



READ

A Pioneering Video-Art Curator Chronicles the Medium in “Video/Art: The First Fifty Years”

By Andrea K. Scott February 14, 2020

Don't be fooled by the straightforward title of the lively new book “Video/Art: The First Fifty Years.” A better description of Barbara London's indispensable and enticingly personal history arrives two pages in, when she writes, “This book describes the madcap trajectory of a pliable medium.” Few guides are more qualified to lead readers through the rapid rise of the once renegade art form, which is now so ubiquitous that screens and paintings share walls in museums—London was the very first curator to introduce video to the Museum of Modern Art, where she championed tech-based experiments for forty-three years. (She retired in 2013.) What makes her book such a fun read is that it's not exactly the comprehensive survey its title implies. Instead, it's as much memoir as exegesis, an idiosyncratic front-line report from a deeply informed, intrepid, and passionate pioneer who is still in the trenches. (London now teaches graduate students at Yale, and her exhibition on sound art is about to commence a five-year tour.) Even her curatorial path was unconventional: the native New Yorker was pursuing a graduate degree in Islamic art when she traded the classroom for downtown haunts, like Max's Kansas City, which was the Cedar Tavern of the electronic avant-garde—or “scenester intermedia mavericks,” in London's words.

So, although readers won't learn about, say, Christian Marclay's iconic twenty-four-hour video installation “The Clock,” from 2010 (the artist merits a mention, but not regarding his most famous work), they will travel with London to meet Chinese artists in Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou, in 1997. (Full disclosure: I was part of a team in New York that produced London's daily online diary of that visit for MOMA, a blog before the word existed.) Any history of video must begin with the wizardly Korean innovator Nam June Paik (1932-2006), who is widely acknowledged as the medium's founding father. Paik plays a major role in London's story, but, in addition to contextualizing him as a towering historical figure, she shares personal anecdotes, including this vivid description of his studio: “I would crawl over and through a maze of electrical wire, tubes, and old circuitry to find Paik often standing in rubber boots, so as not to be electrocuted.”

Similarly, an in-depth account of the work of the influential New York artist Joan Jonas—who has been combining performance with technology since the late sixties and whose bewitching room-sized installation “Mirage” (conceived in 1976), a six-part game of drawing and erasure, is a highlight of the new MOMA—includes the astrological tidbit that both the curator and the artist are Cancers. (London writes, of this cosmic affinity, “Once we met, I identified with her tenaciousness, imagination, and loyalty as a sympathetic friend.”) One special merit of London's perspective is her emphasis on the role of women in the medium's evolution, from familiar names like the pop-culture crossover artist Laurie Anderson to equally important but lesser-known figures like Dara Birnbaum, whose deliriously feminist spin on a DC superhero is also now on view at MOMA, in the five-minute video “Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman.” Not a bad label for the pathbreaking insights of London herself.

