

[home](#) • [artnews](#) • [news](#)

## In Ambitious New Book, Curator Barbara London Charts Video Art's Rise as One of Today's Dominant Mediums

BY **ALEX GREENBERGER**

January 13, 2020 12:00pm



Wang Gongxin, *The Sky of Brooklyn—Digging a Hole in Beijing*, 1995.

COURTESY THE ARTIST

New artistic mediums are rare, and by any measure, video ranks among the defining inventions of any kind in the 20th century. Once relegated to alternative spaces because

some didn't believe it could even be called art, video is now seen in museums and galleries across the world and counts as one of the major mediums of our time.

No history of **video art** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/video-art/>) is as comprehensive and essential as the new *Video/Art: The First Fifty Years* by **Barbara London** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/barbara-london/>), a former curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York who has watched the medium evolve over the past half-century, almost from its very beginnings. Published by Phaidon, the book traces the medium from early works by **Nam June Paik** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/nam-june-paik/>), Mary Lucier, Merce Cunningham, and others to boundary-pushing pieces made over the past few years made by Lisa Reihana, Pierre Huyghe, Kahlil Joseph, and Lu Yang.

London—who curated an exhibition at MoMA called “Video Art: A History” in 1983 that is now regarded as one of the first major surveys of its kind—is fearless in predicting where the medium is headed next. “I’m very excited about this field,” she said, speaking by phone earlier this month. A Q&A follows below.

**ARTnews: In your introduction, you talk about first coming to video art in the 1970s. What was the first video you fell in love with?**

**Barbara London:** Because I was working with a great curator, Jennifer Licht, on a show of contemporary work that went to Australia called “Some Recent American Art,” there were a couple of works that really blew me away. One was Lynda Benglis’s *Now* [1973], and there was Joan Jonas’s *Vertical Scroll* [1972]. In the very early days, I met Nam June Paik, so he and Shigeo Kubota had a big impact on me, in terms of what video is and what it could be.

**How would you describe that impact?**

At that time, various people were anti-television and anti-museum. Those two categories were considered very powerful, and they’d shut out young, scrappy artists working with this new technology. Also, television, being broadcast and very commercially oriented, closed out these artists’ independent voices. That was what was of interest to me. I would run all over town, going to various screenings and performance events, and was very compelled and driven by the energy.



Barbara London.  
HENRY ZERNIKE/COURTESY BARBARA LONDON AND  
PHAIDON

### **Did you face any adversity for studying work that wasn't considered "art" by many people at the beginning?**

In my own institution, I was given a green light, but I worked very quietly. I had space and a small budget. Everyone was happy as long as I minded my own business and kept everybody informed. I was lucky, because [MoMA trustee] Blanchette Rockefeller was interested. Not that she spent a lot of time with it, but she would talk with artists like Bill Viola and others, just because she was curious. A little later, when Agnes Gund became active with MoMA, she was also interested.

Until the past decade, MoMA categorized art by medium. Painting and sculpture was painting and sculpture, and so on. [Former MoMA curator] Bill Rubin would comment that he was happy that I was handling video because his curatorial team wasn't spending time on it. People were aware of what I was doing, so I just put one foot in front of the other and kept going. It took a while, but the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] started giving support, and the Rockefeller Foundation started giving support. It all just evolved.

**The new MoMA is so different, with an emphasis on moving-image art in the collection galleries and someone like Joan Jonas given an entire room to herself. What do you think of the museum's new rehang?**

It's great to feature her. She's a real veteran and a pioneering artist. It's been over a decade since the previous expansion. There have been many, many in-house discussions about how to bring moving-image art forward—how to bring it upstairs, out of the theater where films are shown. I think it's good, because the visitor has a broader context, and that's what I felt from the beginning: nothing exists in isolation. There's always cross-talk and cross-influence. Artists sit in a bar and talk, or go to each other's lofts, as they did in the '60s.

**It's interesting how you place such an emphasis in your book on the experiential aspects of watching early video works when and where you saw them.**

I felt that I'm in very unique position because I was there, and it really was exciting. All of these artists were taking very big steps, and maybe the art writers weren't paying such close attention. But I was going to all of these things, and it sure was exciting!



Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (still), 1975.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX (EAI), NEW YORK

**Many of the early video pioneers were women, among them Martha Rosler, Dara Birnbaum, and Shigeko Kubota. Was that something you wanted to showcase in the book?**

Definitely. I talk about how the medium was new, so it was a clean slate. There existed an old boys' network, but many women were suddenly able to enter the field. They were running art spaces, production centers—people like Beryl Korot founded a publication [*Radical Software*] where technical information was shared. People traveled more than we realize we did, so there were various festivals and conferences. There was camaraderie and a drive.

**There's a focus these days to reach back in history and highlight under-appreciated figures, like Gretchen Bender and Ericka Beckman. Who in the book do you think deserves a showcase?**

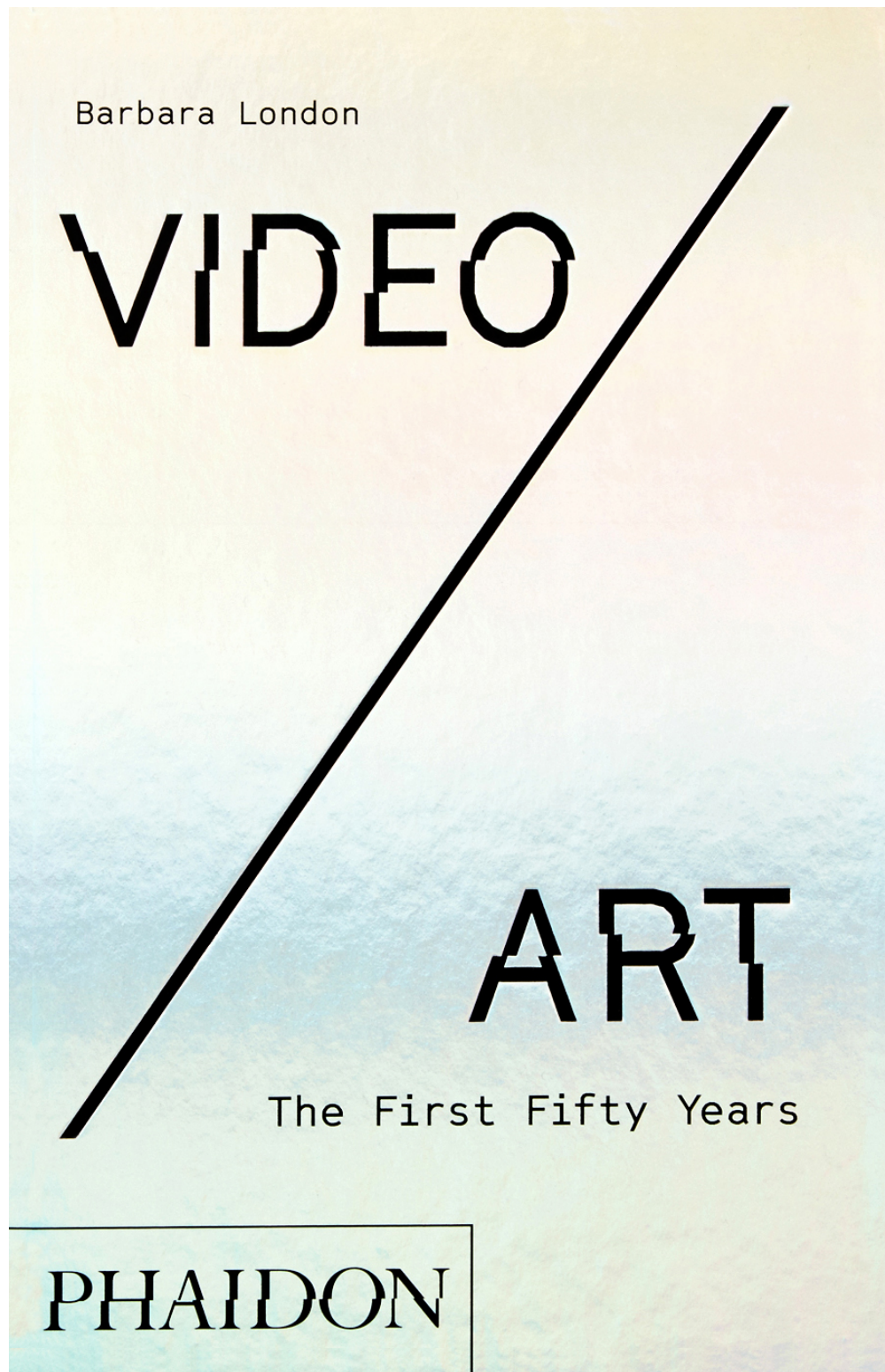
Shigeko Kubota is one example. But there are of course others. And there are a couple of them in Latin America. I was so excited—I went out to L.A. for the Getty's big Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA initiative [in 2017], and there were fantastic women who were active with performance and video in the '70s. A lot of new scholarship is going on, and we'll see fantastic work coming out about them.

**Anna Bella Geiger is one of those Latin American figures you touch on in the book, and she is having a show at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo.**

There are incredible people in Canada and Australia, too.

**Canadian art history is understudied here. Vera Frenkel, Sara Diamond, and Paul Wong were making interesting work.**

It was all across the country. They were very much in tune with what was going on in New York and Europe.



The cover of *Video/Art: The First Fifty Years*.

COURTESY PHAIDON

**At the beginning, you mention, video was defined in part by its liveness—the fact that you’d film it and immediately see the image playing out. But now, that’s changed—video installations by artists like Stan Douglas have big budgets and look like films. Do you still see liveness as an integral aspect of the medium?**

The distinction was the personal voice in relation to the commercialized broadcast voice. At the beginning, there was television and the film industry, and those are corporate. What an artist does is always personal. Everything is digital now, and you can stream. Netflix now makes movies that are eligible for Academy Awards! Steve McQueen and others migrate from one camp to the other. It's more and more blurry now.

**Video has morphed into “media art,” a term for digital and moving-image work. What spurred on that shift?**

A big change for everybody came in the '80s when you had collectors like Peter Norton, who developed and sold the Norton antivirus software. I was very observant of someone like him, who was comfortable with technology. When there was a visit to his New York home at some point, maybe in the early '90s, he had a laptop in his study with videos by artists playing. Up to that point, many museums were nervous. *What is this? How do we take care of it?* It was the biggest museums, like MoMA, SFMOMA, and Tate, that helped create a position in their conservation departments that would help take care of these materials. There was a shift so the tools were easier to use; the software gets better and better and smoother and smoother. Where are the ideas, or what makes a good work? You still have to slow down and ask *those* questions.



Stan Douglas, *Evening*, 1994.

COURTESY THE ARTIST; DAVID ZWIRNER, NEW YORK; AND VICTORIA MIRO, LONDON

**In the book, you say that, as conservation departments have gotten better, so too has museums' programming for video art.**

Not every museum has the budget or the staff to handle this, but of course, the Whitney or MoMA does. Smaller institutions are working with “specialists,” people who now have gone

through graduate programs. They're available for a consultation fee to help a private collector handle an upgrade or storage or to figure out, for example, a certain projector that Bill Viola favored for the aesthetics...

**Your book expands the history beyond New York and Europe to what was going in Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. Was the global history important to you from the onset?**

It was very, very important. It was important for me when I was a curator at MoMA. During the '70s, a lot of my colleagues were going off to Europe. Very early, I think in '77, I went to Japan. I thought: Here, we've got all this equipment, and all of it was manufactured in Japan! I wanted to go deeper into Asia. That has always been part of my objective as a curator and a writer, because the world is big and I think there are pretty great voices out there that need to be heard.



Sondra Perry, *Lineage for a Multiple-Monitor Workstation: Number One*, 2015.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

**Did you ever make any predictions that were wrong?**

I thought video installation would take over installation, but that's not the case. Installation is a much bigger topic.

**Toward the end of the book, you look toward the future of the medium via artists like Sondra Perry and Ian Cheng. Are there any artists you're keeping an eye on that you couldn't find space for in the book?**

There are many I would've wanted to put in, but how to name them? Recently, I was in conversation at a public talk with two very wonderful Korean-born artists who do VR. They both came up to me and said, "When are you doing the next book?" I'm not sure, but of course, I would love to do another! I just hope it doesn't take quite as long.



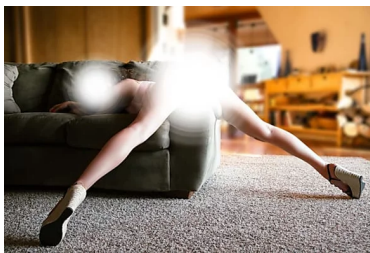
## Virtual reality doesn't really figure in this book.

I see it as another artform. If I do another, that what I would really want to dig into. I never like to pretend I'm a futurist because I'm often wrong, and that's why, at the end of the book, I asked four artists [Rachel Rossin, Julia Scher, Shu Lea Cheang, and Heather Dewey Hagborg] what they see as being the future.

**The book is a celebration of the medium turning roughly 50 years old. Looking back, what do you now think have been some of the major shifts over the course of its evolution?**

At the beginning, video was a new field. The artists really were the ones who had to figure out what the tools were and how to use them. They were describing and deciphering what the art was. In the period I cover, video really morphed into media. Maybe that's the topic of the next book. Technology keeps evolving, art keeps evolving, and artists evolve as culture does.

## More From ARTnews



artists

### 3 Million People Follow Artist Leah Schrager's Cam-Girl Instagram Project. In a New Interview, She Explains Why She'...

Leah Schrager on her Instagram Persona, Ona; censorship; and more. The artist is currently in a show at the Museum of Sex.

BY ANA FINEL HONIGMAN



artists

### Mike Cloud Invents a New Kind of Portrait Painting

With his new paintings, artist Mike Cloud tries to envision a form of portraiture that isn't exploitative.

BY ANNE DORAN



artists

### Only Connect: Ruth Root Brings Her



## Delirious, History-Rich Paintings to Pittsburgh

The New York–based artist is showing 10 wildly patterned new works at the Carnegie Museum of Art.

BY **ANDREW RUSSETH**



**artists**

## ‘Their Work Cannot Be Taken at Face Value’: Massimiliano Gioni on Curating a Duchamp/Koons Blockbuster for Museo...

The 70-work show is now on view in Mexico City.

BY **ALEX GREENBERGER**



**artists**

## Let’s Rock the Beach: Artists Stage Annual Beach Painting Club on Hamptons Sand, Partying and Painting in Honor of Elaine ...

The eighth Beach Painting Club took place at Sammy's Beach in East Hampton.

BY **KATHERINE MCMAHON**



Copyright © 2020 Penske Business Media, LLC. All Rights reserved.  
Powered by WordPress.com VIP