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The *Specials* programs focus on projects by artists and curators who have some kind of connection to the Museum's programming and the MACBA Collection. To complement the exhibition *Are You Ready for TV?*, Kenneth Goldsmith rescues ten works inspired by and taken from TV.

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Curated by Kenneth Goldsmith

Kenneth Goldsmith's writing has been called 'some of the most exhaustive and beautiful collage work yet produced in poetry' by Publishers Weekly. Goldsmith is the author of ten books of poetry, founding editor of the online archive UbuWeb (ubu.com), and the editor of *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, which was the basis for an opera, 'Trans-Warhol,' that premiered in Geneva in March of 2007. An hour-long documentary on his work, *Sucking on Words*, premiered at the British Library in 2007. He teaches writing at The University of Pennsylvania, where he is a senior editor of PennSound, an online poetry archive. He was The Anschutz Distinguished Fellowship in American Studies at Princeton University in 2009-10 and received the Quartz Electronic Music Award in Paris in 2009. A book of critical essays, *Uncreative Writing*, is forthcoming from Columbia University Press, as is an anthology from Northwestern University Press co-edited with Craig Dworkin, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*.

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TV ON THE RADIO #2

In this show, we treat the visual works as if they're audio and see what happens. In most cases, we discover that the sounds emanating from the visual works can stand on their own as great listening experiences. In other works, the visuals and sounds are deliberately 'uninteresting', tending to highlight the mundane or the insignificant experiences of life, which of course, are equally rich in an inverted sort of way.

01. Script

This is Kenneth Goldsmith and welcome to the second Ràdio Web MACBA podcast, TV ON THE RADIO, which accompanies the exhibition *Are You Ready for TV?* at MACBA in Barcelona, that runs from November 5th, 2010 to April 25th, 2011. In the museum's exhibition, you can see what happens when the aesthetic of visual artists collides with the world of television. The results are anything but what you'd expect to see on TV, full of surrealistic interventions and disruptions. Or when artists work on television, there is often an embedded critique of the medium, something that questions the very essence of what our eyeballs are glued to every night. As curator Chus Martínez writes about this show, 'This is not an exhibition about television, but one conceived from the place of television. Its aim: to study how the diverse ways of grasping images and the life of concepts contribute to tracing the horizon of our cultural present.'

In our first podcast, we examined what happened when audio artists used the sounds of television as a source for the audio works. The results – demonstrated to us by everyone from John Cage to the Evolution Control Committee – were rich and varied. For this podcast, we're going to actually listen to the soundtracks from the videos in the show themselves. In essence, we're going to treat the visual works as if they're audio and see what happens. In most cases, we'll discover that the sounds emanating from the visual works can stand on their own as great listening experiences. In other works, the visuals and sounds are deliberately 'uninteresting', tending to highlight the mundane or the insignificant experiences of life, which of course, are equally rich in an inverted sort of way. Although there are hundreds of works in the actual exhibition, we've selected ten to spotlight here that are particularly varied and interesting and which, taken as a whole, can provide you with the flavor of MACBA's exhibition, *Are You Ready for TV?*.

The Dean Martin Variety Show: Orson Welles, 1967–68

The golden days of the Rat Pack were waning when Dean Martin got his own TV show, yet looking at this retrospective clip hosted by his crony Orson Welles, you'd think that the party had never ended. There's Dino crooning 'My Kind of Girl' with a glass of vodka in his hand, appearing so sloshed that he flubs the lyrics.

Yet appearing is the operative word. In fact, Martin was stone-sober when recording these shows and the vodka in the glass was always water. His mistakes are great acting, and all of the sloppy errors in the show were all intentional. In fact, this was the most canned live TV ever presented.

Martin never took the medium of television for granted. Nor did he ever break out of his playboy good-timing character. This was as close to reality TV as we have today: highly scripted and manipulated, yet appearing to be spontaneous, live and exciting.

Take, for example, Dino's famous closet, which was a part of every show. Out of the blue, a knock would come from a door located near the rear of the stage. Martin, in reality unaware as us as to who was knocking, opened the door and, often a random celebrity guest would step out. In this tape we meet a laundry list of stars of the day: stars like Ann Margaret, Hazel the Maid, Jimmy Durante and Raymond Burr; one time, a drunken Red Skelton staggers through the door,



[The Dean Martin Variety Show]

slurring his words and holding a bottle in a paper bag offering Martin a sip. Of course, lots of nude women come through the closet door. We see two from a nudist colony, one in a shower; there's even a nude couple lip-locked in an embrace, on which Martin abruptly slams the door. Sometimes it gets surreal: in one segment, Martin opens the door and out comes a full high school marching band – all 100 members – each dressed in formal band attire, blasting their instruments. The parade seems to go on forever.

Martin, acting so naturally, easily convinces us that this is, in fact, his great life. And in Dino and Orson's Rat Pack world, every minute is a wild party: disruptive, surreal and uncanny – and completely subjective.

Chris Burden *The TV Commercials, 1973–77*

From 1973-1977, the Los Angeles-based artist Chris Burden bought dozens of prime-time spots on LA television to air his 'commercials', legendary interventions which added a dose of absurdity and poetry to the monolithic TV landscape. Burden wrote: 'During the early seventies I conceived a way to break the omnipotent stranglehold of the airwaves that broadcast television had. The solution was to simply purchase commercial advertising time and have the stations play my tapes along with their other commercials.' Now you have to remember that there was no public-access channels at that time, so these ads went out on the major networks, bringing art into the homes of millions of Angelinos. We'll listen to a few excerpts from these broadcasts.

The first ad, 'Through the Night Softly' is just a ten-second clip of Burden's infamous performance piece where he crawls naked on his belly through a bed of crushed glass with his hands tied behind his back, writing and breathing heavily. It's not much to listen to but it's great to think about: this was shown nightly on seven TV stations in the Los Angeles area for nearly a month. You can imagine how shocked viewers must have been to encounter this bizarre self-masochistic scene in between *The Brady Bunch* segments. But now let's listen to a work that really stands on its own as, well, poetry. It's an ad called 'Poem for LA,' and it too clocked in at ten seconds and was occasionally looped three times to run at 30 seconds. The screen shows a close up of the artists' face as he recites three ambiguous phrases, half-manifesto, half-haiku. It's rare enough to see an artist on television, but it's even rarer to see an artist recite poetry on prime-time!

Chris Burden *The TV Commercials, 1973–77*

Another ad, which was aired in May of 1976, Burden calls 'Chris Burden Promo.' For this ad he took the results of an America nationwide survey asking the public who the best known artists were. He lists them in a monotone, and then tags his own name – which certainly was not on the list – on to the end:

Chris Burden *The TV Commercials, 1973–77*

Finally, in 1977, Burden translated a visual piece of his into a TV ad. In the gallery version of 'Full Financial Disclosure', he displayed all his cancelled checks and financial ledgers in a gallery, making a mockery of what corporations and politicians are forced to do in public all the time. Burden's financial picture, like most artists, is bleak. For the TV ad, imagine if you will this scene: Burden facing the camera while seated at a desk in front of a huge American flag. With a caption identifying him as 'CHRIS BURDEN – ARTIST', he delivers a deadpan monologue in the style of a sincere politician demonstrating his post-Watergate financial transparency. Following the brief statement, a series of graphics silently flashes onscreen, while he reveals his pathetically small gross income for 1976.

Ian Breakwell *Ian Breakwell's Continuous Diary, 1984*

Humor and stories – inspired by the British tradition of the Music Hall where unpredictable events were scripted into skits and songs – was very much a part of the English artist Ian Breakwell's work. Like his contemporary, the storyteller and elfish musician Ivor Cutler, Breakwell found great magic in the world of the everyday. A quiet humor – more funny strange, than funny ha-ha – permeated his investigations of the mundane. Throughout the seventies, Breakwell kept what he called a 'Continuous Diary', where he would write down what happened, literally



[Chris Burden *The TV Commercials*, 1973–77]

right outside his window. This tape, broadcast on the BBC in 1984, features him reading from – and in some cases restaging – diary entries. They're odd little bits of every day life, occasionally feeling like Monty Python skits, particularly one absurd sketch where two nuns pack the back of a black London cab full of dead, skinned animals.

But the diary entries for which he became most well known was a series called 'The Walking Man Diary,' which was written between 1975–78, in which Breakwell observed one man outside his window over the course of time and recorded how he interacted with the architecture and denizens of his neighborhood.

Samuel Beckett *What Where*, 1980

Breakwell's Walking Man – an itinerant hobo wandering about in search of meaning – could easily be a character out of a Beckett play.

The next TV show that we're going to listen to is, in fact, a production of Beckett's very last play called *What Where*. In the MACBA show is a television adaptation of the play that was made for Süddeutscher Rundfunk in 1985 and was aired on German TV in 1986.

Even if you don't speak German, Beckett's words are sparse and simple enough to get an idea of what's happening. The plot – if you can ever say that a Beckett play has a 'plot' – centers around four characters, each of whom takes turns as interrogator and interrogated, tormenter and tormented. In a typically Beckettian manner, we don't know exactly they're being questioned about. Nor do we know what they did to deserve such treatment. We don't know why they change roles, with the good guys becoming bad and vice versa. The play is structured around the passing of the four seasons. But, as is usual in Beckett's universe, time doesn't heal anything. These characters appear to be doomed to eternal Sisyphean suffering. And don't ask what it all means. When asked that question about this play, Beckett snapped: 'I don't know what it means. Don't ask me what it means. It's an object.'

What's important to note here is that, although you can't see it, this is a play that has been adapted specifically for the medium of television. Instead of four characters on a stage, there are four disembodied heads floating on a black background, each speaking their lines. The resolution is purposely soft: each head seems to be jaggedly constructed of television ben-day dots. As the heads move, they sort of disintegrate, à la Mike Teavee in the original *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The end result is really Beckettian: pixelated ghosts floating in a deep, dark space of nowhere, truly the space of television.

Jef Cornelis *James Lee Byars: The World Question Center*, 1969

In 1969, the spiritual-seeking, Zen-inspired artist James Lee Byars came up with the idea that, in his ultimate quest for knowledge, he would read through all six million books at Harvard's Widener Library. To this end, he began reading, taking out four books at a time to his sparsely furnished room, with the insane idea that it was perhaps possible for one human being to know everything. He quickly ran aground with this idea and began to reformulate the concept in a more realistic way. To this end, he came up with something he called *The World Question Center*, whereby he made a list of who he considered to be the top 100 world's most brilliant minds, mostly consisting of scientists, doctors and artists and tried to gather them all in one room for a great discussion. But of course this was impossible – those types of people are pretty busy – and most wouldn't drop what they were doing at the behest of a young, unknown artist. So what he finally came up with was a telecommunications version. He took over a television studio in Antwerp and decided to phone up each of his heroes and have them each pose one question for the world to ponder. The entire hour-long proceeding was broadcast over Belgian television.

And it's quite a scene to behold: Byars himself is in the center of an enormous room, wearing a Mad Hatter hat and shrouded in a long white robe. He's sitting on a bench, surrounded by four silent beautiful women of diverse races, each dressed in identical long robes. Their faces are stone-serious and sit perfectly



[John Berger *Ways of Seeing*, 1972]

still, hanging on every word that Byars and his 'experts' utter. Now, picture this: surrounding them in a ring, sitting crossed-legged on the floor, are 40 robed figures who, like the women, are listening closely to the conversations.

As the experts are reached via telephone, the camera zooms in on Byars' earnest face, framed by his long, flowing hair, as he listens intently and tries to extract questions from them. It's a comical scene, but one performed with the utmost seriousness on the part of the assembled cast. And it has very eerie cult overtones, reminding us that during that time, such gatherings often tragic outcomes like the Manson Family or Jonestown.

Glenn Lewis / Marianne Filliou / Robert Filliou / Taki Bluesinger *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts Part II, Video University, 1979*

Real time was the big thing in the seventies. Beginning with the music of John Cage and films of Andy Warhol in the sixties, and extending to US Public Television with the proto-reality series *An American Family*, in the mid-seventies, it was hip to let the camera run... and run.... and run. Fluxus artists loved real time more than they cared for fictitious time or entertainment. They hated scripts. And plots. Instead, the idea was to get in front of the camera and show how life is truly lived.

In 1970, the Fluxus artist Robert Filliou wrote a book called *Teaching and Learning as Performing Arts*, which was a manifesto of sorts. In it he claimed that the artist need not have any technical skills or even need to make art at all. Instead, he says, art should be 'an organized form of leisure,' amounting in essence to nothing more than what we do in regular life: sit around with friends and chat. And that's exactly what he does in this 90-minute broadcast. It's anti-TV and is split into two segments: one where Filliou shaves his face while waxing on the beauty of everyday life; and the second, where he shoots the crap with a buddy of his, the Vancouver-based artist Taki Bluesinger.

Not a whole lot happens in either segment. While Filliou shaves, he throws questions to the studio audience – whom, judging from the lack of response, seems to consist of no one but the camera-operator – which pretty much go unanswered. The second-half is a bit more interact. Here, Filliou appears on a TV monitor and hangs out with Bluesinger who is in 'real' space. They interact as if they're in the same room, both reading the same newspaper and drinking coffee, playing music and smoking cigarettes together across media.

John Berger *Ways of Seeing*, 1972

Ways of Seeing was a 1972 BBC television series consisting of visual essays that raise questions about hidden ideologies in visual images. The series gave rise to a later book of the same name written by John Berger.

Berger explores the ways in which the reproduction of art, be it as a postcard, reproduced in a magazine, or as displayed on television, makes the meaning – a meaning that was originally considered to be stable – ambiguous. He explains that reproductions of works of art can be used by anybody for their own purposes. Images become words rather than holy relics, making it possible to actually discourse with them. He discusses the ways in which tradition art histories try to deny us our own experiences with art, instead, dictating to us the author's own agenda, not permitting us to form an individualistic or personal relationship to works of art. Berger argues that a reproduction – perhaps pinned to our bulletin board above our desk – is a more personal, powerful and emotional relationship with images than the ivory tower onto which art is traditionally placed. His message is a positive, media-savvy one, one that tries to reclaim an intimate relationship with art through the power of reproducible media.

Berger's most prescient statement is a complaint about the one-way nature of television. He claims he's the one in complete control of the images and that, with television in its present 1972 state, we can't respond. He ponders a state of affairs beyond that, which of course, we have today with the internet. He concludes with the statement 'With this program, as with all programs, you receive meanings and images which are arranged. I hope you will consider what I arrange. But be skeptical of it.'



[General Idea *Pilot*, 1977]

T. R. Uthco / Ant Farm (Doug Hall, Chip Lord, Doug Michels, Jody Procter) *The Eternal Frame*, 1975

Berger's provocation about the malleable, shifting nature of images, once presumed to have a stable context and meaning, is explored in depth around one incident – the assassination of John F. Kennedy – in a 1975 video by the San Francisco-based art collective Ant Farm, called *The Eternal Frame*. The title itself is a play on *The Eternal Flame*, which burns at the grave of JFK. In this piece, Ant Farm posits the fact that the JFK assassination was the first made-for-TV media spectacle and they go on to claim that it's been shown so many times and in so many reenactments that it's become hard to separate the myth from the actual event. To that end, the group decides to recreate their own versions of the piece, which they do onsite at Dealey Plaza as well as a few studio recreations in front of a blue screen.

The two artists who comprise the collective, Chip Lord and Doug Hall, dress up as John and Jackie. We see them getting into character, Lord with a heavy Boston accent as JFK and Hall in drag donning a pink Channel suit as Jackie. Off they go into the world to reenact this historical event. The best scenes take place onsite where JFK was gunned down: they rent a limo and drive around in circles staging the event over and over to the delight of the tourists. They film the tourists narrating and reacting to their recreation. One woman claims that Ant Farm's version is better than the original! It's hilarious, yet revealing, particularly when 'real' footage is cut in with their staged versions.

In the end, Hall and Lord do 'exit interviews' and discuss how they each felt about playing their roles. The result is a hall of media mirrors, the kind of event that today is played out for every 'tragedy', making it hard to discern what is live, and as they say, what is Memorex.

General Idea *Pilot*, 1977

Another art collective, Canada's General Idea, decided that they didn't want to just be mere artists; they wanted to become hugely famous and glamorous artists. To that end, they decided that one way to become famous was to invent a beauty pageant and to crown one lucky girl Miss General Idea. Another idea was to launch a magazine called *FILE* (an anagram of LIFE) à la Warhol's *Interview*, which could be used as a way of garnering even more fame and glamour. And finally, they figured that like any good public group, they'd make a promotional video for their organization, hence their 1977 piece, *Pilot*, which was produced for public television in Ontario. It's a mock prime-time newsmagazine, with General Idea as the subject.

Show hosts, AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal describe their collective transformation from young strivers to 'famous, glamorous artists,' by building a media empire. The tape is a retrospective of their activities, including films, fashion and magazines. *Pilot* functions as a half-hour propaganda film. Punctuated with lots of theory jargon, cheesy muzak and repetitious manifesto-recitations, it's an odd cross between an advertisement and a Marxist diatribe show, soaked in the predominant ideologies of its day.

Adam Curtis *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom*, 2007

The many topics explored on this podcast and through the *Are You Ready for TV?* exhibition seems to find their expression and culmination in the complex work of BBC documentarian Adam Curtis, specifically his 2007 three-part series, *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom*. Half-documentary, half-mockumentary, wholly self-conscious and self-reflexive in its deconstructive modes, Curtis falls somewhere between Ken Burns and Vito Acconci. These films are slick enough – and of course are branded by the BBC logo – to be mistaken for objective documentaries, but under the surface are outrageous wacko paranoid conspiracy theories. They're perfect wolves in sheep's clothing, seductive enough to be a part of prime time, but edgy enough to be the work of an artist. Whereas Chris Burden's intervention into the prime time was clearly an interruptive gesture – and markedly the work of an artist – Curtis slides under the radar. It's a wonder that the BBC ever gave him the green light for his projects. In short, this series focuses on happiness and freedom in the UK and America



[Adam Curtis *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom*, 2007]

and how such concepts are bound up with competing ideologies and power-grabs.

In this series, Curtis shreds the idea that there is such a thing as selfless public service. It's a cynical world view he espouses, claiming that, at the end of the day, individuals are only interested in what's good for them and no one else. Curtis cites a model of Game Theory, which claims that people live their lives as a game, adjusting their strategies so as to come out ahead. Curtis examines how politicians reacted to these ideas and in the end, decided that the only way people can express themselves in the most honest way is to let the free market determine the outcome. The result is a market democracy and the supreme power of global capitalism.

Tightly edited, fast paced, rich use of music and found footage, Curtis demonstrates and puts into action the proposition of John Berger. His stirring music colliding with powerful images manipulate us, coercing us to adapt Curtis' very opinionated views. Curtis knowingly uses commercial tricks – Hollywood-style music and seductive archival footage – to make his point. These are seductive videos and in essence, they are as much about demonstrating the possibilities of our own manipulation as much as they are the theories he puts forth. Half crackpot, half visionary, Curtis walks a fine line between mainstream media and the museum. More than anyone, Adam Curtis, is ready for TV.

This has been the second part of a two part podcast for Ràdio Web MACBA, TV ON THE RADIO, which accompanies the exhibition *Are You Ready for TV?* at MACBA in Barcelona, which runs from November 5th, 2010 to April 25th, 2011. I'm Kenneth Goldsmith. Thanks for listening.

02. Credits

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03. Licence

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