
David Joselit coins the term “eco-formalism” in lieu of art works to analyze the complexities of television and its interrelationship to video and media art. He establishes his argument by asserting that television from its inception in the late 1940s and 1950s through the 1970s was anti-democratic in the sense that it fostered only one-way communication, or what he refers to as a “closed circuit”. From the mid-1950s through the 1970s three networks dominated television programming to which audiences served as both passive receptacles as well as commodities to be sold by those networks. Joselit advocates for the use of art and art history as a means of opening circuits by analyzing the work of media artists Nam June Paik, Andy Warhol, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman, filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles, and others who opened the circuitry of television and broadcast media. They explored ways in which broadcast media’s elements can be reconstituted and reinterpreted as works of art. Television sets, test patterns, film clips, and video installations became new avenues for reconsidering television media yet remained confined to the art world with limited opportunities for audience feedback or political impact.

Joselit also examines the production of media activists who spearheaded radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Media analysis by radical publications such as Michael Shamburg’s Guerrilla Television and particularly the Black Panther Party’s Intercommunal News Service advocated for cable alternatives to network television which did not represent blacks or other groups deemed nonessential to corporate sponsorship. Lack of media representation served as a form of nonexistence and social death to unrepresented groups. Through cable television local communities could control the means of production and thereby enable feedback and participation. Joselit concludes with a manifesto stating that art history should be used for political advocacy instead of providing only historical context and meaning to works of art.

A comparative title is one by Lynn Spigel, who in the introduction to her recent monograph TV By Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television, (University of Chicago Press, 2008) asserts that although Joselit advocates for the use of media art in the pursuit of social justice, he does not address the ways in which commercial television developed in relation to the worlds of art and design.

Scholars including advanced undergraduate and graduate students are the intended audience for this monograph evident by the high polish and sophistication of the writing. A sturdy paperback, this book is boldly designed with adequate black and white reproductions considering the quality of the originals. It is concluded by a useful index and notes.

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