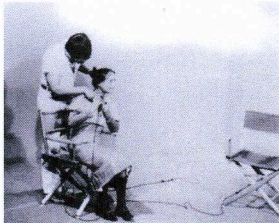## On Air: "Broadcast" at ==Pratt Manhattan== Gallery
By Chloe Gray.

← Image: Chris Burden, TV Hijack, 1972 (Source: Media Art Net)

The date is February 9, 1972, and Chris Burden arrives at Channel 3 Cablevision's studio in Irvine, California, for an interview with Phyllis Lutjeans. The TV station had approached Burden in January and asked him to do a piece for the channel, yet they censored several of his proposals, so he eventually agreed to an interview during which they would discuss the reasons for the station's refusal of his ideas. Burden brings his own video crew so that he can have a copy of the interview. He requests that the interview be broadcast live, and during the course of the interview Lutjeans asks Burden to discuss a few pieces that he has thought of doing. The artist responds by demonstrating a TV hijack: he takes Lutjeans hostage, holding a knife to her throat and threatening her life if the station stops transmission, while verbally abusing her with threats. At the end of the recording, Burden destroys the station's tape of the show by dousing it with acetone. He then offers an "irate" station manager his taped version of the show, which includes footage of the show and the destruction of the station's tape, but the manager refuses. Burden explains in an interview, "T.V. Hijack was ultimately about who is in control over what's presented through the media." This aggressive act against the restrictive and one–to–many structure of television is what curator Irene Hofmann cites as her original inspiration for the exhibition "Broadcast," now on view at ==Pratt Manhattan== Gallery. The show presents a selection of works,

dating from the 1960s to the present, that interrupt broadcasting systems in order to examine or challenge the structure, influence, and power of mainstream television and radio.

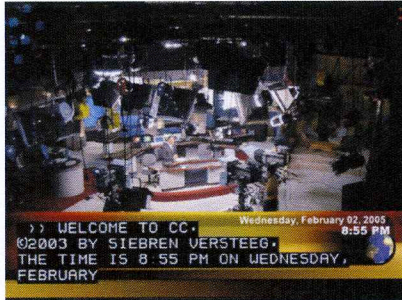← Image: Dara Birnbaum, Hostage, 1994

Several artists in "Broadcast" critically engage mainstream media by appropriating, reconfiguring or distorting broadcast material to investigate political authority, the differences in broadcasting conventions across various cultures, or the ways in which the media formulates dominant narratives. For Hostage (1994), Dara Birnbaum compiled excerpts of television coverage of the kidnapping and subsequent murder of the German industrialist Hanns–Martin Schleyer by the Red Army Faction in 1977. While Schleyer was held captive, the captors filmed him making a series of statements and released the tapes to German television stations, thereby engaging the media as a key player in the hostage negotiations. Clips of these statements appear on one of the six monitors that comprise Hostage alongside other archival footage of events from the period of the kidnapping. In On Photography, Susan Sontag writes, "Combat photographers can't avoid participating in the lethal activity they record." Hostage expands upon Sontag's idea, showing us that by acting as a medium between an event and the public, recorders of such events, not just photojournalists but newscast teams and mass media in general, become active participants. In the case of Schleyer's kidnapping, television was a tool used by both the RAF and the West German State. It was also instrumental in contributing to West Germany's panic over terrorism at the time.

In Hostage, shooting targets in the shape of a human form are placed in front of four of the TV monitors that span diagonally across the gallery ceiling like a spine. On a few of the monitors footage is overlaid with quotes from American newspaper reports on the hostage crisis and the RAF, many of which are sexist statements regarding the participation of women in the kidnapping and in the RAF. Thus, an American construction of West German terrorism is paired with German media coverage, creating a cacophony of image and text circulation representing multiple cultural perspectives. A red laser beam passes between the two monitors positioned at the opposite ends of the piece, and when the viewer obstructs the line of the laser the images on several of the

monitors pause, thereby emphasizing the role of the viewer as a media target – a hostage of the dominant narrative of events formulated by the news, much like the viewing public at the time of the kidnapping.

At a panel discussion on "Broadcast," Hofmann acknowledged that there are two generations represented in the show: a generation that came of age in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s and was initially inspired by a lack of access to broadcasting systems for the larger community, including Birnbaum, Burden, Gregory Green, and Nam June Paik among others, and a younger generation of artists, including Valerie Tevere and Angel Nevarez of neuroTransmitter and Siebren Versteeg, who witnessed the rise of communications technologies, primarily the evolution of the Internet and the devolution of media concentration. Versteeg, for example, graduated from college in the midst of the dot-com boom and found a job as a video editor, learning complex programming techniques that have since informed his artistic practice.

← Image: Siebren Versteeg, CC, 2003

"Broadcast" takes place at a time when the structure and authority of broadcast media is drastically changing. The web has reimagined the architecture of information flow as a many-to-many exchange, in contrast to the traditional mainstream media's one-to-many structure. Yet this paradigmatic shift is a mostly-latent sub-context in "Broadcast"; the Internet's relationship to broadcast systems is directly addressed by only one work in the exhibition, Versteeg's CC (2003), which hangs rather inconspicuously on a wall near the gallery's front desk. This piece examines the relationship between the web and traditional news by pairing a loop of six talking newscasters set to mute with a Web-connected feed of real-time blog and journal entries streaming underneath to mimic closed-captioned text, thus emphasizing a disconnect between mainstream and internet-based news. Here, we see the online community feeding information to a viewing public; its streaming sentences have drowned out the voices of the newscasters, perhaps suggesting a usurpation of the monopolistic nature of traditional television news.

As an exhibition that sets out to examine the ways in which artists working within the past half-century have challenged the primary channels through which information is disseminated, "Broadcast" is a great start, but it seems akin to an incomplete sentence. It lays the groundwork for narrating a fascinating, complex trajectory, but after several turns around the gallery, I could not help wishing there was more material to digest, particularly more work that represents how artists are engaging radio and television right now. Such a big topic as that undertaken by "Broadcast" could be more thoroughly explored in a larger space than Pratt Manhattan Gallery, yet the show originated at the roomier Contemporary Museum in Baltimore with the exact same line-up of artists. To accommodate Pratt's tight space, some of the works that were otherwise projected and, in some instances, given their own rooms in previous venues were displayed on small television monitors. Hoffman says that for her this brought out a dialogue between the works that was not as apparent in the other spaces, but for me it also de-emphasized the more contemporary works and created a sense of imbalance. Ultimately, it seems that the limited selections in "Broadcast" curtailed what the show could have been.

Chloe Gray is a writer and web and graphic designer based in New York City who holds a degree in Art History from New York University. Over the past five years, Chloe has worked in various sectors of the arts, most recently as the Arts Editor and regular contributor at Hex Ed. Journal, an online culture and arts journal. Currently, Chloe is an intern-extraordinaire at Rhizome, where she writes for Rhizome's blog and assists the staff.