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Artists' TV

What's motivating broadcasters to collaborate with artists?

Main image: David Hall, still from TV Interruptions broadcast unannounced by Scottish Television, 1971. Courtesy: © Deborah Hall, Estate of David Hall

At the recent launch of the UK's new Channel 4 series, Grayson Perry: All Man, Commissioning Editor for Arts John Hay announced an increased emphasis on collaboration with artists, envisaged as authors rather than subjects of arts programmes. Specific initiatives cited included a 'super-charged' Random Acts series (consisting of a three-year partnership with Arts Council England to fund 200 creative short films per year for TV, web and social media) and a commission from artist John Gerrard, titled Western Flag, for transmission sometime in spring 2017. Gerrard is known for the production of detailed real-time computer generated simulations of various sites, often located in the US, such as a solar energy plant in Nevada, a Google server farm in Oklahoma and automated pig fattening units in the US Midwest. Western Flag has similarly been conceived as a portrait of a place, responding to the current context of energy production but also referencing an earlier historical moment. This new work consists of a computer generated flag made from perpetually-renewing black smoke, located in a CGI replica of Spindletop, Texas, commonly identified as the birthplace of the modern oil industry because of the massive oil gusher struck there on 10 January 1901.

The Lucas Gusher blowing out oil January 10, 1901 on Spindletop hill in Beaumont, Texas. Courtesy: Getty Images; photograph: Texas Energy Museum/Newsmakers

According to the Channel 4 press release, Western Flag will 'run in cyberspace for a year – exactly paralleling the sunrises, sunsets, lengthening shadows and changing seasons of the real Spindletop – and for one day next spring will break into the Channel 4 schedule'. Seasonality has been a long-standing component of broadcast time, beginning with early public service radio schedules, which both mirrored and modelled patterns of listening that were devised around structures of urban and rural family life, including feast days and harvests. Gerrard's simulations also rely upon familiar temporal formations, such as time zones, but he deploys less obviously human-centred algorithmic logics to simulate the movements of planet-generating shadows and underscore the loss of seasonal time in automated farming.

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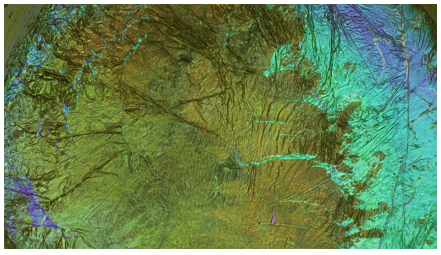
David Hall, still from TV Interruptions broadcast unannounced by Scottish Television, 1971. Courtesy: © Deborah Hall, Estate of David Hall

Western Flag is not, of course, the first artwork devised as a 'break' in the flow of broadcast time; in 1971, for example, David Hall devised seven 'interruptions' to be broadcast unaccredited and unannounced on Scottish Television. (These works were later distributed on video as TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces). Read more about it on the LUX website.)

Perhaps because his work directly addresses televisual objecthood and consumption, Hall's interruptions have been routinely historicized in terms of critique, rather than as the outcome of a negotiated collaboration with a broadcaster. In some respects, Western Flag signals a continuation of this collaborative tradition, but it forms part of an algorithmic turn in contemporary art, and bears little relation to the critiques of television that shaped the reception of Hall's work. It is, however, possible to identify a recent commissioning context in which artists were invited to engage with television itself, as institution, cultural form and public infrastructure. I'm referring here to the project 'Artists and Archives: Artists' Moving Image at the BBC', which took place in 2014 at BBC Scotland, with the support of LUX and Creative Scotland. Six artists – Kate Davis, Kathryn Elkin, Luke Fowler, Torsten Lauschmann, Stephen Sutcliffe and Alia Syed – were invited to undertake year-long residences with 24-hour access to the archives of BBC Scotland. Each artist was required to produce a single-channel work, which would be accessible (to viewers based in the UK) on the BBC website. (All the films are available to view here.)

Kathryn Elkin, Michael's Theme, 2014, film still. Courtesy: BBC

The resulting works are diverse in form, treatment and subject matter, but several make use of 'non-broadcast' fragments. In Michael's Theme (2014), for example, Kathryn Elkin uses previously un-broadcast fragments from the long-running BBC talk show Parkinson to explore the relationship between jazz improvisation and the aesthetics of television that is 'recorded-as-live'. Fowler's 24-minute film Depositions (2014) takes a more explicitly critical approach to the archive, incorporating material from sources other than the BBC and directly addressing the representation of ethnically marginalized groups, including Traveller communities and communities living in the Highlands and Islands. All six films merit attention on their own terms, but it seems equally important to consider the motivations of artists and broadcasters seeking to collaborate at a moment when television's status as a dominant cultural form is very much in question.



Luke Fowler, Depositions, 2014, film

'Artists and Archives' demanded an intense, year-long engagement from the six artists, and it was also technically and administratively demanding for the broadcaster, since all materials had to be legally cleared for use online. There are evident benefits to both parties, since the artists could use materials that might otherwise have been inaccessible, and BBC Scotland could publicly assert its support for art production and its partnership with LUX and Creative Scotland. At a time when income from archive sales is often essential to under-resourced public broadcasters and media archives, collaborations like this can be a way for cultural institutions to meet demands for public access, and identify priorities (for archiving, digitization and

preservation) that might be altogether different from those dictated by the demands of commercial clients. Fowler's film demonstrates that there was at least some scope within the 'Artists and Archives' project for a critique of public service broadcasting, informed by an analysis of the archive and its limits.

Another recent commission – albeit emanating this time from outside the BBC – points to the continued fascination exerted by the BBC and its history. Two Eyes are Not Brothers (2015) by Ben Rivers was commissioned by Artangel for installation at Television Centre in White City, a site that will – controversially – be redeveloped for commercial purposes. Rivers's project, involving sculptural installations of moving image material primarily shot in Morocco, included scenes of old film sets abandoned in the Sahara desert. The Artangel press release emphasised possible linkages between these material leftovers and the infrastructure of television production, tempting the visitor to explore spaces once used to construct scenery and props for BBC TV drama. Two Eyes are Not Brothers promised, and delivered, a compelling journey behind the scenes of Television Centre. But a different model of commissioning might engage more directly with the future of such sites, and with the forces now impacting upon broadcasting, which increasingly require the infrastructure and cultural history of public television to be mined and mobilized for profit.

Ben Rivers, The Two Eyes are Not Brothers, 2015, installation view, BBC Television Centre, London. An Artangel, The Whitworth, Manchester and BFI Film Fund commission. Courtesy: Artangel, London; photograph: Marcus Leith

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