

# Barbara London Calling

As a curator and writer committed to contemporary art, for decades I've pursued art that explores and adapts to the nonstop changes in technology and in the people who use it. Upgrade is the name of the game. Praxis means keeping my finger on the pulse by engaging directly with artists—emerging and established—and keeping an open dialogue with passionate colleagues. Everyone adapts in their own way. For me, I needed a way to talk with the kinds of passionate people whose work and personalities have interested me for fifty years. *Barbara London Calling* was the answer.

BY BARBARA LONDON

## Season 1: Is It Media Art?

When I began my career as a curator at The Museum of Modern Art in the 1970s, video and film were considered separate mediums with distinct technologies and histories. Then, as digital media gradually overtook analog, artists and curators began combining any moving imagery into one category. Today, time-based media can be viewed via smartphones, monitors or large-scale projections. Scale no longer seems to matter.

Many artists engage with the latest technologies on a routine basis; with new

developments in technology, they can now use tools that are relatively more affordable and accessible than those available decades ago. The status of television, newspapers, and magazines has diminished as the internet, video games, and virtual and augmented realities have gained importance. Subject matter combines topical ideas at the intersection of social utility, gender, sex, race, and our relationship to software and the digital world. Audiences have become more sophisticated, too. They're most responsive to the cutting-edge iterations of artists' experiments, which bears some connection to the excitement I felt about what I first discovered as a young curator frequenting underground art venues.

The last eighteen months of isolation brought inexorable change and a lot of soul searching. To survive and stay sane, everyone had to dig deep within themselves, as our lives moved online with family, friends, and coworkers. The experience of lockdown shook everyone up, and appears to have resulted in some forms of renewal, positive or otherwise.

This article looks at my version of renewal—particularly my good fortune in creating a new podcast series to converse with dozens of innovative artists and two prescient curators. I created, produced and published *Barbara London Calling* entirely during the pandemic. It grew out of my continuing fascination with what art

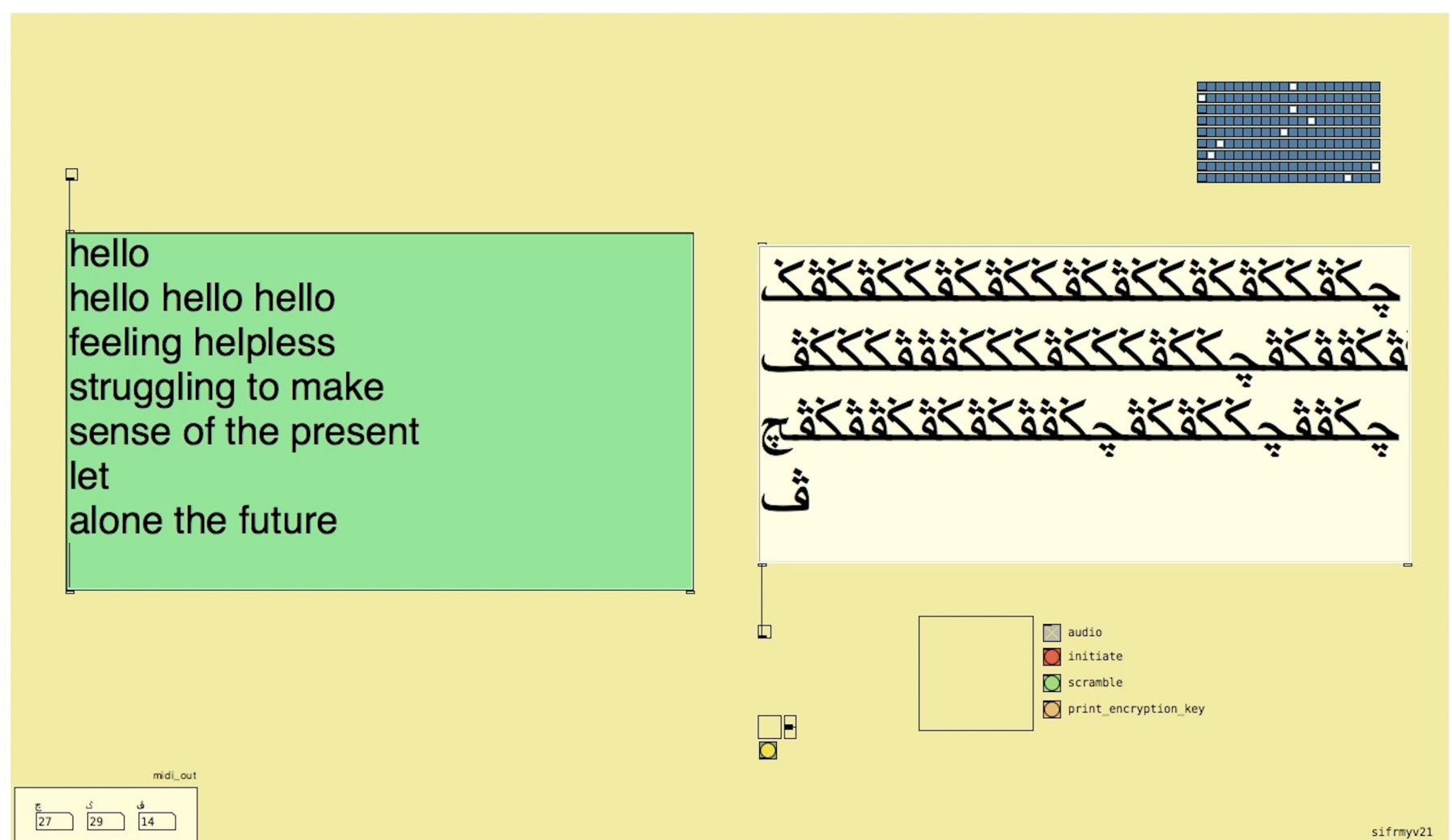
is and what it can be. I released Season 1 in 2020; Season 2 of the series launches December 1, 2021. New episodes will be uploaded every two weeks on Apple and Spotify through March 2022. What follows is a precis of what *Barbara London Calling* is.

## Season 2: Ideas Determine Form

*Barbara London Calling* got going once COVID-19 raised its dreadful head and the world suddenly moved into lockdown. Late February 2020, I decided to create a podcast series. I knew that artists around the world were trapped inside their studios, and might be open to engaging in a conversation with me about their practice. Luckily, they agreed.

I was fortunate to gather support from Independent Curators International and collector Bobbie Foshay; I was also fortunate to secure the professional expertise of the knowledgeable Bower Blue production team—Ryan Leahey and Amar Ibrahim—of Blue Medium. I went ahead and created *Barbara London Calling*. I spoke individually with twelve artists confined to their studios in different countries. Talking into a microphone and recording our own side of the conversation, together we discussed the role of technology in their practice. I concluded by asking each whether or not they considered themselves a media artist. Emphatically, each said no. First and foremost, they identified themselves as an artist who uses the materials and medium that best suits an idea.

Leahey and Ibrahim flawlessly wove together both sides of our recorded conversation, so that it sounded as if the artist and I were seated together in the same room. The twelve conversations with the artists in Season 1, and my thirteenth with curator Chrissie Isles, were published on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, one episode every two weeks starting in July 2020.





Tracey Moffatt, *Nice Colored Girls*, (1987). Film. Image courtesy of the artist.

Season 1 has so far attracted more than 11,000 listeners from all over the world. Transcripts of the conversations with illustrations of art discussed are available on my website, <https://www.barbaralondon.net/>, designed by Vivian Selbo.

The lockdown ended in early 2021, and life slowly returned to an adjusted form of normalcy. Still eager to further my understanding of what artists are up to, late summer I dove into the production of Season 2 of *Barbara London Calling*, this time with the generous support of the Kramlich Art Foundation. I now had the assistance of Vuk Vuković, a committed graduate art history student at the University of Pittsburgh. This time I decided to investigate the relevance or irrelevance of medium specificity, and the momentum gathering behind the concept of hybridity. As host of the series, I explored the prioritization of art's ideas and platforms, rather than its medium. Understood as a fluid network, art is thoroughly global and social, and offers the means of formulating compelling, inventive new connections.

Time-based art is a voracious mix of performance, literature, music, moving image, and installation. Innovation continues to manifest itself in many ways. Art is streamable as digital files, exists in social media or spatially as immersive environments, consists of CGI constructed avatars, or live as NFTs (commodifiable “non-fungible tokens”). What I postulate is that ideas come first, medium second, and forms are not fixed. The software that went into what may have started out as an installation has morphed into theater.



Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, *Chain Smoker-Tap Dancer*. 1995, 2-channel video. Image courtesy the artists.

What matters is how successfully art manages to affect its viewers.

### Conclusion

We're still only beginning to unravel how the world has changed—personally, socially, creatively, institutionally, and economically. The world's gradual reopening means we are finally able to venture out to see museum and gallery exhibitions, go to the theater, see a movie, even travel by plane. Meanwhile, we continue to stare at tiny screens on smartphones to connect with colleagues and friends, gather the

latest news, or learn about and experience art in its evolving forms. *Barbara London Calling* offers a curatorial view of how artists are flourishing with change.

Barbara London is a curator, critic, and

Season 1 Artists: Anri Sala, Bani Haykal, Cao Fei, Didem Pekün, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, Jana Winderen, Jonathas de Andrade, Marina Rosenfeld, Paul Pfeiffer, Rachel Rossin, Samson Young, Zina Saro-Wiwa; curator Chrissie Isles

Season 2 Artists: Auriea Harvey, Sondra Perry, Ryoji Ikeda, Lorraine O'Grady, Ken Okiishi, Nalini Malani, Jakob Kudsk Steensen, Tracey Moffatt, Lucy Raven, Aura Satz, Amar Kanwar, Ed Atkins; curator, Valerie Cassel Oliver