

Barbara London

VIDEO

ART

The First Fifty Years

PHAIDON

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1980s: Video Enters Center Stage



In the late 1970s, video continued to be shaped by its DNA — new technology, real-world politics, and the persistent mutability of contemporary art. While technology fueled the cold war space race, it brought the advances of audiovisual hardware to consumers. The latter development came, in part, as the byproduct of both the Vietnam war and the burgeoning of the porn industry. Simultaneously, radio and television networks that had sent war coverage directly into living rooms, were shifting away from broadcast and towards cable delivery. The boom box, and later the Discman and the mobile phone, expanded the flexibility of sound. Video games could now switch from arcade console to cartridge and on to the personal computer. Each technological advance gave home users and artists tantalizing new prospects.

Anti-establishment and gender politics consumed many artists, as they continued to align their ever-evolving video tools with performance and music. Their impassioned compositions challenged the corporate control of programming and transmission. With limited backgrounds in history or politics or the nature of propaganda, artists often found it difficult to figure out who or what to believe and marched in lockstep with others. Well versed with the feminist writing of Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), Betty Friedan (1921–2006), and Ms. Magazine (founded in 1972), many women artists formed consciousness raising groups. These artists' provocations came at a time when a face-lift promised eternal youth, and when the first in vitro fertilization (1977) resulted in birth.

The art world, always open to the next trend, remained totally infatuated with the “new,” yet it still considered media art uncollectable, an experimental form taken seriously by a fringe audience. Only the most explicable media work was promoted in art magazines, as critics jammed relevant projects into theories they already were espousing. The art biennials that started to proliferate during this period took on the appearance of Olympic races, as international artists were pitted against each other to vie for the lucrative rewards of instant fame. Driven by competitive urges, few found the time to pause and develop ideas. Large scale thematic exhibitions prevailed, as the “cult of the curator” came into play.

Three well-informed artists helped to raise the status of video art, contributing to its acceptance as a serious contemporary form. They began their work at a time when rents were cheap, and they worked in supportive environments that could be found away from



Bill Viola, *The Space Between the Teeth*, 1976.
Part of *Four Songs*, 1976. Color videotape.

the mainstream. Bill Viola and Gary Hill were the first to master the electronic signal, and determine what made video's audiovisual components tick. Each had a distinctive trajectory and succeeded in achieving their own goals. Dara Birnbaum won a new respect for video through strong ideologies that matched the thinking of several major art critics. Less involved with technology per se than Viola and Hill, she drew upon feminism and the critique of popular culture, including music. Each of these artists helped to elevate the status of video.

Bill Viola

Bill Viola (born 1951) likes to clown around and tell funny stories, especially jokes about himself. His playful demeanor often becomes serious, as it did early in our friendship when he told me about a powerful childhood memory of nearly drowning after falling out of a rowboat. The nightmarish experience may be what led to death becoming a predominant theme in his art, coupled with his family's

Catholicism. Of equal significance is the fact that he played drums in his high school band. Later he would pace his video edits to the rhythm of a heartbeat and elicit an unwitting response from his audience, like what he did as a teenage drummer in his band.

Viola once explained that his fascination with the artistic possibilities of electronics began at home in Flushing, Queens. In 1964, he discovered a back door into the nearby World's Fair and began sneaking in on the way home from school. For him, the majestic Italian Renaissance sculpture, *The Pieta*, by the great artist Michelangelo, loaned by the Vatican and presented in a church-like setting, played second fiddle to the pavilions in which high-tech corporations touted their trailblazing hardware. For the first time, the public came face-to-face with room-sized, mainframe computers that chugged away, attended by keyboard operators at adjacent work stations. Before then these mysterious space-age machines resided out of sight in corporate back areas, described in prophetic articles published by *Newsweek* and *Time Magazine*. Viola believed the manufacturers' proclamations that a dazzling, technology-enhanced future was in store for everyone. His dream that consumer electronics would become available as artmaking tools soon became a reality.

Once he entered Syracuse University in 1969, Viola's media prowess advanced very quickly. He began by using the sculpture department's one portable black-and-white video camera to explore the parameters of a "live" versus a recorded video image with its concomitant crude sound. Motivated by the open, inter-disciplinary environment of the school's Experimental Studios, he studied electronic music and worked with the Moog, one of the earliest music synthesizers. This took him from the mastery of reel-to-reel audiotape recorders and microphones, and deep into systems and circuitry and electronic theory.

Eager to use electronics to express the images forming in his head, at school Viola studied the experimental films from the 1960s by Michael Snow (born 1928), Ken Jacobs (born 1933), Hollis Frampton (1936–1984), and Stan Brakhage (1933–2003). He analyzed how they handled the camera and structured recorded images, and how they anatomized ordinary actions in everyday settings. Through the filmmakers' simple yet hallucinatory effects, Viola found the tactics to develop his own audio-visual compositions.

For Viola, the electronic signal was a raw material that an artist could shape. He painstakingly did linear, tape-to-tape editing of his image and sound recordings, using the most basic, open-reel

equipment to assemble his desired sequences. But he soon felt frustrated by the lack of precision in working “on the fly” with consumer equipment. Given how cheap it was to overshoot — record video nonstop — emerging video art that critics often labeled as boring proliferated. Viola sometimes disparaged the rambling, guerilla style documentary videos that were presented in conjunction with his more meticulous work. Still, he agreed with Cage, who stressed that it is much more important to promote curiosity and awareness than to make value judgements.

After Viola and several classmates set up Syracuse University’s Synapse Video Center, a professional television studio reserved for art students’ use, he became an adept editor. With a three-camera, broadcast-quality setup, he gained firsthand experience as a studio engineer, learning how to use a video switcher to do “live” editing independent of but simultaneous to recording in the manner of low-budget, television soap-opera productions.

Meanwhile Viola was hired to work on exhibitions by the Everson Museum’s savvy young video curator, David Ross (born 1949). The affable Viola embarked on an apprenticeship and gained expertise as he assisted video pioneers with their one-person shows at the Everson. In 1972, he worked with Chilean-born Juan Downey (1940–1993), who created a precisely arranged, multiple-monitor installation that explored Magic Realist-inspired notions of relationships between the natural world and the man-made environment. Downey’s main interest was in merging the subjective and the cultural, the diaristic and the documentative. With a literary mind, he investigated the self through the historical texts of Western art and culture, and the rituals of his native Latin America. At the Everson, his *Video Trans Americas* [illus.] installation traced his journey by car, armed with a portable camera, from New York and through Central and South America, into remote hamlets where he shared his recent video recordings with villagers who had never experienced television.

While preparing for Nam June Paik’s 1973 Everson exhibition, Viola heard the artist press “for a broader understanding of time as experience within the notions of randomness and indeterminacy that were central to his personal Fluxus sensibility.” Viola would go on and take delight in chance, which he always tapered with an overarching formal structure.

In 1973, Viola met Peter Campus (born 1937), when his video survey was shown at the Everson. Campus had abandoned the physicality of

the boxy monitor and used the then rare and expensive video projector to create an image that consisted of light alone. Campus’s technical expertise, derived from an early career as a film editor, matched his exceedingly meticulously composed installations. In carefully delineated, darkened environments he placed an inconspicuous video camera. The anonymous observer became both subject and object as he or she confronted a dark brooding image of his or her live self cast on the wall. Campus had found a link between the infinite expanse of time that surrounds the viewer and the loneliness of the inner self. By immersing the viewer in total room-scaled projected video environments, he forced a consideration of the physiology of perception as well as the psychological dimension of observation.

When the electronic composer David Tudor (1926–1996) came to Syracuse in 1975, Viola was invited to perform with ten other musicians in Tudor’s improvisational sound installation, *Rain Forest*. Each musician was assigned a large, discarded metal object that was suspended from the ceiling. As they drove electronically generated sounds through their designated metal objects, they activated the resonant characteristics of each. Audience members “listened” to the acoustics of a particular “instrument” by ducking down to put their heads into an oil drum or bucket, or by placing their ears against a bed spring. Viola later said that from Tudor he learned how to maneuver sound to create a carefully tuned environment.

That same year, Viola graduated with a BFA and moved to Florence, where he connected with his Italian roots. He spent a year as technical director of *Art/Tapes/22*, a short-lived video production facility for artists founded by Maria Gloria Biccocchi. There he worked closely with Greek-born Arte Povera artist Jannis Kounellis (1936–2017), among others invited to produce videos grounded in their performance and installation practices. Biccocchi had modeled her studio on the Television Gallery set up in 1968 by Düsseldorf visionary Gerry Schum, who believed television broadcasts could be works of art rather than mere reports on art.

When Viola moved back to New York, he stopped by my office and effused about the religious frescoes of the late Middle Ages Florentine painter Giotto, that he’d seen for the first time in Padua, and about the poetry of the thirteenth century Persian Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi, whom he had just started to read. We began meeting regularly to share information, often near Columbus Circle at the Cosmic Coffee Shop, its name well suited to Viola’s interests in the metaphysical implications of



Bill Viola, *Room for St. John of the Cross*, 1983. Video/sound installation.

consciousness. Over a slice of apple pie, he would describe his efforts to begin each video with a mental image, which he would then spend weeks or months assiduously matching to the perfect setting and precise time of day. *A Million Other Things* (1975) captures the changes in light and sound at the edge of a pond during an eight-hour period, from day to night. When the sun sets towards the end of the four-minute work, an individual standing in the distance remains the only visible object, illuminated by a single electric lamp suspended overhead.

Meanwhile, Viola had joined a new wave of practitioners invited into the Artists TV Lab at PBS station WNET/Thirteen in New York and WGBH in Boston, which professionalized their work. WNET/Thirteen gave Viola access to broadcast-quality CMX computer editing and to a sympathetic engineering genius, John Godfrey. Viola was now able to bring his videotape projects up to his conceptual level technically, and

to manipulate time more precisely. He told me that he wanted his new work to have the same polish as a beer commercial.

In the short works collected in his first WNET/Thirteen production, *Four Songs* (1976), Viola carefully recorded true-to-life images and merged actual and rejiggered (edited) time. Assembled in much the same way that a musician arranged individual songs for a record album, each brief section was centered on a specific location. In the case of the section entitled *The Space Between the Teeth* [illus.], the setting is the end of a long dark corridor, where a man appears seated in an easy chair. He stares at the camera and after a while lets out a blood-curdling scream, as the camera quickly hurtles backward down the corridor. The video revolved around the artist — the initiator of the feelings and ideas — in addition to him being the subject. *The Space Between the Teeth* concludes with a photograph of the man — a still image taken from the video. The photograph is thrown off a bridge, floats briefly, and disappears when the wake of a boat drags it away.

Dropped into the evening programming flow, Viola's new work aired nationally on the PBS "Video and Television Review" series that ran on Sunday nights. The network insisted on adding a "talking torso" host, who introduced and explained the unconventional work about to be broadcast. Viola found this offensive and unnecessary. He argued that viewers tuning into PBS, like visitors entering a contemporary art museum, were inquisitive and similarly anticipated the challenge of encountering something new. Whereas a museum-goer might enter MoMA's video gallery directly after seeing an abstract Mark Rothko painting upstairs, a TV viewer might switch to PBS after a football game broadcast. Believing that context shapes interpretation, Viola felt that the television audience was astute enough to decipher his video art work.

In this early phase of his career, Viola would develop each of his themes both as a videotape and as an installation, one linear with a narrative flow and the other spatial with an immersive dimension. His videotape *Migration* (1976) begins with a close-up shot of a drop of water that functions as a lens, which magnifies details of a man's face. In a slow pan backward, the image reveals that the face belongs to the artist seated behind the drop. In this work, Viola was contemplating how an eagle sees a field mouse from five hundred feet up in the air. The eagle's comprehensive world view had inspired him to make a tape that would focus viewers' attention, so they might perceive greater detail in what they see: "Reality," he wrote, "unlike

Video Art's Rising Status



In the 1990s, the explosion of consumer electronics moved post production away from expensive labs and onto the affordable personal computers and laptops in artists' studios. Another major shift was fueled by the arrival of low-cost, luminous video projectors, which enabled artists to project their videos onto the walls of darkened galleries. Some hurled their images onto walls willy-nilly with enthusiasm but little reason. A few turned to the glamor and story-telling devices of the film industry, often appropriating footage to form critiques. Others managed to finesse the line between the precepts of painting and avant-garde cinema — between abstraction and realism — and investigated the perceptual experience of being inside an immersive environment that was both sonic and visual. Projection installation became the de rigueur video art standard.

Contemporary museums and biennials started to take time-based art more seriously, presenting video, installation, and performance with some frequency and showing multi-screen video art in their galleries. Drawn by the excitement created by shrewd marketing, viewers rushed off to biennials and contemporary blockbuster shows, knowing they would see at least a few unorthodox forms and off-the-grid artists. In 1992, *documenta ix* in Kassel featured Bruce Nauman's *Anthro/Socio* (1992), the esteemed artist's return to video and the audio-visual installation after a hiatus of over fifteen years. The software publisher and philanthropist Peter Norton brought a group of American curators with him to the opening of the second (and last) Johannesburg Biennale in 1996. Their exposure to William Kentridge's projected video animations kickstarted the career of this South African artist. Ten years before, many of the same curators had given him the cold shoulder when he knocked on their doors during his first visit to Manhattan.

Meanwhile several brave contemporary art collectors started to tackle video in earnest, even though the conservation of video, unlike the conservation of painting with its centuries of preservation formulae, had yet to be developed. In Munich Ingvild Goetz had become an impassioned investigator of the work of emerging artists. During the 1960s, she had been the first to acquire the postwar work of Dé-coll/age-ist Wolf Vostell and Arte Povera artist Giovanni Anselmo. In the 1990s, when she believed that artists finally had the tools to achieve greatness through work with multiple channels of precisely edited videos, she turned wholeheartedly to video. Bjørn Melhus was one of the young artists whose multi-channel flat-screen installations Goetz collected in-depth. Goetz recently donated her extensive

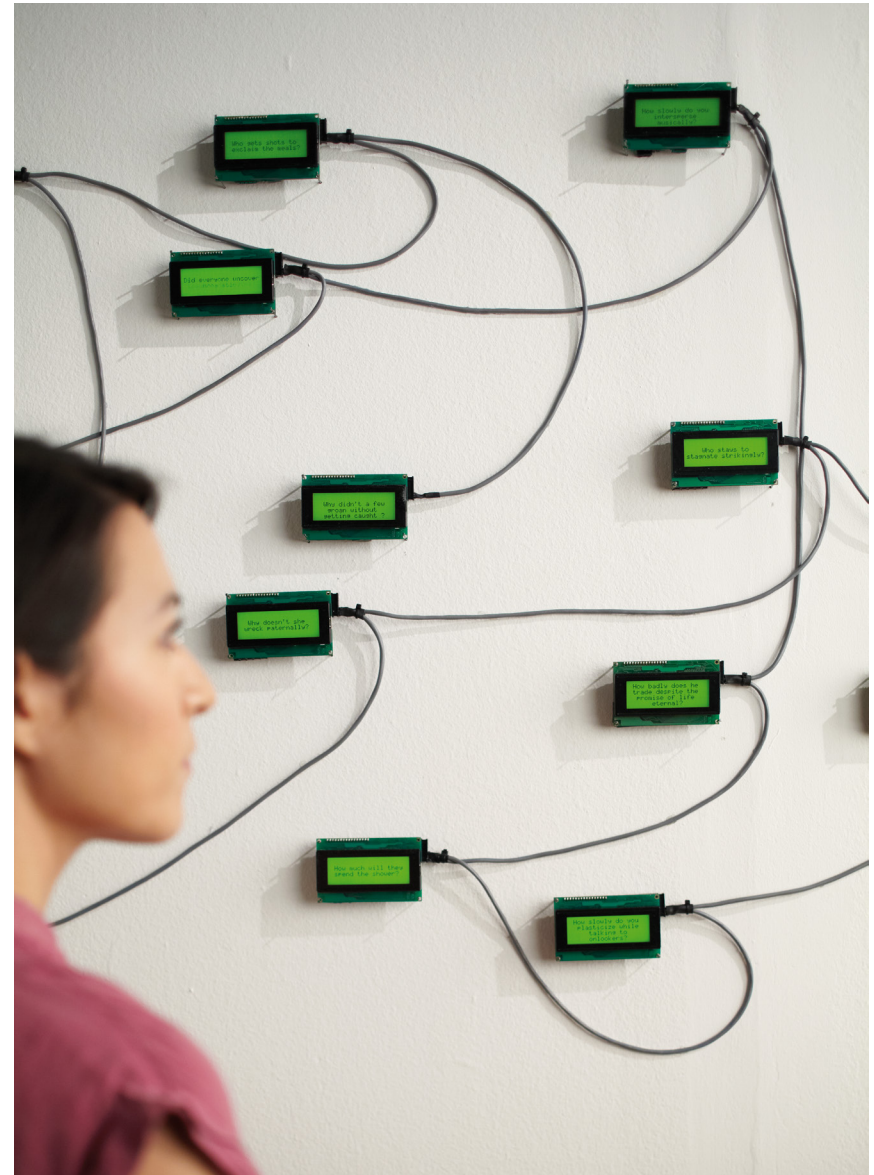
The quasi-revolutionary aura of the dot-com era dissipated with the financial crash in March of 2000. Still, technology and art continued to ride together on a tidal wave of imagination. In 2007 I organized the exhibition *Automatic Update*, so that the diverse languages and ecumenical interests of media artists would reach a broad art audience. The exhibition featured recent installations, mature works with an entertaining agenda that lightened the somber mood of the times. Each of the artists had their own approach to incorporating technology into their work. The artists' humor did not soften their biting commentary on our social milieu. The exhibition included work by Cory Arcangel, Raphael Lozano-Hemmer, Xu Bing, Paul Pfeiffer, and Jennifer and Kevin McCoy.

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

The Montreal-based artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer holds a degree in Physical Chemistry. A cyclone of energy, he exudes the passionate congeniality of a reveler combined with the incisiveness of a top scientist. He not only creates show-stopping, large outdoor installations, he also makes small, equally dynamic work by joining everyday objects with simple electronic tools and off-the-shelf programming software. When I saw his installation *Caguama* (2004), I had to laugh as thirty 32-oz. brown beer bottles twirled in sync on a table top as if they were the Rockettes.

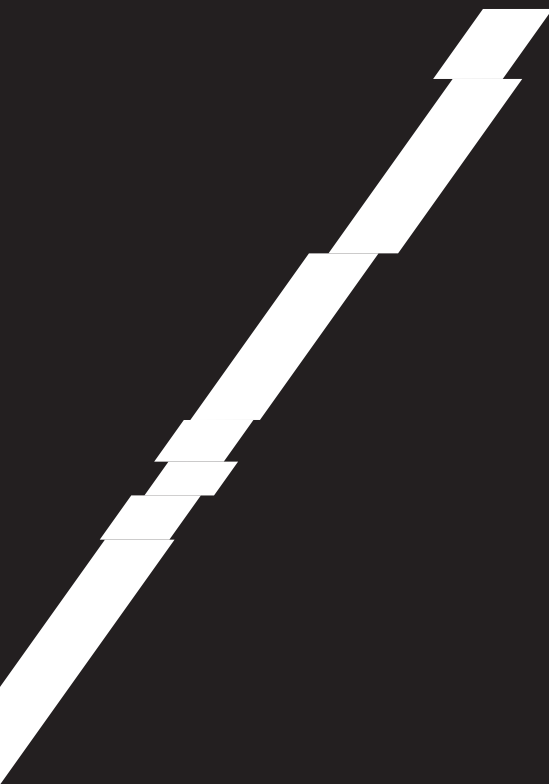
Lozano-Hemmer's ability to turn complex ideas into elegant, understandable systems is what drew me to his *33 Questions per Minute* (2001-02). The interactive installation consists of a computer and twenty-one small LCD screens, each the size of a cigarette pack. The work is based on a computer program that uses grammatical rules to combine words from a dictionary and generate 55 billion unique, fortuitous questions. The automated questions are presented at a rate of 33 per minute — the threshold of legibility — on twenty-one tiny LCD screens mounted either on the support columns of the exhibition space or on a wall. The system will take over three thousand years to ask all possible questions. By means of a keyboard, members of the public can introduce any question or inject a comment into the flow of automatic questions. Their participation shows up on the screens immediately and is registered by the program.

The large question Lozano-Hemmer posed to viewers was the following: Could a chimpanzee pecking randomly at a typewriter reproduce Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? The question gave twentieth-century



Raphael Lozano-Hemmer, *33 Questions Per Minute*, 2001-2

Backmatter



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An insider story of the fifty-year
history of video art, written by
former MoMA curator Barbara London.

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