

TV Control

Ryan J. Smith

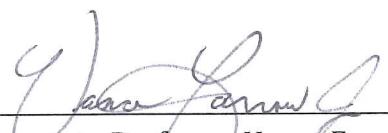
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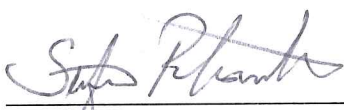
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Master of Fine Arts

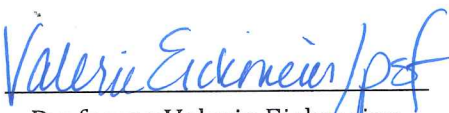
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TV Control

In my life, television has taken the on varying roles from teacher to entertainer, from salesman to charlatan, and though I have my issues with television, its presence has had such a profound impact on me, I find it difficult to imagine what life might be like or who I might be without it. Although television has been criticized as a problematic device which has a negative impact on society and its peoples, my thesis exhibition, *TV Control*, attempts to dereify the institution of television by taking over its medium, remodeling it and rethinking it in order to gain more transparency, greater control and a better understanding of television and our contemporary, media immersed world.

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My Electronic Eyes (The Television Appendage)

The century before I was born communicating through technology became increasingly pervasive. As I grew up, computers and the internet were not the dominate force they would later become, and television was the king of mass communication. The TV room was as ubiquitous a gathering place as its ancient ancestor, the hearth.

Television has been my access point to the outside world, to places free from the constraints of ordinary, day-to-day life. Yet, it is more than a window into the larger world, television can be an enthralling visual storyteller concerned both fictional and non-fictional works mirrored in my animations (Figures 1, 2).



Figure 1: *Cheetah*, animation, 2014

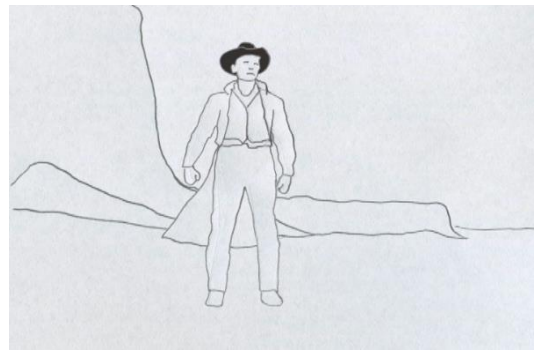


Figure 2: *Western*, animation, 2015

Television, due to what and how it presents itself and its contents, has its own way of portraying the world. In *Television Shapes the Soul*, Michael Novak explains:

“The conventions of various sorts of television recreate different sorts of “worlds.” These “worlds” raise questions - and, to some extent, illuminate certain features that we notice in ourselves and around us as we watch.” ¹

By looking closely at television’s programming, it both mirrors reality and creates its own. Its stories can embody society’s moral struggles and aspirations.

In this way, television is more than a tool for sight; it is a way of seeing. With this in mind, television has always held more importance to me than a simple appliance. I define myself through it and, in doing so, television is an integral part of my identity as

¹ Novak, Michael. “Television Shapes the Soul”. *Mass Media Issues*. Lenard L. Seilars and Wilbur C. Rivers New York: Prentice-Hall, 1971.



Figure 3: *TV Control* participants viewing *Interview*, an animated self-portrait created in the style of a television program.

portrayed in my animation, *Interview* (Figure 3). Thus, I find that it is impossible to separate myself from technologically driven media.

We Can Rebuild Him, We Have the Technology. (Transhumanism)

Over the course of my life, I have learned to seek out technologies like television as a way to enhance my everyday experience. While working towards my thesis, I discovered the personal connection I have with new technologies and television mirrors transhumanist philosophy and its ideas of the self. Transhumanism is an ideology which asserts that humanity can surpass its limitations with the support of technology.² In works of science fiction and fantasy, this concept of a new, technologically-augmented human is often conveyed in very visible ways, through depictions of cybernetics and genetically enhanced human bodies.

In reality, the way technology is integrated into our everyday life manifests itself more sensibly and subtly. A contemporary example of this would be cell phones, which

² Ranisch, Robert. *Post- and transhumanism: an introduction*. Frankfurt am Main New York: Peter Lang, 2014. Print.

extend our voices across vast distances and assist our ears in picking up speech far outside of our normal, audible reach. Television is, of course, another prime example because it extends our vision, allowing us to see things that lie far beyond the scope of our own eyes. While working on *TV Control*, I searched for ways to make the viewer and myself feel more actively aware of television's potential for augmenting the human experience.

"Skin has become inadequate in interfacing with reality. Technology has become the body's new membrane of existence."

(Nam June Paik)³

Nam June Paik, a contemporary artist who I identify with, emphasizes television's relationship to transhumanist philosophy through his work. In Paik's *TV Buddha*, a statue of the Buddha sits directly opposite of a closed-circuit television. A camera records an image of the statue and projects it onto the television's display. The Buddha stares at himself through the television, seemingly in contemplation of the nature of his existence. By way of a physical-to-optical transformation, television becomes a transhumanist tool for Buddha's transcendence. Where *TV Buddha* is concerned with technology's ability to bolster spiritual development and conveys the possibilities of technologically-augmented experience through visual metaphor, I am interested in a more mundane and worldly experience, using a similar metaphor but placing participants in the Buddha's role.

³ Stiles, Kristine, and Peter Selz. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996. Print: 430

In *TV Control*, I am providing the viewer with a remote, a device of transhumanist expression that extends one's reach (Figure 4). Beyond exploring the installation space, participants are invited to explore the realm of the television. Their



Figure 4: *TV Control*, participants during the exhibition, 2015

control of the remote gives them command over the work and the content that they are viewing. It provides capabilities beyond most gallery experiences, giving the viewer a way to determine (to some extent) what is displayed on the television.

All that is required is a simple press of their thumb. In this way, participants can become one with the remote and by extension one with both the piece and the technology during their time in the exhibit.

With the contemporary ways we integrate technology throughout life, humanity is becoming closer and closer to the technology that they use. In his seminal work, *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan expressed this idea:

“During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man - the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and our nerves by the various media.”⁴

⁴ McLuhan, Marshall, and Lewis H. Lapham. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994. Print: 19

In *TV Control*, I am interested in presenting my viewers with a way to extend their body but also attempting to draw attention to the viewer's connectivity with the whole of society through technology.

Resistance Is Futile! (Reconciling with Critiques of Television and Technology)

Some critics have expressed the opinion that humanity's connection to technology is, or could become, increasingly problematic. They approach this from a variety of angles, often stemming from the anxiety felt over the loss of control over the media they consume, or the cognitive dissonance one has with the unchangeable, repetitious nature media programming. *TV Control*, as a social installation and physical embodiment of our techno-social society, aims to reconcile with many of these concerns.

A fundamental concern for critics is the loss of human agency to technology. Electronic beings seizing power away from humanity may sound familiar from countless works of dystopian science fiction. The Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* takes this idea a step further by making this control horrifyingly invisible to the titular system's inhabitants. These fears are a reflection of real-world, contemporary anxieties that surround technology, in relation to how far reaching its influence is.

In *TV Control*, although participants extended their control through the use of technology (via the remote), at its core, the television's programming is orchestrated in a way that is outside of their control (Figure 5). Invariably,



Figure 5: Electronics and wiring hidden beneath *TV Control's* stage.

their perception of the television and its opportunities for choice and selection will be dictated by the programming that is set in place. This begs the question of whether the remote (or technology as a whole) can actually imbue one with meaningful faculties, or conversely only the illusion of control.

Similar to our uncertainty over control, another critique is that technology is created by humans and has a tendency to encourage the worst aspects of humanity. In Guy Debord's seminal work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, he postulates the destructive nature of new media in the late 20th century, claiming we are in "the moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life".⁵ Here, Debord is criticizing the way in which technology is self-fulfilling. Furthermore he explains, in modern times, technology is used to further materialistic novelty within society and often achieved through excitement and spectacle. Debord also asserts that several technologies exist solely as a distraction, which provides us with superficial merit.

⁵ Debord, Guy. *Society of the spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1983. Print: 42

By utilizing an outdated cathode ray tube (CRT) television (Figure 6) in *TV Control*, I want to raise the question of whether television, as a commodity, is trivial. With this out of style technology, I divorce my work from Debord's cycle of artificial desires and novelty which serves the spectacle of the trivial. By liberating my work from Debord's spectacle in this way, the installation becomes about a device and our memories of its impact. With this temporal distance from the

technology, one can reflect upon the historical significance of television and make clear its current relevance and influence.

Thinking beyond television as a device—as a societal construct—the media that is broadcast on television is also subject to much criticism, in relation to problematic programming. Jerry Mander, in his book, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, provides a fairly concise list of the primary issues he believes plague television. Mander “calls out” television and its effects on humanity’s long term critical thinking skills, relationship to natural environments, health and society conditions, focusing on who wields the power of television and why television is so apt to feature problematic programming⁶.



Figure 6: Montgomery Wards 20" Color TV, Model 12680 as displayed in *TV Control*.

⁶ Mander, Jerry. *Four arguments for the elimination of television*. New York: Morrow, 1978. Print.

TV Control addresses Mander's characterization of television viewers and their relationship to natural environments, personal health and social status, through the



Figure 7: *TV Control*, right corner view of installation, 2015

recreation of a basement-like space (Figure 7).

This relates to contemporary connotations of “the basement”, which typically aligns with the image of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), shut-ins or others seeking an escape from the real, who isolate themselves from the world. NEETs have gone by several terms over the years, but mostly have been associated with lethargic attitudes and delinquency. Simon Cox

of BBC News referred to NEET as “the latest

buzzword for teenage drop-outs”.⁷ By interacting with *TV Control*'s environment, the viewer can place themselves into the shoes of those commonly thought of as an undesirable byproduct of technology and reexamine television's social impact.

In Mander's book, notes this quote from 1960s magazine *Advertising Age*, “Network television, particularly, is largely the creature of the 100 largest companies in the country”.⁸ So according to industry insiders, television is in the hands of an elite few. Outside of being a major advertiser or media executive, viewers don't determine what is on television. In short, it's out of their hands. It is frightening to think that not only can television have an unseen hand in our lives, but is also primarily influenced by

⁷ Cox, Simon. "A 'Neet' solution". *BBC News*. Accessed 24 August 2011.

⁸ Mander, Jerry. *Four arguments for the elimination of television*. New York: Morrow, 1978. Print: 149

a select few. I work to subvert this notion in *TV Control* by altering my relationship with television from a passive viewer to a content creator and the architect of my television's broadcasts.

During production, I modified a pre-existing television's hardware through retrofitting low-grade broadcasting equipment (Figures 8, 9). For the duration of the exhibition, my personally arranged animations are viewable as a series of different television channels. The importance in managing the television as a device can be traced to Marshall McLuhan's



Figure 8: View of *TV Control*'s stage without paneling, exposing its customized components.



Figure 9: Close up of components.

famous aphorism, “the medium is the message”.⁹ McLuhan believed that the medium of television affects society, possibly more than the content TV carries. In that sense, television influences us beyond what is on the screen. It manufactures its own culture. In adopting the medium, I change the message. Through reclaiming a physical

⁹ McLuhan, Marshall, and Lewis H. Lapham. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1994. Print.

television, I hope to empower others to take control of their own technologically influenced lives.

As a medium, *TV Control* critiques the institution of television itself. Where television normally concerns itself with advertisement, consumption, and trendsetting, my thesis work attempts to illuminate the repetitive nature of television. As *TV Control* indefinitely repeats its programming, its contents are always shifting but never progressing. This contrasts with television's normal tendency to emphasize the spectacle of the new and satisfy the ever-changing demands of viewers.

With the agency I assert over the television, I also commandeer television's content. By re-drawing or rotoscoping, as in *Western* (Figure 10), I appropriate iconic shows or segments and recontextualize them. By taking ownership of this mode of presentation, I can place my hand directly into the production side of television and can then influence how such media is understood. In some instances, as exemplified by *Interview* (Figure 11), I expand my control over television by inserting segments comprised of fully original content. With this newfound command



Figure 10: *Western*, animation, 2015

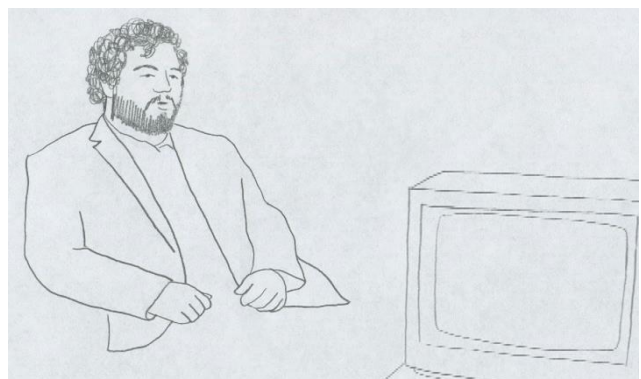


Figure 11: *Interview*, animation, 2015

over television, I can then dissect and remedy the limitations placed on my own viewing of everyday television broadcasts.

When consuming televised programming, viewers are often unaware of how broadcasts adhere to an established system. Even with the vast array of programs available to the public, televised content remains highly formulaic. The same set of tropes and archetypes are recycled week to week, resulting in most new programming remaining symbolically unchanged. Much in the way Sisyphus is condemned to eternally roll a huge boulder up a hill, the inability to develop or progress hinders true freedom. As viewers, we cannot escape this cycle unless we also recognize that our actions are made meaningless when they become repetitious and devoid of purpose.

In *TV Control*, I intentionally highlight the formulaic nature of television by distilling popular tropes and genres into an array of separate channels. Repetition is made apparent through the loops of animation. Tension builds as my televised



Figure 12: *Cheetah*, animation, 2014

animations never truly progress.

In the animation *Cheetah* (Figure 12), the animal remains eternally engaged in the act of eating a successful hunt. It never finishes its meal, as the loop continues indefinitely. The suspension of time here is satirically referencing

the unevolving content from the days of *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* to its contemporary parallels. As a whole *TV Control* attempts to make abundantly clear the

single-mindedness of television's content, as well as the limitations of choices placed on the average viewer.

In these ways, *TV Control* allows the viewer to contemplate the contemporary concerns of television consumption. By becoming aware of the device and the programming that dictates its content, viewers can potentially find ways to get around the regimentation of television and take charge of the medium. With a newfound understanding, viewers can operate as active participants, rather than remaining passive observers. As an interactive and contemplative space, *TV Control* attempts to place this form of agency into the hands of participants.

What You See Is What You Get! (Making the Unconscious Conscious)

Due to the negative connotations associated with television, I want myself and my audience to have a "first time I'm experiencing this" type effect when they walk into *TV Control*. By doing so, we can look upon television with new perspectives. I looked to the writings of French philosopher and founder of Phenomenology, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to explore how experiences can be revitalized and reconditioned. His philosophy asserts that interactions with the uncanny can fundamentally lead to a viewer's acceptance of an object's ambiguity.¹⁰ Thus, from a phenomenological perspective, viewing the uncanny can re-open one's eyes to new ways of seeing things; even if they were once familiar and ingrained.

¹⁰ Ponty, Maurice, and Donald A. Landes. *Phenomenology of perception*. Abingdon, Oxon New York: Routledge, 2012. Print.

Wanting *TV Control* to represent the experience of television, but hoping to avoid its sordid reputation, I chose to create an uncanny facsimile of an ordinary television viewing experience. The implementation of this is related to French philosopher Jean Baudrillard's simulacrum. In *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard states, "a simulacrum is not a copy of the real, but becomes truth in its own right: the hyperreal".¹¹ The space created through the installation in *TV Control*, as well as the animations displayed on television, exist as different stages of simulacra with differing levels of veracity.

For the exhibition, I orchestrated the space of an imagined, lived-in basement complete with items you might find in that setting, such as cheap carpeting, a ragged couch, and an outdated lamp (Figure 13). These objects act as scenery similar to theatre props or movie backdrops. These prop-like objects exist only as stand-ins. Observant viewers may notice that the lamp cannot possibly fulfill its regular functions as it lacks power, plug or even a bulb, thus negating its everyday use and its "lampness". This places



Figure 13: *TV Control*, left corner view of installation, 2015

¹¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print: 1

the installation into Baudrillard's first stage of simulacrum, a "basic reflection of reality".¹² Though the items on the stage are actual, they represent a reflection of reality, an uncanny likeness.

Due to a viewer's interaction within the environment, the installation aspect of *TV Control* fits Baudrillard's third stage of simulacrum, as a "pretense of reality".¹² I attempt to make a "false" display appear "true" by making the absence of reality apparent. By arranging the stage in the center of a sterile gallery space and floating a ceiling above this structure, I allude to the mechanisms of theater. Theater shares a pretense for reality with Baudrillard's third stage of simulacrum, in the way in which an interactive and believable environment is staged. When interpreting the installation as a set and its participants as actors, the gallery space fades and the installation transforms into a tangible and interactive environment. As a virtual reality, participants can explore the artifice of television and discover their own truths.

The animations found in *TV Control*, fit into Baudrillard's fourth stage of simulacrum, "no relation to reality".¹² While the drawings have a similarity to everyday television programming, it is nearly impossible to identify their original source. The hand-drawn animation acts as a replacement and distillation of channels existing on network television. Yet, though the animations may be obscured from their original source, they retain their eerie similarities with many of the tropes, images and associated noises of their originals.

¹² Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print: 6

In *Western* (Figure 14), I animate and cut the video in an effort to abstract the structure of its narrative while still utilizing iconic images from the genre, such as a man in a white hat, a man in a black hat, murder, and revenge. The “story” only emerges due to how ingrained these tropes are to viewers.

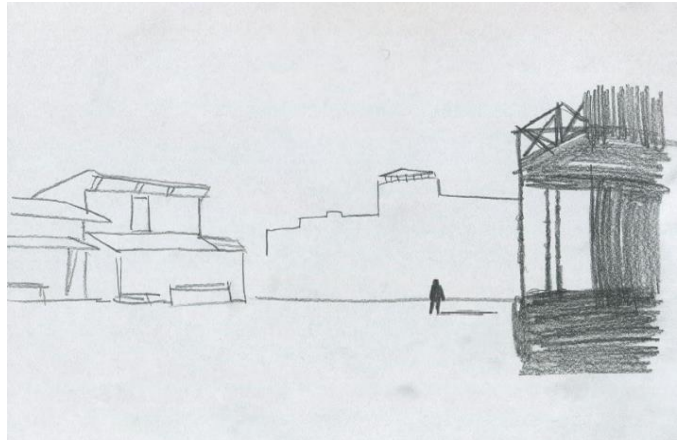


Figure 14: *Western*, animation, 2015

Like the animations, the artifice of the television itself fits Baudrillard’s fourth stage of simulacrum.¹³ It is in no way shape or form a regular television. Instead, it is a subterfuge and a lie. The electronics are hidden and then funneled into a streamlined presentation. Its programming is made to look and function like everyday television, but they are in no way actual broadcasts. The wiring, engineering, remote, channel splitter are hidden behind the veneer of the display (Figure 15).



Figure 15: Comparison views of *TV Control* with wires hidden and revealed respectively.

¹³ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print.

As a series of simulacra, *TV Control* becomes a familiar yet strange environment. Its uncanniness provides a perfect state for our minds to wonder, rationalize and reconsider our relationships to television of which we are normally unaware.

Really Big Show! (Audience Reactions to the Exhibition)

On the night of my exhibition, I aimed to make the experience for viewers – while in the space – feel authentic. I left them unhindered, allowing participants to explore the realm of my television and, unless invited in or directly asked a question by the viewer, I tried to stay out of their way as they experienced the installation.

As my audience left the installation, many voiced intrigue with the familiarities of the space. Some of which were clearly transported back to a time and place where they encountered a similar environment of a living room or basement. Particularly, many of the viewers over 40 talked to me about television “back in the day”. They shared several stories with me about their experiences with friends or family and explained the social dynamics of their living room.



Figure 16: *TV Control*, installation, 2015

When composing the set of *TV Control*, the idea of a NEET in a place of quiet isolation weighed heavily on my mind. Several of the design choices I made toward the exhibit were based on that image (Figure 16). *TV Control* allowed for a

certain manner of experiment to occur. Would audiences mimic the NEET or would a

different story play out? The audience feedback provided me with relief from my doubts, allowing the space to take on new meaning as participants altered the environment of the installation with their positive responses.

In reality this space fluidly changes connotations, person to person. While *TV Control* can be the place of a NEET, in my experience it is just as often a friend's basement, a grandparent's attic, or a childhood haven—places defined by social activity. I particularly enjoyed the way



Figure 17: *TV Control*, installation, 2015

different groups of people connected and how they appeared to be a nuclear family, even if they were merely acquaintances or random gallery viewers when entering the exhibit (Figure 17).

Just One More Thing... (Final Thoughts)

TV Control is my way of exploring my relationship to television. I hoped to make something where I could detach television from its problematic aspects by taking control of the medium, producing my own programming and by giving viewers back their agency. I wanted to set the stage for my audience to dismantle their previously held beliefs and form new opinions based on their interactions within *TV Control*. My hope is that, through *TV Control*, we can rediscover television and with that, better

understand ourselves and our technological, mediated world with a greater sense of transparency.