
Sivergues, Luberon, France
 1976
 Photograph



◀
Ken Botto
Video Awe
 1981
 Photograph



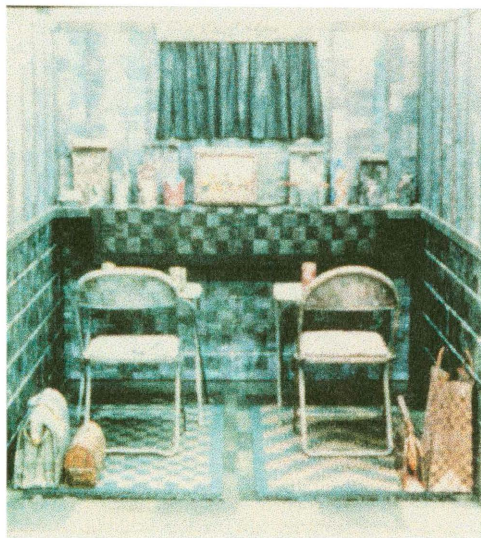
➤
Alex Harris
Las Vegas, New Mexico
 January 1984
 Photograph



Jane Mathews
Nature Morte, Altar to Convenience
 1994
 Fibers installation

Mathews uses TV as a domestic item. In her thesis writing on this installation she states, "Like the window, the television is a connection to the outer world, but a passive one. It is two dimensional, non-interactive. It

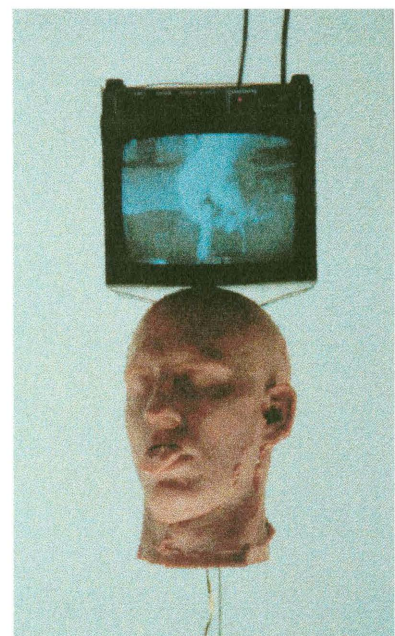
allows the viewer to gather information, be entertained, and fulfill daydreams vicariously, without breaking old patterns, without having to act, or change the familiar."



Jane Mathews
Nature Morte, Room Interior
 1994
 Fibers installation

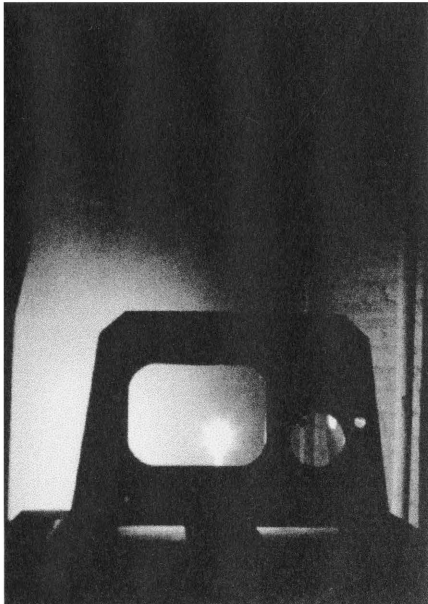
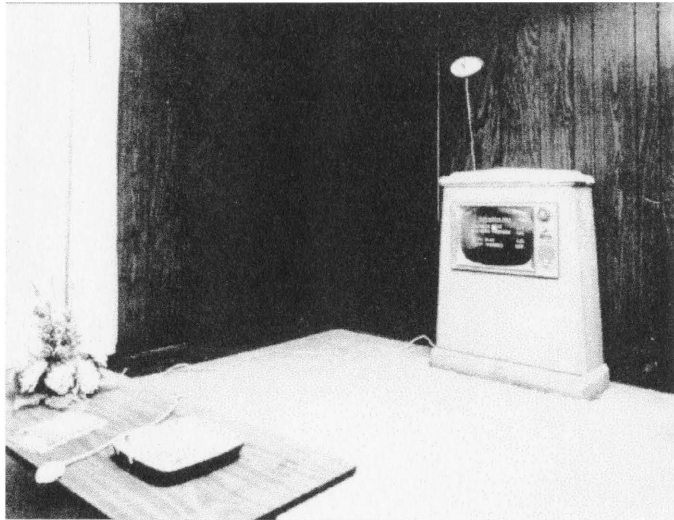


Bruce Nauman
Perfect Balance
 1989
 Video sculpture
 50.8 cm x 25 cm x 25.2 cm



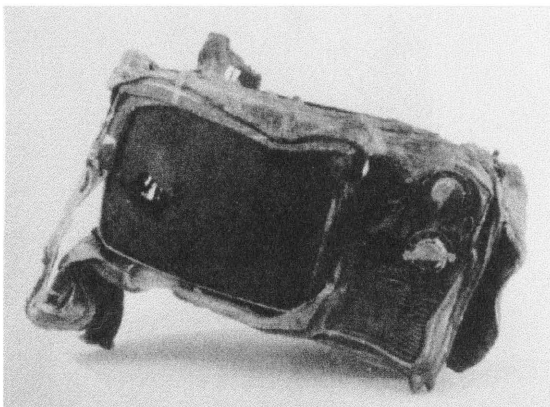
➤
Edward Kienholz
The Eleventh Hour Final
 1968
 Mixed media installation

Kienholz puts TV in a concrete gravestone console. The images on the screen are Vietnam War statistics and media coverage.



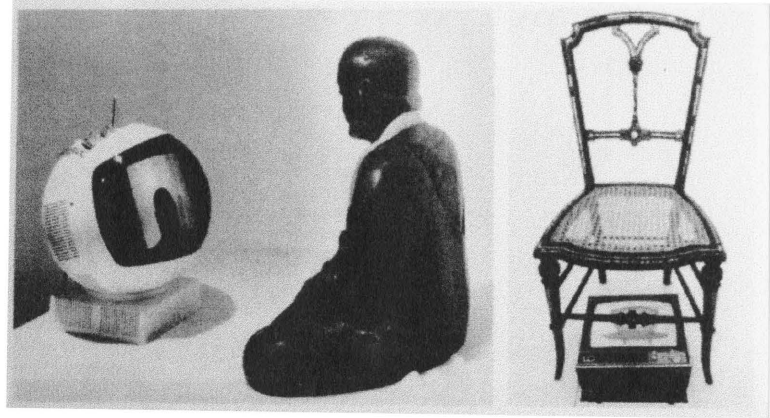
◀
Nam June Paik
Candle TV
 1975

In the early 1960s Paik was the first artist to use TV as a medium; his approach is seen as imaginative and witty. He puts objects in televisions and televisions in other objects, and creates dichotomous combinations. He uses TVs as building blocks in his technological sculptures. His flamboyant style makes fun of TV and its increasing role in people's lives.



◀
Nam June Paik
Burned-Out TV
 1976

➤
Nam June Paik
TV Buddha, 1974 (left)
TV Chair, 1974 (right)



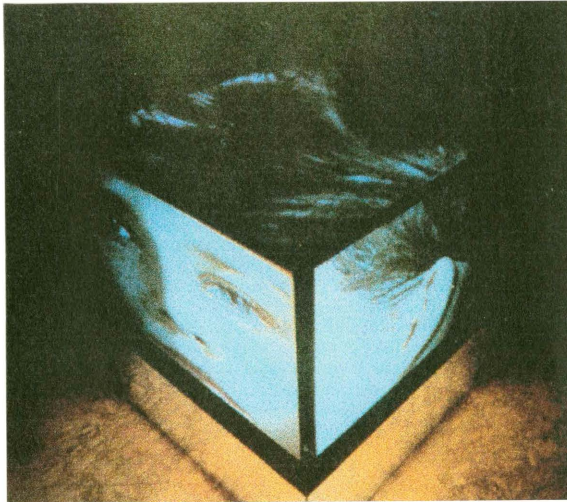
◀
Nam June Paik
Electro Symbio Phonics for Phoenix (detail)
 1992
 Video installation

Wolfgang Staehle
 #9
 1988
 Mixed Media
 ▼



In his February 1989 *Artforum* article "Television's Body," Charles Hagen states, "Through quirky compositions...Staehle removes the television set from its usual domestic associations, its role as talking furniture, and points up its industrial origins—the fact that a TV set is a highly complex technological object, sharing a secret kinship, in both appearance and the Modernist ethos it implies, with other industrial products. In essence Staehle treats the TV set as a particularly fraught sort of found object, a sculptural material rich in contradictory aesthetic and social meanings. (93-94)"

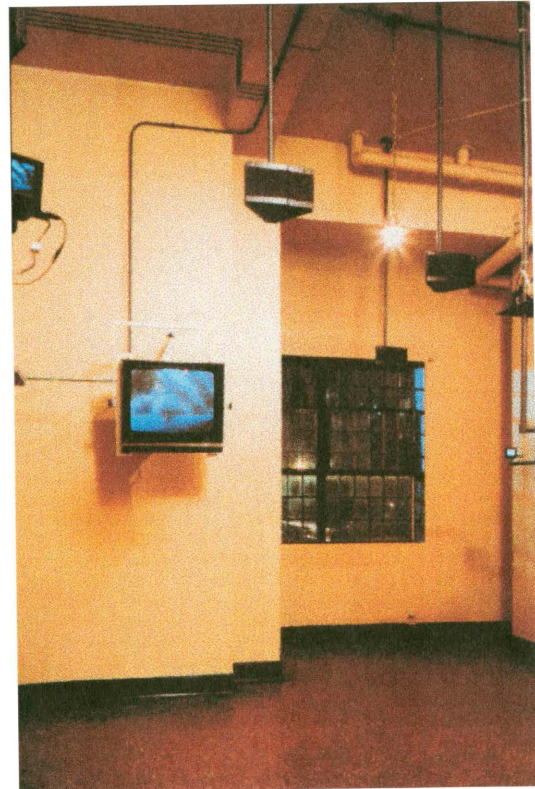
SCREEN AS CANVAS



Judith Barry
Imagination Dead Imagine
 1991
 Video sculpture

This piece is an attack on the neutrality of Minimal Art.

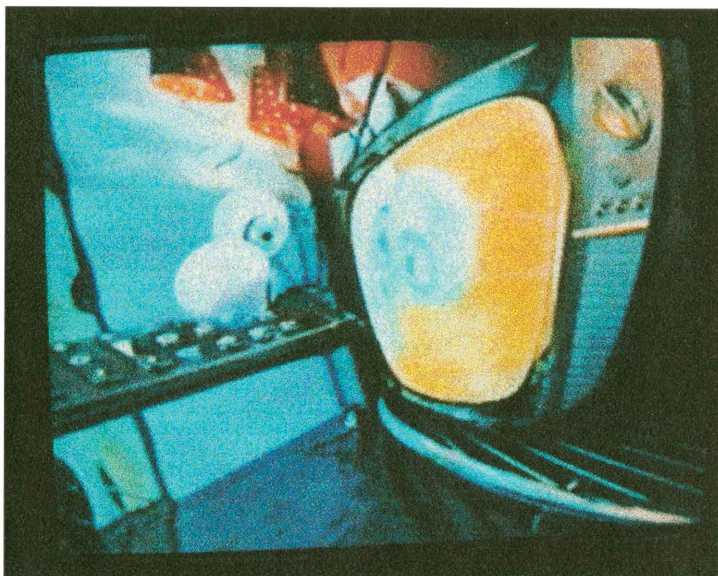
Dara Birnbaum
Transmission Tower: Sentinel
 1992
 Video installation



Dara Birnbaum
Tiananmen Square: Break in Transmission
 1990
 Video installation

Birnbaum's experiences are incorporated into political works which clarify the visual and aural impact of TV upon the individual. She emphasizes rather than neutralizes the TV material and views broadcast television as fundamentally non-interactive and constricting.

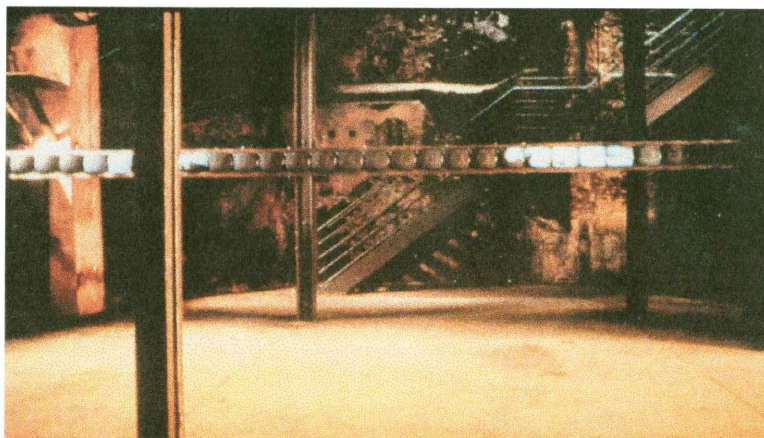
➤
**Pierre Buffin
 and BUF Compagne**
Zapping (still)
 1994
 Computer animation



➤
Gary Hill
Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place
 1990
 Video installation

Hill works with video image, text and sound, and his theme is objectification and fragmentation of the body.

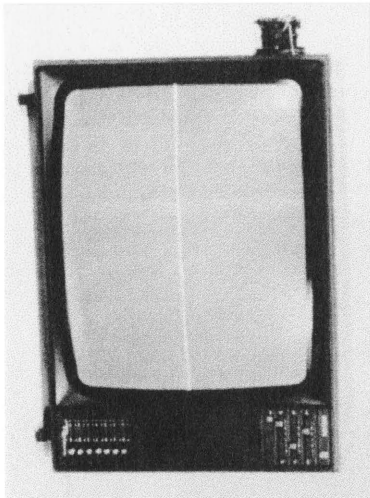
➤
Gary Hill
Suspension of Disbelief
(for Marie)
 1991-92
 Video installation





Nam June Paik and Charlotte Moorman
TV Bra for Living Sculpture
 May 1969
 Video performance

In these pieces Paik introduces the idea that the cathode ray tube will replace the canvas. His work uses the TV to get away from TV. Paik himself does not watch television. He says the information is too slow.



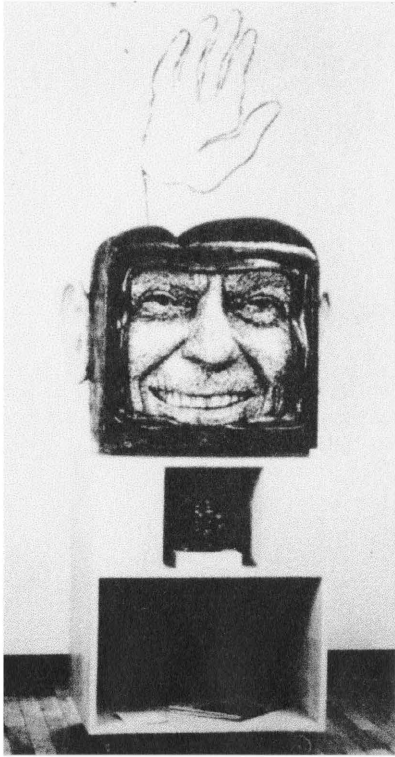
Nam June Paik
Zen for TV
 1963-75

Television set modified to show only a vertical line
 67 cm x 49 cm x 40 cm



Nam June Paik
Random Access/Paper TV
 1978-81
 Two decks of
 silk-screened cards show
 images of John Cage and
 Merce Cunningham

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SET



Robert Arneson

Ronny

1986

Glazed ceramic sculpture with
wood, metal and found objects

47 1/2" x 30" x 26"



Zeke Berman 

Falling Glass

1983

Photograph, 16 1/2" x 15 1/2"



Archie Brennan 

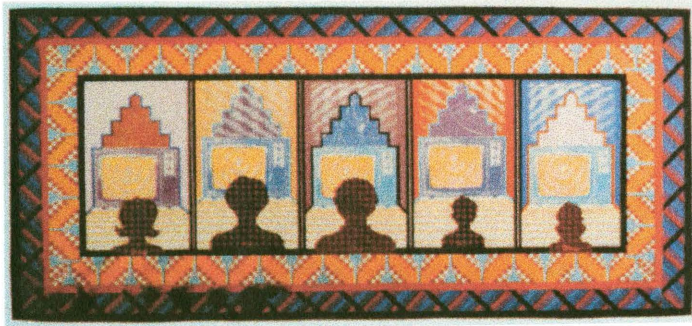
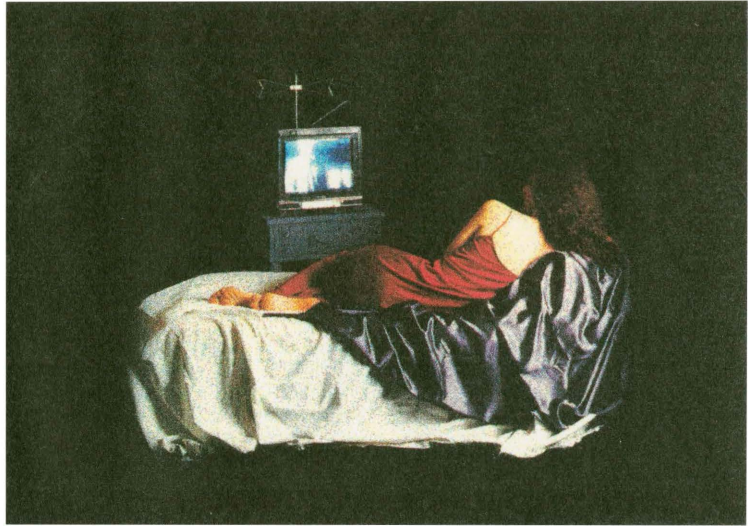
Muhammad Ali/TV

1973

tapestry in cotton and wool
with foam rubber filling

3'8" x 5'2" x 8"

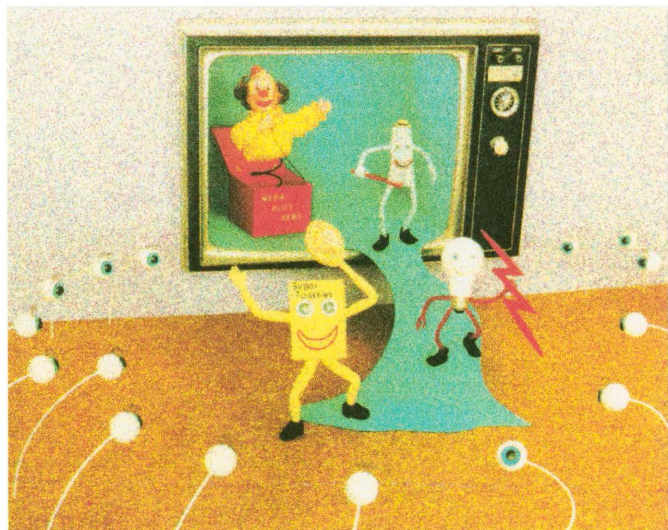
➤
Eileen Cowin
Untitled
 1988



◀ **Jo Ann Giordano**
Family Prayer Rug
 1984
 Cotton screen print, 35" x 75"

Giordano's work comes out of strong emotional reactions in her life. She expresses social and political issues, and uses humor to increase awareness while remaining serious about content.

➤
Jim Haberman
Television Land
(from the Silver Fantasy Series)
 1983
 Sculpture/photograph





A
Louise Lawler
(Stevie Wonder) Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine,
New York City
 1984
 Cibachrome print
 29" x 34"



A
Philip-Lorca Dicorcia
Little Bo Peep, Los Angeles
 1984

➤
Warren Neidich
Nude with T.V.
 1984
 Cibachrome print
 20" x 24"

Neidich uses the reflection of the screen on the figure. It shows the dichotomy of the organic versus geometric, or alive versus electric.



▲
Teresa Graham Salt
All I Know I Learned on T.V.
 1987
 Silk tapestry, 6 1/2" x 12"

➤
Teresa Graham Salt
I Only Watch PBS
 1986
 Silk tapestry, 8" x 9"





A
Alexey Shulgin
Untitled, Moscow
 1989



➤
John Wehrle
Saigon Managua (detail)
 1987
 Sculpture

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