

The Guardian

Smashed cars and Chinese chewing: the five masterpieces of video art

Half a century ago, an art form flickered into life as mavericks from Nam June Paik to Bill Viola took up technology to transform the way we see the world



Smash it up ... Pipilotti Rist's *Ever Is Over All* on view at the Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland. Photograph: Saul Loeb/AFP via Getty Images

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Sun 19 Jan 2020 10.00 EST

I was a bright-eyed young curator with a passion for the unconventional when video art first took off. Lured by its galvanising pandemonium, I jumped into its wide-open terrain. It was the mid-60s and portable equipment had just started appearing in shops. Although the gear was rudimentary, activist mavericks ran with it, suddenly able to storm a medium that had until then been the exclusive domain of broadcast TV.

I was working at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and, keeping my ear to the ground, would attend events in alternative spaces housed in low-rent, rundown buildings across the city. I would race up splintery staircases just as artists rushed down them with newly completed videotapes tucked under their arms. I watched works on TV monitors and navigated my way through mazes of cables and cobbled-together equipment to experience “site-specific installations” – an unfolding new art form showing live feeds or prerecorded videos on carefully arranged TV sets.

Artists often drew in collaborators, adding experimental music and dance to this fledgling genre. All but an assiduous few persevered. By the time the 70s dawned, they were the ones who were defining video art and exploring all it could be. In the half-century since, many great artists have made work in video – without contributing in any fundamental way to video as art. Instead, it was a resolute group who gave the medium its profound relevance. Here are five towering works by those trailblazers.

As mystifying as a Michelangelo

Nam June Paik: TV Buddha



What's real? ... TV Buddha by Nam June Paik. Photograph: Hogers & Versluys

Nam June Paik called the TV screen “a canvas” and said he wanted to shape it as precisely as Leonardo, as freely as Picasso, as colourfully as Renoir, as profoundly as Mondrian, as violently as Pollock and as lyrically as Jasper Johns. Considered to be the mastermind behind video’s eventual acceptance as art, Paik was born in Seoul in 1932, but was educated in Tokyo then lived in Düsseldorf in the early 60s, doctoring the innards of old TV sets to create abstract patterns on their screens.

In 1965 he snapped up one of the first video cameras to reach Manhattan, his new home town, and by 1974 had created his masterpiece, TV Buddha. A video camera is aimed at an impassive stone Buddha seated in a classic pose on a pedestal. The Buddha gazes knowingly at his image, which appears on a round, futuristic-looking TV in front of him. Nothing moves, which leads the viewer to wonder whether the image on the screen is a live feed or recorded.

The piece could be seen as a timeless Buddhist *koan* or riddle: what is the difference between the Buddha staring at a live (present time) image of himself and the Buddha

confronted with his videotaped (past time) image? In this accessible new medium - a break from the venerable, static forms of painting and sculpture - a work can seem as classic and as mystifying as a Michelangelo sculpture.

Belly dancer in a Noh mask

Joan Jonas: Vertical Roll



Mysterious seductress ... Joan Jonas's Vertical Roll.
Photograph: DACS/Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix, New York

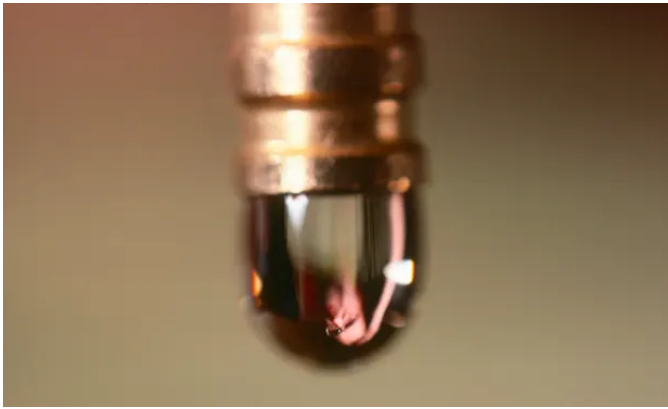
This skilfully choreographed work is based on an irritating flaw common to early black-and-white TVs: the image would often scroll nonstop from the bottom to the top of the screen, or vice versa, stabilised only by a turn of a knob.

Vertical Roll opens with Jonas's outstretched hand filling the screen. As the image scrolls, she gives her hand a flip and, in perfect sync, we hear a percussive sound that persists throughout the work, as parts of Jonas's body come in and out of view. With her torso gyrating, Jonas becomes a mysterious seductress caught in a tight space. Attired in either a satin, boudoir-like robe or a belly dancer's clothes, she never reveals her full figure, moving away from closeup and into another space, as her legs are shown jumping up and down. At one point she comes forward and gazes out enticingly from behind a Noh theatre mask.

In Jonas's hands, a live camera and a TV set function as both mirror and shallow stage. It's not just images that she layers and transforms but space and time. Her otherworldly theatre of the self and the body has all the wonderment of puppetry and fairytales.

The exploding water droplet

Bill Viola: He Weeps for You



Ready to drop ... Bill Viola's *He Weeps for You*. Photograph: Kira Perov/courtesy Bill Viola Studio

Bill Viola grew up in Flushing, New York, near the site of 1964 World's Fair, which he would visit, marvelling at its idealistic vision of new technologies. Viola came under the spell of video at the University of Syracuse, exploring its Moog synthesiser and mastering reel-to-reel recording.

By 1976 Viola had honed his skills and created his tour de force: *He Weeps for You*. When viewers entered Viola's precisely calibrated environment, they came upon a long copper pipe originating from the ceiling and terminating at eye level, where a small valve allowed a single drop of water to slowly emerge.

A colour video camera, with a special lens for extreme closeup, was trained on this swelling drop, which appeared on a large screen in the rear of the space. The optical properties of the water drop caused it to act like a fish-eye lens, reflecting the room and those within it. The drop grew until it filled the screen, then suddenly it trembled and fell out of the image. A loud "boom" was heard as it landed on a small amplified drum. Then a new drop emerged and again began to fill the screen, capturing the viewer once more as it did so.

Viola once wrote: "I want to introduce an 'I' more extreme than in literature." He has continued to interpret human experience through portrayals of the body, giving shape to otherworldliness and filling a void in our precarious times.

Western food in a Chinese chew

Zhang Peili: Eating

In the mid-90s, I heard that artists in China were experimenting with video. The name Zhang Peili kept cropping up. I decided to get a first-hand look at what the country's artists - previously suppressed by Mao and still kept tightly in check after he died in 1976 - were doing.

I spent 10 days travelling from Beijing to Shanghai, then took a bus to Hangzhou to meet Peili. As we sipped aromatic tea in his modest apartment, he explained how in the 80s he had questioned whether anyone in China could be avant garde, given how closed-off their environment was.



Triple vision ... Zhang Peili's *Eating*. Photograph: John Wronn/MoMA/Scala

He made his first video in 1988. Called 30x30, the tape shows the artist's hands in closeup. Wearing a pair of latex gloves - a reference to the country's filthy standards of communal living and its then rampant hepatitis, which the artist had recently caught - Peili holds a 30x30cm mirror. He drops it, then meticulously glues the shards back together. After dropping the mirror a second time, reassembly is more difficult. The entire procedure takes about three hours.

Towards the end of my visit, Peili showed me *Eating*, a video sculpture using three synced monitors stacked on top of each other. Each details a different view of the same event: the top shows a cheek during chewing; the middle a black-and-white, surveillance-like view of a fork going from plate and mouth, recorded by a camera strapped to the diner's arm; the bottom captures western foods (boiled egg, tomato, layer cake) disappearing from the porcelain plate.

It's like watching a sentence in a language class being parsed into subject, object and verb.

The merry car-smasher

Pipilotti Rist: Ever Is Over All



A young girl sits and watches *Ever is Over All* in Sydney. Photograph: James D Morgan/Getty Images

Famed for her upbeat video-sound installations, Pipilotti Rist was born in a small Swiss

village called Grabs. She started out making short films and designing stage sets for rock bands, going on to make exuberant, sensual videos that belie her serious questioning of macho posturing. Rist addresses issues of womanhood, especially notions of beauty, makeup, cosmetics and self-adornment.

When Rist premiered the 1997 work *Ever Is Over All* at the Venice Biennale, with its euphonious soundtrack and ravishing visual images, it immediately caught everyone's attention. Two large adjoined projections stretched across touching walls, spilling on to the floor and ceiling. On the left, playing at slightly slowed down speed, a woman wearing a translucent blue dress and red heels gracefully lopes along the pavement of a tidy Zurich street, holding a metal replica of the tall flower known as a red-hot poker.

The flower suggests an ancient priapic wand, typically associated with springtime fertility rituals. The camera captures the woman's carefree movements as she merrily smashes the side windows of cars parked on the street with the flower. Passersby smile, as if indulging an innocent child. They include a policewoman, who salutes the perpetrator. Beyoncé later paid homage to the sequence in her video for *Hold Up*.



Homage to *Ever Is All Over ...* Beyoncé's *Hold Up* video.
Photograph: YouTube

The projection on the right side, meanwhile, portrays a vivid field of actual red-hot poker flowers, stretching off into the distance on a sunny day. Shooting from the point of view of an insect on the ground, with her customary technique of a camera attached to a stick, Rist leads viewers through this verdant field - and into the heart of her high-spirited, two-channel installation, its images and sounds so naturally woven together that one is transported to a magical new realm.

Here, in Rist's hands, video art becomes a format that has room for everything: painting, sculpture, technology, language, music, movement, flowing pictures, poetry, sex and premonitions of death. What could have been a cold, technical piece becomes something joyous, warm and revelatory.

Video/Art: The First Fifty Years by Barbara London is published by Phaidon, £27.95.

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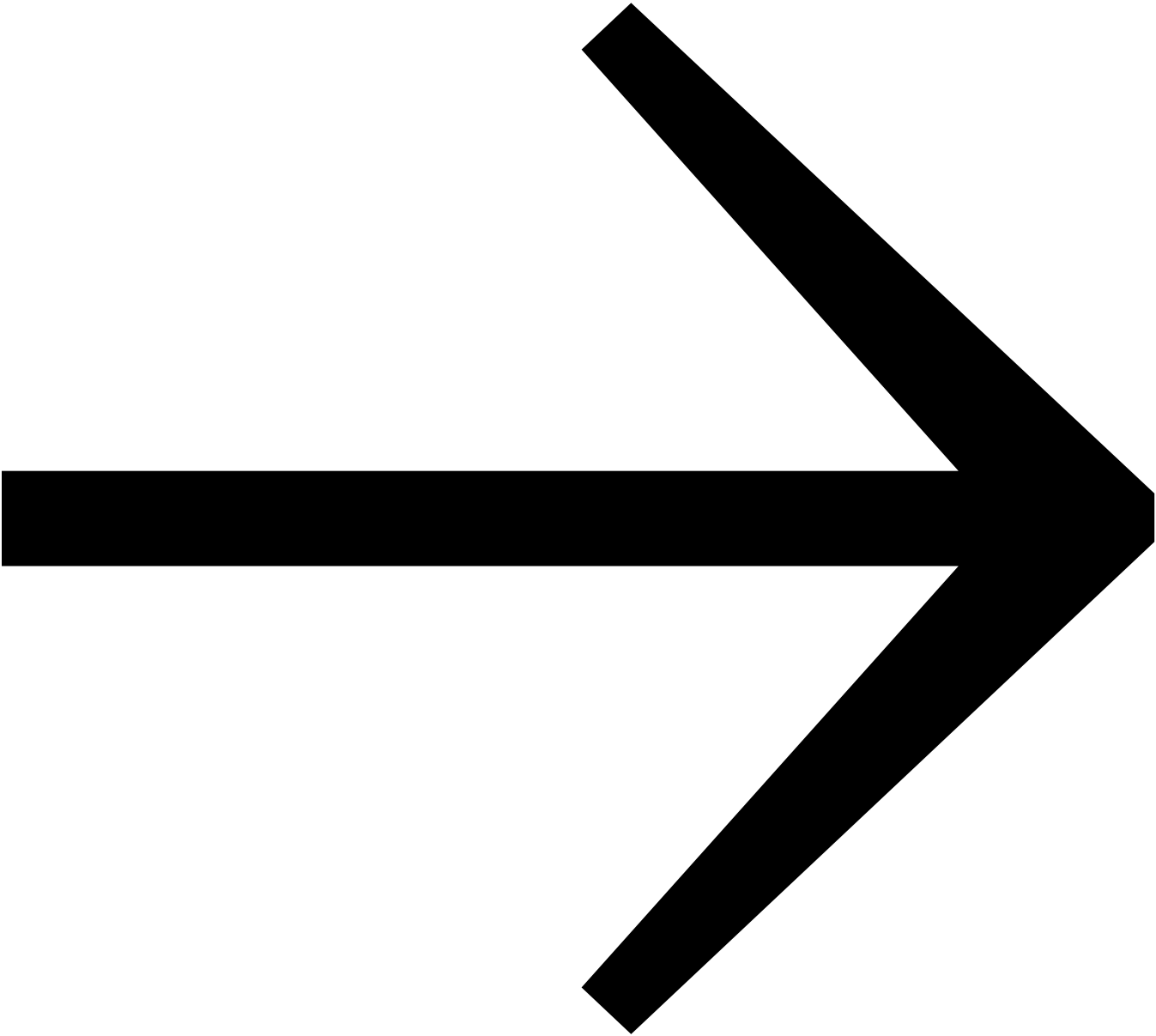
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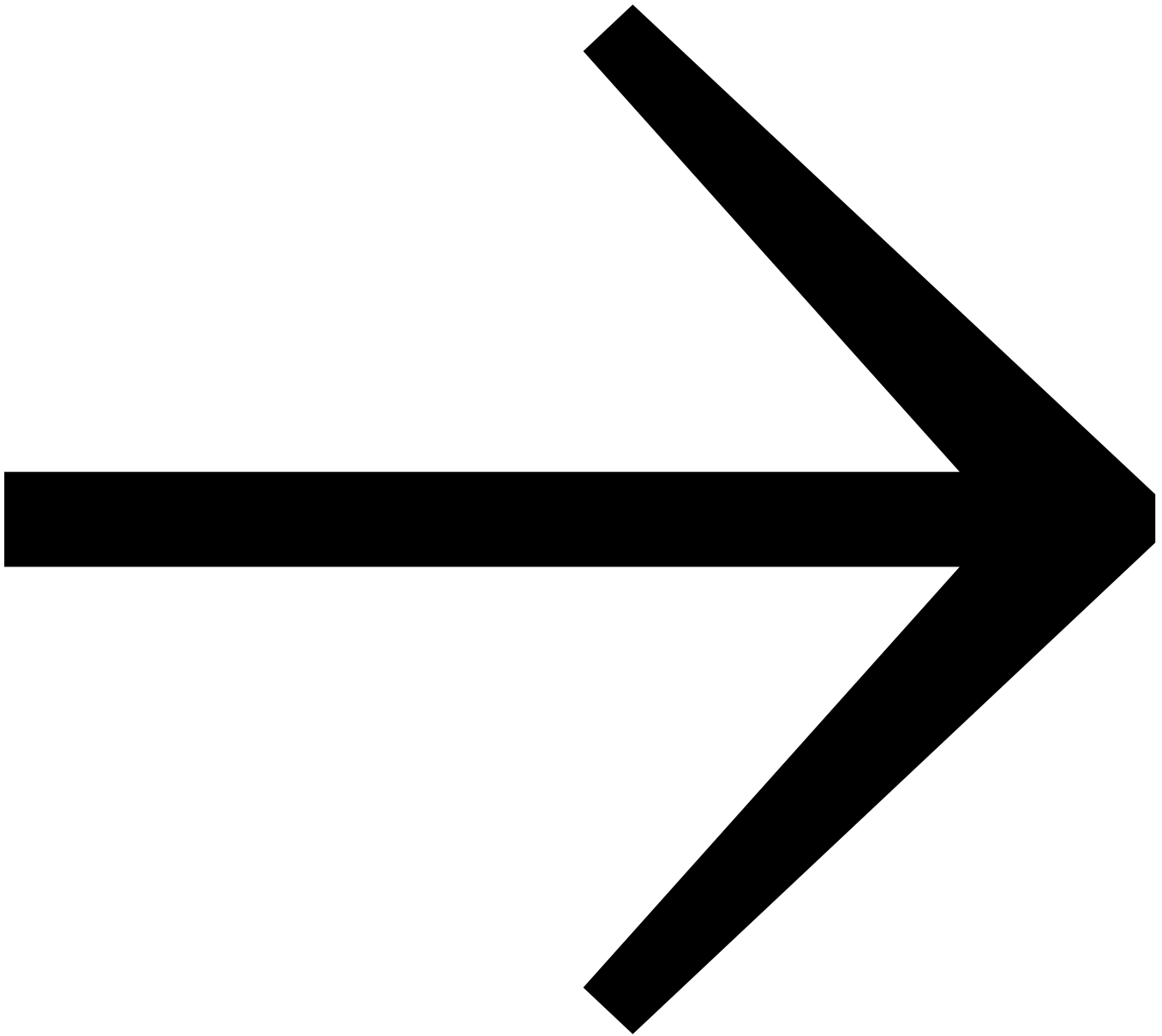
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