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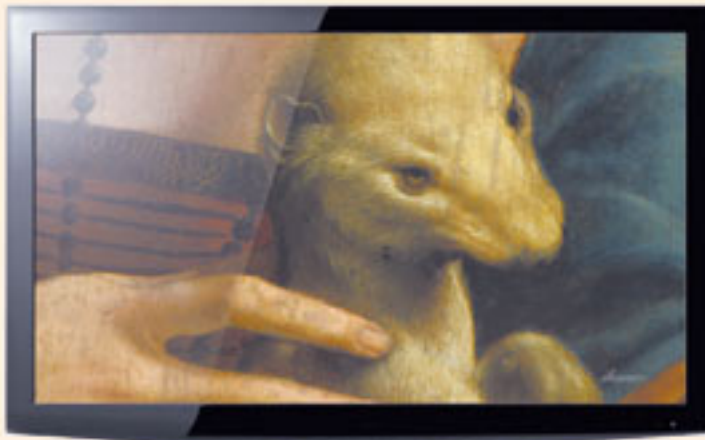
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Vision on

By Alex Newman

A new television channel shows nothing but works of visual art, from Leonardo to highlights of this year's Venice Biennale



From Leonardo to the Pharaohs, ikonoTV gives a detailed but silent guide to a range of art works

Last year, slumped on a hotel bed after an arduous journey from Damascus to Amman, I stared at the television, idly flicking through a bewildering selection of cable channels. Preening Iraqi boy bands, a soap opera in Urdu, BBC Persian and CNN all jostled for attention, all determined to overwhelm the viewer with fast cuts and

rolling scheduling updates. Amid the cacophony, I found myself oddly drawn to a weather channel. With no voice-over and the barest of meteorological information, the screen glided gently over the face of the earth to a faint muzak accompaniment. While everything else continued on overdrive, the simplicity and stillness of this programme's focus stood out.

I thought about this moment when I spoke to Elizabeth Markevitch, the director of ikonoTV, whose flagship channel, ikono Menasa, has for the past year been broadcasting across the Middle East, north Africa and south Asia on Arabsat. IkonoTV, which on December 1 expands into mainland Europe (and soon, Markevitch hopes, the UK), is not unlike that weather channel. It broadcasts an uninterrupted, constantly updated playlist of works of art, ranging from a detailed examination of Leonardo da Vinci's "Lady with an Ermine" to highlights of this year's Venice Biennale. There is no narration and no captions, save for the work's title and its artist.

More

This description may sound like a glorified screensaver; Markevitch however, is a robust and articulate defender of her vision for the project.

"Ikono already stands out, because it is a certain type of aesthetic that you don't see in any other channel. Television is more and more a maximum of information in a minimum of time," she says, speaking from ikonoTV's offices in Berlin. "We are giving you a visual experience. It's not just a zoom in, zoom out; it's a reading of the painting. It gives you two minutes of pleasure, giving you the tools of how to read." Pleasure is a word Markevitch comes back to several times. For her, it is intimately connected to a belief that television can do for art what radio did for music: that when people first discover a work of art they like, the attraction will be

established, even if the viewer or listener is not aware of what it is they are experiencing.

“Pleasure is something no one really talks about in the art world,” Markevitch says. “You have to know about art’, people will say. But you can just *like* art.”

This impulse – to democratise the arts by reaching people who would not otherwise experience them – runs in the family. Her father and uncle, the cellists Dimitry and Igor Markevitch, managed to make classical musical festivals more accessible to 1950s America. Purists balked at the idea of “bringing a symphony orchestra into a cow field”, as Markevitch puts it, but her family was not dissuaded by the loss of sound quality to the outdoors, if it meant people could see an opera for the first time.

In her own career, while working as a senior curator for Sotheby’s in Geneva, she encouraged the auction house to hold exhibitions of works for sale. In 1990 she co-founded Eyestorm, an online gallery and retailer of contemporary art, specialising in limited edition prints of works by established and emerging artists. Early sales included reproductions of Damien Hirst’s dot prints, which now sell at up to 10 times their original price.

The venture has been, according to Markevitch, a great success, but she says of the various attempts to curate on the web (such as [Google’s Art Project](#)) that, “the internet has rarely been a platform for discovering people; there have been exceptions but very few. You still need radio or television to discover things by chance, or to reach people in their homes.”

Succinctly summing up ikonoTV’s sales pitch, Markevitch adds: “You will discover us through your remote control; the internet does not have a remote control.”

But there are limits to televising art. The Arab League, which runs Arabsat, will not permit nudity or highly political content on ikono Menasa. Even in Europe, ikonoTV has

found that what might be merely provocative in a Berlin art gallery will not necessarily pass the regulators. Is this an inevitable sacrifice in targeting the mainstream? Does the medium of television, with its centralised standards, risk some of the curator's independence?

Markevitch understands the compromise, but she is adept at putting a spin on it. With Menasa, she says that restrictions have at least "made us family-friendly".

"That's not to say we are just showing decorative works," she is quick to add. "We have works that can provoke, but provoke your intelligence, and question yourself, without being too politically provocative."

Nonetheless, I try to probe her further. Three weeks after ikonoTV started broadcasting in the Arab world, the [Jasmine Revolution](#) began in Tunisia. Alongside social media, channels such as the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera have been credited with helping to raise the profile of popular struggles for democracy in the region. Where could an art channel – some of whose content focuses on the work of contemporary artists from the region, many of whom are politically engaged – fit into this picture?

At a presentation she gave in Sharjah, UAE, in March, Markevitch found that the Middle East's artists were "all coming to us saying there was a big problem, that because of the revolutions that were going on, all their exhibitions were being cancelled ... so they started asking if they could play with us, and we said of course." People may spend more time online, but the recognition and infiltration television grants is still powerful.

It is hard not to warm to Markevitch's enthusiasm for the project. IkonoTV has set itself the ambitious task of becoming, in the words of auctioneer Simon de Pury, "the MTV of art". Arabsat reports some 200,000 households a day tuning in to Menasa: modest in TV viewing figures, but significant considering ikonoTV's limited funding – it has, as

yet, no outside backers.

Throughout her career, Markevitch tells me, she has “constantly had a question: why is art not as popular as music?” Viewing figures will be the judge of ikonoTV, but perhaps her real achievement will have been to begin to level the playing field.

ikonoTV broadcasts to mainland Europe on Telekom

Entertain from December 1. www.ikono.tv

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