Barry Chappell’s Fine Art Showcase

Apparitional TV, aesthetic value, and the art market

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The only thing I can say is that he sells cheap what no one else wants. The Dali’s are ugly, the Royos are ugly, just about every artwork he sells is ugly. I think he buys in bulk cheap what no one else wants. And he doesn’t know crap about art either.


I am an artist and have enjoyed watching Barry on DirecTv [sic]. He is very informative and I have learned a lot about the art business end. He has shown many beautiful pieces of work. [...] I think Barry is making art affordable to the common man, and should keep doing the good work.


1. The value of art on TV

Barry Chappell sells art on television. If you believe him, he sells fine, even museum quality art at bargain prices on Barry Chappell’s fine art showcase. Fine art showcase is not a particularly well-known programme and in many ways it defies the most common models of understanding American television and TV programming. Indeed, it is sufficiently marginal that I sometimes wonder if it really counts as a television programme at all, even though it airs, live, on a recurrent basis. It also subsumes many of the familiar tropes of the medium, variously engaging liveness, self-reflexivity, education, entertainment, domesticity, public service, consumerism, repetition, direct address, intermediality, and convergence. These are deployed in the context of a constant discourse about art, as the programme participates in a much longer history of art on television.¹ In the process, it raises fundamental questions about art, commerce, value, and consumer culture, and offers useful ways of thinking about current, transitional formations of television.

Fine art showcase is a version of Direct Response Television (DRTV), the industry label for programmes that market products directly to viewers.² Infomercials and home shopping television services are the most familiar DRTV programmes. Infomercials are prerecorded programmes that air repeatedly to sell a specific product that viewers can order by mail, phone, or online.³ TV shopping
networks (such as Home Shopping Club and QVC) sell a wide range of merchandise through live programming, accepting orders by telephone or through the internet. DRTV is not supported by advertising or by any form of subscriber fees. Instead, companies buy time on existing stations, or operate their own channels which they fill with sales programmes, and the income generated from successful sales pays for both the products and the programming. Because they market directly to viewers, DRTV companies are far less concerned with aggregate audience numbers than they are with sales volume per hour.

While Fine art showcase resembles these familiar DRTV formats, there are important differences between them. In distinction to prerecorded infomercials, the Fine arts showcase is a live programme that runs from two to six hours per episode. In contrast to the 24/7 shopping networks, Fine art showcase is one (of only two) live programmes that air on the Celebrity Shopping Network (CSN), a channel otherwise comprised of non-stop infomercials for a variety of products including celebrity-sponsored merchandise. CSN sells cosmetic and skin care regimens by Victoria Principal, Cindy Crawford, Susan Lucci, and Leeza Gibbons; DVD sets of branded exercise programmes and the Dean Martin celebrity roast; and a range of household cleaning products. This is the context in which Barry Chappell’s fine art showcase appears on television, where it is inserted into the discrepant flow of infomercials that are the mainstay of the station with its signature identity grounded in celebrity culture and domesticity. Moreover, the conceit of the programme – fine art sales – involves a product seemingly at odds with the presumptive working and lower-middle class consumer taste associated with DRTV products. This disparity is amplified by the cost of the merchandise which is considerably higher than typical infomercial products. Prices on the Fine art showcase vary widely, but typically range between a few hundred and several thousand dollars (US).

Barry Chappell presides over the programme from Santa Monica, California, in a studio designed to efficiently convey the conceptual scope of the programme: art, domesticity, and the retail process that connects them. An easel sits on one side of the set to display individual works of art; the other side is furnished with a large desk in front, some upholstered seating, and a photographic cityscape in the draped window on the back wall. Barry easily moves between these two areas, and conjures up the unseen production and sales area behind the camera by conversing with his off-screen staff. Barry sells singular and multi-edition artwork. Singular works (oil paintings, drawings, watercolours, signed proof runs, and unique pieces of glass art) are auctioned while multiple-edition works (silk-screens, etchings, giclees, serigraphs, and lithographs) retail for a set price. The live TV auction highlights that only one person can own the unique work, and provides prospects for televisual drama as bidders call in and push the price higher. By contrast, multi-edition art can be sold to multiple buyers at the same time. Thus, the programme adapts the process of valuing, selling, and buying art to the distinctive context of live, direct sales television.

Fine art showcase sells work by an international array of artists. Andy Warhol and Salvador Dali are probably the most famous, though the appearance of their work is extremely rare. Some of the artists are well-known for their work
in other creative fields, including author Henry Miller and American comedian Jonathan Winters. Pierre Henri Matisse has fame by association, owing to his grandfather’s renown. Barry constantly reminds viewers that some Guillaume Azoulay drawings are held in the permanent collection of the Louvre. In sum, there is just enough name recognition to support Barry’s claims to be selling investment or museum quality art. Yet not all of the work seems to belong, or hang, in museums. More often, it veers in the direction of mass market decorative art, resembling that found in shopping mall galleries, community art fairs, or upscale furniture stores – proficient work, albeit with uncertain prospects when it comes to long term investment or aesthetic value.

Of course, this assessment raises larger questions about art worlds, taste cultures, class distinction, and commodity culture. Judgements about the value of art are fraught, changeable, and open to debate, including considerations of how art gets valued in the first place, as well as discrepancies between the personal taste of individuals buying art and the perspectives of the (high) art establishment. These differences emerge in the vernacular of my opening epigraphs that come from a discussion thread on an art-related website. Does Barry buy and sell cheap the ugly stuff that no one else wants, or does he show beautiful pieces and make art affordable to the common man? These sorts of question are addressed in more academic terms when scholars explore the social, aesthetic, and cultural contexts that are integral to determinations of the value of art.

Questions of value are also at the heart of the show, which consistently characterizes the work being sold as ‘fine’, ‘museum’, or ‘investment’ calibre. Barry discusses value in at least four different ways: the aesthetics of the work (art appreciation); the artist’s life work (art history); prospects for the work increasing in price over time (investment value); and his prices (bargain value). Reference materials clutter his desk. He routinely rifles through piles of art books, gallery catalogues, brochures, art collecting guides, and pages from websites of other dealers who sell similar work, evidence that other art experts show, sell, and appreciate the same work that he does. Sharing this information with viewers signals his expertise and professionalism, assuring the value of his judgement and the value of the work he sells.

And yet, the programme confounds efforts to assess its value, and the value of the art, because it presents the art in terms that immediately challenge the show’s claims. If this is really museum quality work, why is it being sold on TV, on an infomercial channel to boot? If a particular print is in short supply, how can Barry sell multiple copies of it on show after show? At the same time, why assume the work is not worth the asking price? He may be selling the work at a fair market price. In fact, it may be a real bargain. There are even times when I wonder: if some recognized artists can turn ordinary household objects and popular culture icons into museum quality art, why can Barry Chappell not do the same with a run-of-the-mill oil painting?
2. The art of selling the work of art

*Fine art showcase* markets a disparate group of artists whose work appears again and again on the show, and individual episodes intensify the redundancy, as Barry typically sells works by one artist at a time. He introduces a painter and then points out their style in each work that he sells. The formal aspects of each artist are condensed into a fixed repertoire of attributes, presented as definitive signs of the artist’s personal style, and of Barry’s unique insight. With Dorit Levi, he begins by carefully enumerating the signature elements of her work – the inclusion of the painting’s ‘colour code’, use of bright colours and gold leaf, bird and clock motifs, and textural, sculpted forms that protrude from the flat surface. Then, in an almost mechanical fashion, he identifies each of these traits in each painting and print, one after another, occasionally pausing to express something along the lines of a more sincere, personal response to the artistry: ‘Isn’t that beautiful?’

The repetition addresses some of the challenges of showing and selling art on television. His sales approach both demonstrates and educates, putting viewers in a position to see the art in the same way that he does. The details that Barry singles out are superficial insofar as they are the most obvious visual features of the work. But they are not necessarily readily apparent on television. By pointing out the traits, often with accompanying close-up shots, Barry helps his audience to literally see, and then appreciate, the distinctive motifs at the same time that it inscribes them as the definitive style of the artist. The programme hereby cultivates an eye for art, veering in an educational direction, and the very act of iteration turns the traits that appear in one individual work after another into the most memorable information about each artist that the show provides, as it moves through each episode.

As a result, considerations of singularity and multiplicity, originals and copies, and originality and banality loom large in the programme. The repetition of artworks with their common formal traits accrues broader resonance, evoking the rich history of modern and postmodern thought about art, images, spectacle, and simulation. The programme provides a flow of individual works of art that bear striking resemblance to the equally unique works sold before and after. The works thus displayed, described, and sold one after another configure the art into a series of commodity-spectacle attractions. At the same time, the programme transmits these art images – both one-of-a-kind and multiple-edition works – through television in ways that reproduce, multiply, and disperse their availability as images of works of art. But the work is reproduced and circulated in this way with the expressed aim of having many individual viewers each purchase their own unique, original works of art, a vertiginous trajectory that at once exacerbates, and undercuts ideas about the aura of the artwork (and the loss of aura) that occurs with changes in technologies of art production. Multiples become singular; originals become copies. Even print editions that sell out on one show miraculously reappear for sale again weeks or months later. In many different ways, the programme submits theoretical perspectives on the artwork in the age of mechanical (and electronic, digital, and networked) reproduction to a series of dizzying material and representational contortions. This is intensi-
fied (or perhaps dialectically mitigated) by the conspicuous performativity of the programme’s eponymous host.

Fine art showcase hinges on the unremitting, live presence of its namesake host and principal on-screen personality who orchestrates the proceedings. Barry Chappell comes across as equal parts carnival huckster, used car salesman, art dealer, art appreciator, street hustler, investment strategist, and performance artist. With his non-stop patter and deliberate control of the pace of the proceedings, he delivers something of a tour de force performance on every show. His success relies on his ability to persuasively communicate his authority and his authenticity in the arenas of television commerce and the art market that the programme commingles. He exerts mastery over art, sales, and television, as he explicitly directs the camera and the staff who are often heard off-screen, but rarely seen.

Barry’s style is informal. He drinks Diet Mountain Dew and chews Nicorette at the same time, implying at once an air of casual disregard and urgency for the business at hand. Drinking soda from the can and chewing gum may convey a relaxed attitude. But the particular products indicate that his business requires the buzz that comes from the addictive supplementation of caffeine and nicotine. These are in turn consumed as reconstituted food/drug additives (in soda and gum), exacerbating the tensions between artifice and authenticity that characterize his performance. Barry alternates between the hard, fast sell and quiet, relaxed chat, between passionate engagement and nonchalant indifference. His energy and enthusiasm seem to wax and wane, modulations of tone and mood that strategically navigate the disparities between television marketing and fine art exhibition and sales.

Barry’s sales spiels combine thoughtful analysis, raw wonder, and crude materialism, sliding through different registers of value. He studiously highlights the visual elements of a silkscreen print, and then swings right into wide-eyed awe at the artist’s use of gold leaf, as if the work’s value resides in the delicate tissue of the shiny metal on its surface instead of in the artistry he has exhaustively described. ‘Look at all that gold!’ he exclaims, as he gently curls a corner of the print to intensify the reflections of the studio lights off the gold leaf overlay. He frequently highlights gold leaf in this way, ambiguously crossing between aesthetic and economic terms of appreciation. It hardly seems coincidental that many of the artists he represents routinely embellish their work with gold leaf finishes.

In conjunction with his mastery of the artists’ formal practices and the details of individual works, Barry presents broader contextual perspectives on the artists, establishing their value in the world of art history writ large. He displays the breadth and depth of his expertise in art history and art connoisseurship, readily identifying specific art movements, publishers, galleries, and museums, as well as universities and compatriots with whom the artist is affiliated. The art historical views help establish the value of the work. These are not just pretty pictures; they also have value and meaning because they are connected to significant trends, movements, and individuals in art. He harps on Henry Miller’s literary stature, and solemnly asserts that Miller and Ernest Hemingway are the two most significant American writers of the twentieth century. As part of the sales pitch, he presents a commissioned study of investment prospects for Miller’s paintings that
graphs substantial increases in sale prices since 1970, stressing that the report was written by a professor of business and finance with a PhD. (The emphasis is his, conveyed by intonation). He mentions that a PBS documentary about Henry Miller’s visual art is airing soon, and will give national exposure to the work. Barry spends twenty or thirty minutes presenting all of this information before he starts selling, to verify that the posthumous, signed Miller prints that he is about to put on sale at bargain prices are an exceptional value in terms of aesthetics, art history, and investment prospects.

Barry rambles at length on Chinese artist Jiang Ti-Feng, describing him as the ‘Picasso of China’ and founder of the ‘Yunan School’ of modern Chinese painting. He confidently asserts that Jiang’s work represents the biggest change in Asian art in seven hundred years. He also addresses geo-political conditions in the ‘new China’, where economic transformations have yielded a flourishing emergent middle class. These new Chinese consumers – one billion strong – want to invest their discretionary income in art by Chinese nationals. Work by artists like Jiang is going to be snapped up, and will be increasingly hard to find on the market; as a result, demand and prices will soar. In other words, Jiang is both an important artistic figure and a good prospect for financial speculation.

These are just two examples of how Barry marshals information to confirm the value of the art he sells. He achieves a delicate balance in these spiels, with sales patter that infers value as often as demonstrating it. While American literary scholars may question his assessment of Miller’s stature as an author, Barry talks about Miller’s literary preeminence and the value of his original paintings in the global art marketplace, even though he only sells posthumous, multi-edition print versions of the paintings. The increasing disposable income in China has led to a hot market in Chinese art, but it is not clear that Jiang is one of the artists whose work is being sought by collectors. He often ascertains an artist’s reputation with apparent digressions, explaining that they trained under someone who also taught some other, well-known painter, even showing pictures of the work of these other artists, before he starts selling the work of the lesser-known figure.

All of this involves some hedging, even snake-oil salesmanship, but it also contributes to the global, art historical context he provides, integral to the educational and entertainment aspirations of the programme. Barry affiliates his television commerce in art with global art histories and global flows of capital. This sensibility extends into Barry’s modest forays into philanthropy, when he dedicates the income from occasional episodes to Children, Incorporated, a charity that provides housing, schools, and related services for children on four continents. You can participate by watching the show and buying the art. But this is not necessarily as easy as it sounds.

3. Apparitional television

Despite its status as a DRTV programme that requires viewers to buy its products while it is on the air, despite its regular scheduled appearances on the Celebrity Shopping Network, despite its expansively performative host, Fine art showcase
is not easy to find. My husband first stumbled upon it while channel surfing, and thought I would find it interesting. But tracking it down so I could see it proved to be a minor ordeal. Over the course of several weeks, at different times on different nights, he searched through the channels without success. The show was not listed in any printed television programme guide, not even in the detailed on-screen guide of our Comcast digital cable system.

When we finally found the programme, we discovered that Comcast only identified the channel with *Fine art showcase* as ‘Leased Access’. This was the case all of the time, 24 hours a day. It did not matter what was showing on the channel, or even if anything was showing at all. (And, as often as not, that particular channel was not even leased; if you were channel surfing you were as likely to encounter a blank blue screen as you were an actual programme). Then, sometime in 2007, *Fine art showcase* disappeared from the Leased Access channel on our cable service. *Fine art showcase* was still on television, but only on DirecTV, which requires a private subscription and a proprietary satellite dish. And while it is listed in the satellite service’s online programme guide, it is buried among a slew of infomercial titles, clustered with many other shopping networks, among several hundred channels available to DirecTV subscribers.

Certainly a live show on television two or three times a week counts as a television programme by anyone’s reckoning. However, this particular programme is hard to find in schedule guides. It is only advertised, if ever, on the channel where it airs, a channel of infomercials; and is only available through private satellite subscription. It is hard to find, even when you are looking for it. If viewers have no way to know a programme exists in the first place, and no way to find it, how can it attract an audience, cultivate customers, build viewer loyalty, or develop a brand identity? While *Fine art showcase* does not need to trade aggregate audience numbers for advertising revenue, it certainly needs viewers to watch the show, buy the art and, participate in the live auctions. Indeed, it needs an active, consuming audience more than almost any other show on television. And yet, it hovers in a netherworld of rarefied accessibility. As such, *Fine art showcase* troubles fundamental ideas about how relationships are forged and maintained between stations, programmes, programming, and audiences, ideas that are considered the driving force of television systems, commercial and public, analogue and digital, broadcast and cable, mass and niche. In many different ways, *Fine art showcase* offers itself as a marginal or limit case that, nevertheless, offers new perspectives for thinking about television more generally.

‘Apparitional television’ is a term to account for programmes like *Fine art showcase*, whose appeal and conditions of access are narrow or precarious, despite their being embedded in established networks of media circulation. As a conceptual framework, apparitional television emphasizes a paradox: television can be fully available and present, at least readily on tap, yet somehow remain rarefied or elusive. While the apparitional qualities of *Fine art showcase* are distinctive, they extend beyond the particulars of the programme; indeed, all of television may be apparitional at one time or another. Nonetheless, you have to wonder just how apparitional a programme can be in the age of convergent, networked, digital, mobile, and interactive media. Making sense of *Fine art show-
Case in this context requires consideration of its place in the contemporary mediadiscape, and the implications for its modes of appearance, apparitional or not.

Fine art showcase straddles old and new media. It relies heavily on older media forms – most notably television and the telephone – to transact its business. People have to watch while it is on the air, live, and call in during the programme to purchase the art it sells. Even though it airs on a digital satellite service (rather than being an over-the-air broadcast), this seems like a quaint DRTV model. Moreover, the programme also has an official website, but ultimately, it hardly mitigates the programme’s apparitional status. To be perfectly clear: the website is easy to access using the programme’s title or ‘Barry Chappell’ as a search term. But you have to already know about the programme to find it this way in the first place. The more important question is whether, or how easily, you can get to the website without already knowing about the show, for example with broader or more generic search terms (e.g. ‘art on television’), or through links on other websites. The short answer is not readily.

Under the heading of ‘Art and coin TV’, the programme website announces the current rubric branding the two live programmes on the Celebrity Shopping Channel. It lists when the programme is showing on DirecTV and whose work is featured in upcoming episodes. It includes one page about Barry and profiles the artists he represents. You can see short videos about some of the artists; and when the show is on the air, you can watch streaming video on your computer. Occasionally, the website sells artwork at deep discounts, but only a fraction of the inventory available on the television show. In sum, it is effectively a digest of the television show, with basic information and pictures, a handful of multimedia features, and virtually no links to other sites. The main purpose seems to be to direct viewers back to the television show, even simply to confirm the programme’s existence in an intermedial context, holding visitors within the conceptual and institutional confines of the programme.

In one way, it makes sense that the programme website restricts easy access to other websites with comparable merchandise, even though these sites are easy enough to find, and even though on TV Barry encourages viewers to Google the artists and see for themselves what other dealers charge for their work. The design constraints in this regard are instructive in situating the programme with respect to older and newer media. Fine art showcase may be marginal, eccentric, and precarious in the context of American television, while also requiring keenly interactive TV viewers. However, its strategies for showing and selling art remain tied to older business and media practices, more reminiscent of the hierarchical, one-way transmission of ‘old’ electronic media than the open-architecture, mobile, on-demand interactivity of ‘new’ digital media. But the show’s sandboxed nature will only hold as long as the programme and its website can maintain these strategies of self-containment. How well this is working so far is best assessed by looking for signs of Fine art showcase across the internet.

Beyond the official programme website, Fine art showcase is an internet rarity. It gets mentioned in a handful of blogs; it is the topic of a couple of brief, intermittent forum discussions on two art websites; and occasionally, the Fine art showcase is referenced on the websites of the artists whose work is sold on the
programme, and in well-established open-source references such as Wikipedia. Some artwork purchased through the show shows up for sale on eBay. Overall, the nature and range of information on the web is surprisingly limited, and generally replicates the material found on the programme’s official website, often in the exact same words. The information about Barry Chappell himself is precisely what you would learn from watching the show or consulting the programme’s official website. The account of the programme on Wikipedia is terse. A number of online television guides have had unfulfilled requests for viewers familiar with the show to provide information. When it comes to Barry, the programme, and the artists he represents, it is almost impossible to find much on the web, and certainly nothing substantially different from what is provided by the programme and its official website.

In some cases, this constraint has salutary commercial and promotional implications, even if it limits the programme’s broader visibility. One striking example is artist Lindsay Dawson’s website. His homepage prominently features a quote about his work from Barry Chappell, the text lifted directly from the Dawson biography on the programme’s website. Dawson’s exhibitions listings include nine separate ‘One man shows’ at the Fine art showcase, Santa Monica, California, as if it were a brick-and-mortar gallery in a wealthy California ocean-front community. He separately lists seven interviews on the programme under the heading of ‘television appearances’. And he includes information about the programme among the Frequently Asked Questions about his art. ‘What is the Fine Art Showcase?’ The response echoes the programme’s own publicity: ‘The Fine Art Showcase (a.k.a. Barry Chappell’s Fine Art Showcase) is the premier art program on television today’. These references both reiterate the programme’s own PR language, and situate Lindsay Dawson and the Fine art showcase in a mutually referential, dyadic relationship, in which each reconfirms the value of the other. And yet, there are no active links between the two sites. The evident mutual admiration and textual repetition do not extend to facilitating connections between Fine art showcase viewers and Lindsay Dawson devotees.

In other contexts, the same kind of repetition of material from the programme’s website yields a different fate for Fine art showcase. Despite their scarcity, these idiosyncratic cases also involve copying from the programme website in ways that end up obscuring the programme. For example, an entry from Barry’s summer 2006 travel blog was posted a year later in its entirety in the web journal of ‘Evil Mr. Sock’, with no comment apart from the cryptic title ‘Saved for posterity’. The text is a rambling account of Barry’s return from a European trip, and subsequent visit to a Nevada mine. It details a boring trans-Atlantic flight, Barry’s life-long interest in mining, camping in the desert, an encounter with a rattlesnake, and so on. Fine art showcase comes up in one incident among many others. By the time Barry’s blog entry was pasted into Evil Mr. Sock’s web journal, it had been removed from the programme website. Both Fine art showcase and its host are eclipsed through the very act of duplicating the text from the programme’s website, severed from its original context.

Despite its increasing, if slow, dispersion through the online world, the Fine art showcase ultimately seems no less apparitional on the internet than it does
on television, at least so far. The kinds of access, interconnectivity, dispersion, social networking, and knowledge networks enabled by new media are in short supply, leading instead to any number of digital dead ends, another version of apparitional media. Frankly, one can only speculate about the motives behind the programme’s apparent sandboxing, or even whether there is even a decisive intentionality at work. However, the impact of these strategies is more apparent. By eschewing links that connect the programme’s website to others, the programme and its web architecture contribute to its invisibility. Ultimately, the chances of finding any of these websites while web-surfing are about as slim as the chances of finding the show on television by channel surfing. The television programme, its official website, and its other web appearances seem to exist as the trace of the others, apparitional echoes that are equally obscure, and equally unlikely to come to anyone’s attention. The ways Fine art showcase appears on other websites extend the programme’s own new media strategies in this regard: containment, isolated mentions, obscurity.

Even when you do find it, Fine art showcase seems to flaunt its apparitional status through the nexus of liveness, values, singularities, multiples, and duplicates that it generates. The programme encourages viewers to buy art by emphasizing the value of the work it sells in many different ways, including its rarity and singularity, at the very same time that it sells the same, or very similar work, by the same artists over and over again. As a result, even though the show is almost always live, Barry ends up repeating the same sales spiels over time, using the same stories, information, expertise, and even turns of phrase. One time, he was supposedly selling off the very last inventory from the Henry Miller estate, offering a handful of each of the rare, once-in-a-lifetime prints that had seemed to sell out several months earlier. On this occasion, he did not just repeat his previous sales patter. Instead, he started off live, and after a few minutes, he abruptly switched to tape from the earlier show on which he sold the same prints with a curt, ‘Watch this’. He had lost considerable weight in the intervening months, and it was jarring to see the live, slimmer Barry seamlessly juxtaposed with his taped, paunchier version. The representational contortions to which the programme submits the artwork reverberate here in the double embodiment and multiple mediation of the live performer making the sales pitch (while echoing the before/after images for a weight loss regimen that might be part of the infomercial programming on the Celebrity Shopping Network). The present Barry was a shadow of his former self, in another twist on the vicissitudes of aura, authenticity, and availability that the programme unleashes.

The transition to tape was patently evident in the apparitional body of the programme host, and transparently revealed that he records his own programmes. Yet, it is hard to conceive a media afterlife (or long tail) for the programme. Since it sells things that can only be purchased while it is live, both reruns in syndication and DVD release seem ridiculous. Because the sales pitches ramble on, verging on the interminable, and lack any succinct punch, it is equally hard to imagine the show being appropriated by contemporary clip culture (e.g. on YouTube or as viral video). Nevertheless, Barry himself used a recording of previously aired programming – a rerun – to resell rare prints that supposedly sold out months before, reinforcing the apparitional conditions that haunt the show.


4. Conclusion

Television and its convergent, networked, new media successors are always prone to appear and disappear, to come into view and then recede from view, in a variety of ways. This is characteristic of apparitional television, and perhaps also of apparitional media more generally. Apparitional media are not easy to access even when they are in, or on, a network. Indeed, for three months in 2009, the Fine art showcase was not even on television at all, but was instead on summer hiatus with announced plans for a relaunch in September 2009. ‘Now you see it, now you don’t’. Fine art showcase is hardly unique in its status as apparitional television. However, it presents a particularly extreme case that throws into relief characteristic aspects of apparitional television as old and new media. As a case study, it points toward avenues for further consideration.

1) Apparitional television is not intended as a way to reclaim individual programmes as uniquely valuable in themselves, even if, as in the case with the Fine art showcase, value is a persistent, expressed theme. Rather, apparitional television calls attention to a wider range of television programming, past and present, than is commonly studied by television scholars.

2) Apparitional television is an analytic concept for assembling and thinking about different kinds of television programmes that are unlike the categories that attract considerably more critical attention, which are often described by a nomenclature that proclaims their patent visibility or evident ubiquity – e.g. must-see TV, viral video, tabloid television, beautiful television. Apparitional television is a call to look, and look carefully, beyond the first or most obvious things we see.

3) Apparitional television is more common and ubiquitous than realized, even if it is not always easy to see. Some examples are television programmes that air on small, local broadcast stations, stations that do not even get picked up by regional cable systems; shows produced for local access cable channels; primetime network programmes that fade from view because they are not widely redistributed (in syndication or on cable); programmes that are not readily available on DVD or on sites such as iTunes, YouTube, or Hulu. (Even these sites are only variably accessible, depending on where you are in the world, and the bandwidth capacity to which you have access).

4) Apparitional television engages familiar tropes, strategies, and discourses of television while also introducing reconfigurations, deviations, and mutations. Thus, it has the capacity to challenge what we think television is and how we think television works in the first place.

5) Apparitional television undermines common and largely untested assumptions about the ready availability of all media, past and present, in consideration of their often-precarious conditions of access, in spatial and temporal terms, whether you are talking about broadcast, cable, satellite, videotape, DVD, webcasts, downloading, streaming, or other technologies to come.

6) Apparitional television is not the same in all places at all times. Apparitional television has implications for thinking about television as we presently know...
it. Because it signals tenuous aspects of the medium, including programmes that evanescce, it recognizes that in some ways television is always ending, or perhaps just beginning, even if it is not ending or beginning all at once, in the same ways, in all places. Thinking about apparitional television, especially in its interactions with other, newer media reminds us that despite their ubiquity, particular media are not always so easy to find. Once you do find them, they may not be all that they appear to be. But in the meantime, you do not necessarily know what you are missing, or even exactly what it is you are seeing.

Notes

1. For example, Lynn Spigel (2009) has explored the cultural dynamics between television and the visual arts in the early decades of the medium.
3. In the United States, infomercials help fill the 24-hour programme day, often in fringe day-parts. Starting in the 1980s, infomercials flourished in the US, largely in response to broadcast and cable deregulation. The same deregulatory dynamics fuelled 24-hour TV shopping networks (Hope and Johnson 2004).
4. For analyses of home shopping television channels see Gary Gumpert and Susan J. Drucker (1992) and Mimi White (1992).
5. This point is also made by Hope and Johnson (2004).
6. Among the more prominent works in this regard are Howard Becker (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (1987).
7. There is a vast amount of scholarly work across disciplines in this area (media/screen studies, art history and theory, literary theory, philosophy, history of science, etc.). Some of the signal work I am thinking of in this vein includes Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and W. J. T. Mitchell.
9. This of course refers to the enquiry initiated by Walter Benjamin in, ‘The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction’.
10. Among others, Paddy Scannell (1996) develops perspectives on the importance of programme schedules to television broadcasting predictability for viewers, especially in chapters one and seven.
11. When it was still on the Leased Access cable channel, Barry once commented, during a really slow stretch of bidding, that the show was going up on the satellite in another twenty minutes, and that the bidding was sure to heat up then.
12. The website is www.fashowcase.com. ‘Treasure hunter’ is the other live programme on the Celebrity Shopping Network, hosted by Jimmy Gerstel who sells collectible coins.
16. Even as I assert the programme’s relative scarcity in this regard, I am fully aware that this assessment is provisional, almost by definition; Barry and the programme could suddenly go viral, or could at least develop more robust social networks, at almost any time. But over the course of its first five years on television, the programme’s appearance and dispersion on the internet was sluggish.

References