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MEDIA ARTS
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page 14

TVOD

Having grown up in the cool glow of the television tube, many of today's media artists approach their work from "inside" the TV culture which their work addresses. Much of the work being produced is as much a product of as it is a reaction to this culture—a culture within which much of this work blends almost seamlessly. Instead of providing the outsider point of view, or engaging in any dialogue with the culture, many artists have simply and thoughtlessly adopted the notion of "packaging" which is the basic premise of TV culture.

The term "New Music" has been used as a packaging device, or label, in such a wide variety of contexts that it has, at this point, become of little or no use to anyone. I remember something similar happening to punk music in the late seventies. In 1977, punk records were hard to come by; for the most part, they were available in the few shops which carried imported records. These import bins were my first real exposure to avant-garde art of any sort. Record companies watched with cautious curiosity. At best, collectors of these records were considered "tastemakers." More often, they were considered brain-damaged.

Before long imported record sales represented a serious financial threat to stateside companies, most of which were experiencing their worst sales in years. The gap between the "dinosaur" bands and the punks had to be closed before the cycle of extinction closed the market completely.

The solution: dilute the most palatable of the punks and hustle them as "New Wave." Make them sound more like French filmmakers than bikers. Needless to say, it worked and the record companies are soaking the public with these watered-down "revolutions" to this day.

The entire "East Village" phenomenon in New York City has as much precedent in this corporate punk as in what one typically speaks of as the "art world." What's the real difference between Tom Petty (corporate punk) covering the old Searchers' song *Needles and Pins*, and Mike Bidlo, art star, "covering" a Jackson Pollock. More to the point, what difference is there between Barbara Kruger's "art" and a Sex Pistols record cover from 1977. Kruger's work simply circulates in a more polished context and is therefore a bit harder to take seriously. For better or worse, the much-cited "breaking of boundaries" in the art world is simply a function of the marketplace.

Last fall, the Museum of Modern Art and MTV found themselves in each others' shoes. MoMA's video program offered *Music Video: The Industry and Its Fringes*, a sampling of music videos produced since 1967, while MTV commissioned a series of *Artbreaks*, brief video clips by

contemporary artists. This cultural exchange was actually less shocking coming from the Museum than MTV.

MoMA produced a program which unraveled the history of this commercial artform more insightfully than MTV could hope to do. MoMA's program offered such diverse artists as the Beatles, Michael Jackson, Captain Beefheart, Devo and the Residents, whose "One-Minute Movies" were a highlight of the MoMA show.

MTV inaugurated *Artbreaks* with six artists who work in a wide variety of media. Jonathon Borofsky's *Ruby Dream* shows a computer-generated red ruby spinning hypnotically through a seemingly boundless space as the artist's off-screen voice describes a dream:

I dreamed we were driving across some rough land with my father. Once I yelled at him to stop because he was about to drive across a golf course where people were still playing. One of the people still playing was Cybill Sheperd. Then she walked away with her mother, both in very large flat, brown hats.

In twelve seconds, Borofsky (and sound collaborator Ed Tomney) manages to yank MTV viewers out of their flight over the rushing waves of ceaseless music videos, and pulls them into his ethereal eddy. *Ruby Dream* is by far the most successful of MTV's *Artbreaks* because it utilizes the networks wildly paced programming to "frame" peculiar reverie. The other *Artbreaks* tend to more closely approximate the frenetic pacing of the network's music videos, or its pop graphic style.

Charles Clough's video, shot from thirty feet above the floor of the Brooklyn Museum, documents (in fast speed) the execution of a large abstract painting (done with what appears to be a mop) in which an MTV logo emerges. Luigi Ontani brings one of his paintings to life using a computer paintbox. A mythical creature hurls a discus (bearing the MTV logo) through the Colosseum and into the head of a mummy which becomes a video screen. Jean-Michel Basquiat's video clip offers the artist's studio as the ideal party space. Arto Lindsay bounces around the place playing his guitar as the artist works. Hangers-on smile for the camera. Gone are the days of suffering artists; this guy makes Hollywood look dull by comparison.

In another piece, MTV's cameras pan through a Richard Tuttle wall relief in close-up, using the sound of a running sink in the artist's studio as a soundtrack. This video offers no sense of scale; until I saw the actual wall-relief at the *Artbreaks* "opening" (a benefit for Artists Space), I had assumed that I was looking at an installation created for the camera. Having seen the actual object, the video seems less of a mystery; at best, it offers a sort of instruction for "seeing" the work (some-

how pointless without the benefit of a "wide shot") and, at worst, comes off as high-tech insurance documentation.

The real kicker in this series is the Richard Prince clip. Prince's best-known works are his close-cropped photographs of advertising images, pulled out of context and offered as "appropriated" readings of contemporary culture. Prince's work has always been problematic for me. Are these magazine models standing in for the gods of days-gone-by? If that's the entire scope of this work, it seems to me that it's been done by feminist filmmakers (Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly*, for example) and politically-correct writers.

After seeing Prince's MTV clip, I no longer have any doubts about his work. Simply put, Prince comes off as a real jerk. Purchasing an ice cream in front of the Guggenheim Museum, he offers the following endorsement of MTV:

Do you know me? I'm one of the best-kept secrets in the art world. But even the best-kept secret carries MTV. (R-I-C-H-A-R-D P-R-I-N-C-E punches onto an image of the MTV "card.") Art and MTV. Hey! Don't stay home without them.

It's tempting to believe that Prince has pulled one over on the folks at MTV. In truth, however, parodies of this long-running American Express campaign are as old as the campaign itself.

The MoMA exhibition press release referred to music videos as "promotional tools of the music industry" which brought to public attention several experimental techniques developed by independent artists in the sixties. In the cases of Borofsky, Ontani and even Clough, it could be said that the MTV artists are using techniques pioneered by the commercial sector. Tuttle just seems to have missed the mark altogether. Basquiat and Prince have created works which, I think misguidedly, seek strength through familiar cliches of the medium, not exposing them or revitalizing them in any way. Basquiat's clip risks trivializing the art world by pandering to the party sensibility of MTV's viewers, an audience which, frankly, isn't likely to be very sophisticated as far as contemporary art goes. The "fuck art—let's dance" posturing seems better suited to the punk-rockers than artists. Basquiat's clip will help to perpetuate the "my two-year old could do that" mentality which works against artists.

Ironically, it's Prince's piece which best demonstrates the most dangerous aspect of the television medium: banal formula. Prince, it would seem, is a secret best kept. If there's truly a future for art on TV, it more likely lies in directions which television itself has not taken. By dressing art up, fitting it into the mindless pacing and formulas of television, it becomes as ridiculous and meaningless as the company it keeps.