

People and Ideas

TELEVISION'S IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY ART

by Marc H. Miller

When television made its official debut at the 1939 New York World's Fair, it was heralded as a key feature of "The World of Tomorrow." People thronged to the RCA pavilion in Flushing, Queens, to see the new invention that promised to bring moving pictures and synchronized sound into every living room across America. Although the promise of TV was temporarily delayed because of World War II, public response to its reintroduction in 1946 exceeded the expectations of even its most ardent boosters. Within a few years, as the price of sets fell, millions of TVs were purchased and hundreds of broadcasters began serving up programming. Today, with more than 86 million televisions in 98 percent of the homes of America, and the average person watching more than thirty hours per week, there are few who have not been touched by the new medium.

Television has had a particularly powerful effect on visual artists. As TV has

assumed its place as a principal source of visual information, it has radically altered the visual climate both in the way images are presented and in the range of content. Many artists have adopted the new medium to make video art, but TV has also affected the style and content of works done in traditional mediums. The dynamic of this response recalls the nineteenth-century arrival of photography, a new visual medium that affected the subject matter and style of many artists, both realists and Impressionists.

In the 1960s the first wave of TV-influenced art appeared. Now in the 1980s the first generation to grow up with TV has come to maturity. Weaned on the tube, the "electronic babysitter," these baby boomers are producing a deluge of TV-inspired works.

Artworks produced in response to television are a far from uniform group. This is not surprising, since TV is a passive tool of communication suited to many purposes. It serves revolutionaries and reactionaries, gratifies hedonists and inspires evangelists, shows us nutrition experts and sells us junk food. TV offers itself equably to the wide range of aes-

thetic and philosophical inquiry that makes up contemporary art. Despite the pluralism of TV-inspired work, there are some basic ways in which artists have interacted with TV.

The TV set itself has emerged as subject in numerous works of art. A quintessentially modern piece of furniture, it defines a scene as contemporary. As a kind of window on the world, the TV is an evocative motif that, whether in a still-life interior or a figurative scene, radically alters the mood. Its phosphorescent glow provides artists with a new type of light; its depiction infuses a scene with distinctive new feelings.

Artists have also focused on TV programs, which provide an endless stream of subjects. The constant flow of entertainment and news shared by Americans (and by people around the world) has in large part replaced literature and newspapers as common culture. In depicting this public subject matter, the artist knows that what has a strong effect on him has had a strong effect on others. It is a new kind of history painting.

The new electronic technology has stimulated artists to imitate the distinctive

Lewis Stein, from *Surveillance Series*, 1984-1985

