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## Exhibition review

### *Remote Control*

ICA, London

30 April – 10 June 2012



*Nicola McCartney*

AS THE NATION PREPARES TO RE-TUNE their television sets for the digital switch-over, marking the end of an analogue era, I doubt if many people will consider the event historical or little more than a hassle. Once a privilege or symbol of wealth, the television is now commonplace. The flat screen, consumer advertising and late-night repeats have become so ubiquitous they are unchallenged and beyond subliminal. I remember when the launch of Channel 5 was big news and its contents considered almost amusing soft-porn by comparison to the more scholarly BBC or entertaining Channels 3 and 4. Freeview offers us more 'options' but the quantity outweighs the quality. When Orwell's '1984' became a reality with Channel 4's series *Big Brother* the nation was gripped with shock and horror. Moving towards its tenth series, the programme is now somewhat of a joke and, with it, the notions of 'live' or 'reality' television.

'Remote Control' (until 10 June 2012) is an exhibition at the ICA that evaluates the impact of television on contemporary social and visual culture. The lower

gallery harks back to analogue technology and feels somewhat 'out of fashion'. Heavy-duty 3-dimensional monitors display some of the first television art by Ant Farm and Richard Serra, and surround Simon Denny's installation of remnants of transmission hardware [Figure 1.]. Quotes from Serra's *Television Delivers People* (1973), scroll like credits at the end of a film and critique the very media they inhabit. Dictatorial statements such as 'Soft propaganda is considered entertainment', 'The viewer pays the privilege for having himself sold', and 'Control over broadcasting is an exercise in control over society' were once rebellious, insightful and more powerful than they appear in today's cynical society where the same sentiments are taken for granted – who doesn't know that every broadcaster has a political agenda and that we become the products of our own consumerism? But reading them with knowing agreement, almost to the extent of apathy, only reinforces their truth and current pertinence.



Figure 1. Installation view of *Remote Control*, ICA, London  
Image courtesy of the ICA © Stephen White

The exhibition continues upstairs where one is confronted by Adrian Piper's ironically titled *Cornered* (1988). This passive-aggressive installation comprises a set of chairs facing a television monitor that sits atop a turned-over table in the corner of the room, either side of which a copy of the artist's father's birth certificate is placed. Through the monitor, Piper conducts a one-sided argument with her viewer – us – on the notion of racial identity and her heritage. She uses the physicality of the television to set up a domestic space in which we feel comfortable enough to engage with 'her'. But the turned-over table implies otherwise; aggression, violence and the result of a dispute. In contrast, Piper discusses what it means to 'fit-in' and pretend to be white – "If I tell you who I am, you become nervous or uncomfortable" – in a very diplomatic and passive manner, as if she were adopting the pose and style of an anchor-woman, the traditionally white and middle-class personality she critiques for having to represent, and be misrepresented by.

Also upstairs are Tauba Auerbach's mesmerizing images of TV static and binary code (2012). Though the piece is contemporary it encapsulates a sense of nostalgia; taking as its subject matter the changing look of the stuff of transmission. The waves of black and white, rarely seen on television now, reminded me of a past-era when TV 'stopped' at the end of the evening. Auerbach's enlarged details draw the viewer in to play at making their own images of the code, like versions of Magic Eye pictures.

Works by Jessica Diamond, Martha Rosler and Mark Leckey deal with television's pop-culture. Leckey uses the well-known character Felix the Cat as part of his film collage, which is particularly symbolic as Felix was also used in the 1920s as part of a test pattern for the first television broadcasts in the USA. In Leckey's *Felix Gets Broadcast* (2007) [Figure 2.], however, the cat's shadows are projected ominously throughout the various scenes so that he becomes an eerie but slick and contemporary life-like version of the other edits he appears in. By including much of the 'set' and film equipment in his video, Leckey creates a backstage feel, so that the uncanny-like Felix-turned-*Chucky* character appears more like the producer than subject of his film. *Felix Gets Broadcast* demonstrates how television is a medium that can be used to play on itself – a cartoon within another – and still holds enough power to create tension and suspense.



Figure 2. Mark Leckey, *Felix Gets Broadcasted* (2007)  
© Mark Leckey and Cabinet, London

'Remote Control' also hosted a live programme of events named after Serra's piece, *Television Delivers People*, to complement the exhibition. Unfortunately this reviewer was unable to review those but relevant performances and screenings included *The Truman Show*; and talks and performances by Auto Italia East, Bob Stanley, Experimental TV Center, Stephen Sutcliffe, Jonny Woo and Lucky PDF.