

# Flickers of life

A gleeful car smasher, an exploding water drop, Buddha watching telly ... **Barbara London** was there at the birth of video art. As it hits 50, she picks the landmark works

**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, 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 low-rent, rundown buildings across the city. I would race up splintery staircases just as artists rushed down them with newly completed videotapes under their arms. I watched works on TV monitors and navigated mazes of cables and cobbled-together equipment to experience "site-specific installations" - an unfolding new art form showing live feeds or prerecorded videos on TV sets.

Artists often drew 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



Left, Beyoncé's homage to Pipilotti Rist

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*  
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 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. 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*  
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



Profound relevance ... clockwise from top: Pipilotti Rist's *Ever Is Over All*; Zhang Peili's *Eating*; Bill Viola's *He Weeps for You*; Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha*; Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll*



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 theatre of the self and body has all the wonderment of puppetry and fairytales.

## Through a drop of water darkly

*Bill Viola: He Weeps for You*  
The artist grew up in Flushing, New York, near the 1964 World's Fair, which he would visit, marvelling at its 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 camera, with a 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 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. 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 foods in a Chinese chew

*Zhang Peili: Eating*  
In the mid-90s, I heard that artists in China were experimenting with



to the country's filthy standards of communal living and its then rampant hepatitis, which the artist had caught - Peili holds a 30x30cm mirror. He drops it, then meticulously glues the shards back together. After dropping it again, reassembly is harder. The entire procedure takes about three hours.

Towards the end of my visit, Peili showed me *Eating*, a video sculpture using three monitors in a stack. 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; the bottom western foods (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.

### Red-hot poker on the rampage

*Pipilotti Rist: Ever Is Over All*

Famed for her upbeat video-sound installations, Pipilotti Rist was born in a 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 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. On the left, playing slightly slowed down, 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 windows of cars with the flower. Passersby smile, as if indulging an innocent child. They include a policewoman, who salutes the perpetrator. Beyoncé later paid homage in her video for *Hold Up*.

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.

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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 around, 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.

He made his first video in 1988. Called *30x30*, the tape shows the artist's hands in closeup. Wearing latex gloves - a reference