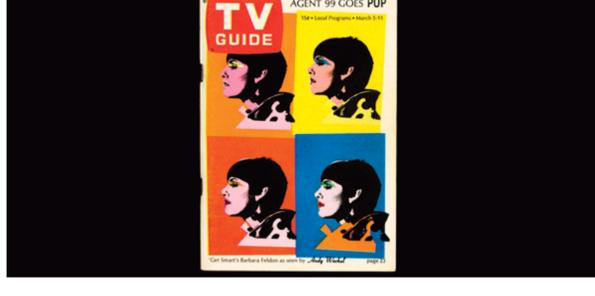


## GALLERIES



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### Media blitz

#### Mercer Union delves into the avant garde's commercial side

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BY DAVID BALZER   November 18, 2009 21:11

##### EDITORIAL RATING:

We Interrupt This Program:  
Print Ads and TV Spots by  
Artists  
To Dec 12. Tue-Sat 11am-6pm.  
Mercer Union, 1286 Bloor W.  
416-536-1519.  
www.mercerunion.org.

Now, here is a show done right. "We Interrupt This Program: Print Ads and TV Spots by Artists," currently at Mercer Union and scrupulously curated by Sarah Robayo Sheridan (with Steven Leiber and Ted Purves), is the kind of thing you might see at, say, New York University's Grey Art Gallery, but which is, for whatever reason, hard to come by in this city. Why is it so good? As an exercise in presenting how an idea has been worked through by the avant-garde, it feels complete, specifically well-contained and -shaped; as a document, it is helpful, illuminating and very entertaining.

When you go, it is essential to pick up Sheridan's exhibition brochure, a fantastic full program (a souvenir, really) done, from stem to stern, in the style of *TV Guide*. In it are expository blurbs on the exhibit's many pieces – presented as TV-show synopses, natch – which tell the story of how artists have used the mid-century mass-media formats of TV and magazines as their canvases. That story is one of ambivalent conflict, summing up many of the problems and triumphs of the avant-garde: how it depends on and conflates promotion and meta-promotion, branding and meta-branding, not quite wanting to explode the systems onto which it ties deconstructionist bows.

The show thus boils down to three types of work: first and rarest, artists doing work that is, foremost, commercial (perhaps the only pure example of this here is Warhol's pop-ification of *Get Smart*'s Barbara Feldon for the cover of *TV Guide*, pictured); second, artists using TV and print media for exposure and self-aggrandizement, however declaredly ironic (e.g., Jeff Koons' and Lynda Benglis' *ArtForum* ads; United Art Contractors' tongue-in-cheek soliciting for a patron in the same publication); last and most numerous, artists drawing attention to and, often, structurally critiquing the formats they're using (e.g., Chris Burden's and Stan Douglas' TV spots; Dan Graham's subtle interventions in *Harper's Bazaar* and the *New York Review of Sex and Politics*).

The narrative here concludes, in many senses, with David Hall's 1993 TV Interruptions for MTV, a station – initially, at least – so tied to surrealism and decontextualization that Hall's work seems, immediately, to transcend mere subversion. Indeed, that halcyon decade-or-so of music television from the early '80s to the early '90s might have been the closest the avant-garde's dream ever came to materializing, with the consumption of mainstream culture not being completely thwarted, but done, instead, with panache – with a big-brained (and/or sarcastically comatose) wink and a nod. The internet, of course, has changed all that, and, in turn, the nature of "interruptions" such as these, which, however seditious, absolutely depend on a dominant, shared culture in order to succeed. Kids, consider this your history lesson.

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