From clunky computers to TikTok: how video art took over the world

Fifty years ago, video art didn't exist. Now, social-media users watch billions of clips a day. One curator has seen it all change

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Premium

Imagine you're going to Tate Britain: what do you expect to see? Plenty of paintings, whether abstract or representational; sculptures, drawings and etchings; videos on wall-mounted screens. None of these things is in itself remarkable.

And yet, if you'd been planning your visit 50 years ago, the last one wouldn't have entered your mind. At the turn of the 1970s, "video art" barely existed at all. Portable video-cameras were being used by the television industry, but they wouldn't reach camcorder size until the 1980s. Their use to record artists at work, or to make artworks in themselves, was alien to most.

For those under a certain age, it may be difficult to imagine this. "There was a technophobia then," explains Barbara London, the veteran curator who founded the video collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art. "Today, that technophobia is gone. Everybody has a laptop and a smartphone. Everybody uses apps, or figures them out."

London's new book, Video/Art: The First 50 Years, is the first survey of how the art world changed. More than that: in the age of the smartphone, her book is a history of how Western society was transformed. Today, the Tate can use one of its largest galleries to programme a video retrospective – its Nam June Paik exhibition, currently at Tate Modern, covers a half-century of innovative work – but when London was setting out in the 1970s, her interest in video left her almost alone.

The technology then was primitive, she explains; there were no Mpeg files, or internet to ping videos from device to device. Instead, they had "clunky machines": "If you were a contemporary curator, you probably didn't have an audio-visual staff who could help you, so in many cases you had to do it yourself."

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That special assistance is rarely needed today, whether you're in the gallery or at home. Most Westerners, of all generations, are now literate in video technology, using FaceTime or Skype with ease. In their pockets are smartphones loaded with social-media apps, most of which host videos. TikTok has over 500 million monthly users; Instagram has over a billion. Facebook has almost 2.5 billion, or a third of the world's population, and videos on the platform gain nearly 8 billion views per day. Many are composed exhaustively, to create a personal aesthetic: they promote the user's opinions, or their selves, and they're works of attention and craft.

London now teaches at the School of the Arts at Columbia University in New York. Since the 1970s, she says, she's seen "a long arc" of changing habits. "When [the early video artist] Bill Viola put work on public television in New York, he had to contend with 'channel flippers' – people who were constantly turning the dial.

"Today, the young ones know that if you're on Instagram or TikTok, you're moving fluidly. You'll be grabbed by something, and you probably won't spend more than a couple of minutes there. I think [her students] work on videos with shorter durations, with that in mind."

These social-media platforms have, she says, effectively become a global repository of video art. "It's information, it's sharing, it's really social media, with people commenting and so on. And artists explore these new platforms, they try to figure out how to commandeer it.

"But what's good – what's going to have the legs – that's what writers like you or curators like me are trying to find."

London was born in 1946. Leaving graduate school in 1970, and already hooked on an underground scene that blended new technology with art, she was struck by the antagonism between early video artists and the institutions that might offer them a future. "Video makers," she writes in Video/Art, "put the television industry in the same category as museums – a high-handed adversary that, for the most part, treated them like outcasts."

She came on staff at MoMA in 1971, determined to be the curator for a genre that didn't exist. Word got around. She received swathes of unsolicited video tapes – it was all on tape, back then – and she sorted through them all. Her colleagues called her "catholic", and didn't mean it entirely well. It was still normal to scoff at video art, then go home to watch TV.

But gradually, figures like London established themselves on the scene in New York (still the epicentre of the artistic world). "You could count us on a couple of fingers," she recalls. "And it wasn't just one homogenous group, it was made up of splinters."

Her position at MoMA helped: someone on the inside of a major institution was forcing it to take these changes seriously. "I always felt that I had to have an open-door policy," she says. "There was so little information that I relied on conversations with artists about their work. And slowly I was able to get little travel grants from MoMA, and find out what people were doing in Paris or Cologne."

Blank tapes cost under $10 (£5 then), and they could be copied and sent in the post. Compared to large-scale painting or sculpture, it was the everyman's medium of choice. Aptly for a genre that was coalescing from zero, the range of emerging young artists was vast.

"You had people," London remembers, "who were very issue-oriented, who picked up the early portable video-camera and documented a taxi drivers' strike because one of them was a taxi driver. And at the same time, there were people straddling the performance realm and the art realm, like Joan Jonas, who took a video-camera into her studio, and started treating it like a live mirror."

London was an early champion of Nam June Paik, who made TV sets that showed abstract patterns, and used them to build strange robotic forms. Other early pioneers included Jonas, who recorded herself moving around in repetitive, enigmatic performances, and Viola, who used editing techniques to toy with our sense of time on screen.

In particular, this budding genre suited so-called "identity politics", a phrase that's roughly the same age as video art itself. This is no coincidence. "The camera," London suggests, "gave artists a choice to direct the camera either at themselves – them, their body, their ideas, their identity – or out into the world. And in the late 1960s, and certainly the 1970s, you had a lot of political ferment, feminism and racial politics."

Little has changed; the awakenings of the 1960s weren't so different from the current drive to be "woke" – a term invented by African-American activists, and only lately thrown back against them. Take Kahlil Joseph, for instance, whose meditative videos of young black men, living in American cities, frame their bodies in tableaux of rebellion or melancholy. (Joseph was an original choice by Beyoncé to direct her 2016 film Lemonade.)

But video art was, from the beginning, nicely in tune with the public mood. Some pieces by Paik were displayed in a 1968 MoMA group show called "The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age". That show, London remembers, was an early "popular success": the same

Americans who watched TV every day were intrigued by screen-based art.

And yet few critics paid it any attention. She's still nonplussed about that today. "[Video art] was durational – it took time – and not everyone wanted to invest that amount of time. But certain art critics didn't want to invest the time, or they would say: 'Oh, it's so *boring*.' That was a comment that a lot of them made."

Duration has remained the challenge of the form. Put simply, you have to stay put. If you went to Tate Britain's recent installation by Mark Leckey, O' Magic Power of Bleakness, you had to watch for more than an hour to view the work in its entirety.

But back in the 1970s, when London was filling MoMA with video art, the public were quickly engaged. She would come down to the galleries and find young couples entwined in front of the screens, or children playing with toys on the floor. "Even if the parents stayed only a short while," she says, "they started to have a context. They were seeing one thing and thinking 'what's that?' – but the next time they would see something else and say: 'Oh yes! I saw something like that a week or a month ago!'"

The groundswell, belatedly, grew. Curators, critics, senior figures: video art took hold of them all. "It was a magical moment for exploring," London remembered. "There was very little written at that point, so everything you did mattered – you were breaking ground just as the artists were."

Today, with that ground long broken, the challenge is for video artists to differentiate the videos they put in galleries from the ones everyone sees on their Facebook feeds (or TikTok, or Instagram). Video as a medium is part of the furniture. As a result, the break-out stars are often dissidents, making you reconsider what this familiar form can do.

Think back to November, when the American teenager Feroza Aziz spliced an eyelash-curling tutorial and a critique of how Uighur Muslims were treated in China. This was subversive art: a well-staged performance masquerading as a beauty tip. TikTok, which is Chinese-owned and thus answerable to the Chinese government, swiftly banned Aziz; it then had to backtrack, creating further headlines, in a classic example of the "Streisand effect".

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As for the quality of "newness", 2020 and 1970 aren't so dissimilar. London, who retired from MoMA in 2013 after 42 years, cites "artificial intelligence and augmented reality" as two examples of technology entering the studio. But she cautions against thinking that a new kind of art is good for its own sake. It may be interesting, but that's not the same thing.

"Unfortunately, I think we have to wade through a lot of mediocrity. It depends who gets their hands on those tools: are they engineers, are they artists, are they hybrids?" (The best are adept at both. Take Robert Rauschenberg, for example: with engineers and materials scientists, he co-founded a collective called Experiments in Art and Technology.)

Virtual reality is one tool that seems inescapable of late. It's often kitschy, like a shiny toy you're meant to enjoy just because it's new. Here in Britain, it has been tacked onto historical surveys at the Royal Academy and blockbuster shows at the Saatchi Gallery; next week, it'll be central to the "Meet Vincent Van Gogh Experience", a "cutting-edge, interactive" South Bank show.

I tell London that last year I saw the VR work Lunatick by Antony Gormley – he of the public sculptures, knighthood and Turner Prize – and found it trite and dull. (This, despite it being a trip to the surface of the Moon.) "But we're always going to have that," she counters. "I agree with you, most of VR art is *so bland*. But I'm waiting for the one who comes and catches us off-guard.

"Gormley has a reputation, a name, he's won awards. But what's exciting is when someone comes from left-field – a genius who takes the tools and twists them. And then we go: 'Ah, yeah! Now *that's* what this medium can do.'"

Video/Art: The First 50 Years is available from Phaidon now at £27.95

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