

T THE NEW YORK TIMES STYLE MAGAZINE

Isaac Julien: "Four Artists on the Future of Video Art"

By Andrew Russeth

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Clockwise from top left: a still from Hito Steyerl's "Liquidity Inc." (2014); a digital print of Isaac Julien's "Lessons of the Hour" (Lessons of the Hour)" (2019); a still from Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Lorna" (1979-84); a still from Rachel Rose's "Lake Valley" (2016).

Photo Credit. Clockwise from top left: courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin; © Isaac Julien, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York; © Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, N.Y.C.; courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise New York/Rome

When coronavirus shuttered just about every gallery in the United States and confined many to their homes, museum curators and dealers had to improvise. Overnight, the only way they could show art was digitally. In some cases, this meant posting photos of paintings or using cameras to offer 360-degree virtual tours of exhibitions — to varying degrees of success. But then there were the works that were *designed* to be viewed on a screen, which have enjoyed a sort of a renaissance.

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On many Friday nights since April, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York has streamed video art by Alex Da Corte, Juan Antonio Olivares and Adelita Husni-Bey, to name a few. Gagosian Gallery staged web shows with moving-image work by artists including Ed Ruscha and Douglas Gordon, Metro Pictures hosted a digital film festival over more than a dozen weekends, and the artist Nina Chanel Abney curated a two-week run of pieces by Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Solange Knowles and others at Brooklyn's We Buy Gold. Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Art launched an online exhibition series with "Lake Valley," a 2016 cartoon-collage animation by Rachel Rose that follows a rabbitlike animal as it explores an enchanted world, seeking community. "Two-dimensional work or sculpture all comes out a bit flat on social media," says the filmmaker Isaac Julien. "I'm not saying people can't sell works. They do, in fact. But I think the moving image — it becomes its own form. It's not really compromised."

Since its emergence in the 1960s, it's video art that has typically been harder to present and sell and perhaps to take in, too, often requiring time and patience of its viewer. When pioneers like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci and Joan Jonas wielded cumbersome cameras in the 1970s to make scrappy, poetic or otherwise bizarre tapes intended for gallery display, the prominent dealers Leo Castelli and Ileana Sonnabend started a service to rent and sell them. It never turned a profit. However, as production values increased and minds opened in the 1980s and '90s, stars were minted: Bill Viola, Matthew Barney, Pipilotti Rist and Christian Marclay were among those to see their work sold in limited editions and featured in major museums and international biennials, just as that of Ryan Trecartin, Arthur Jafa and Martine Syms has been more recently.



Meriem Bennani's video installation "Party on the CAPS" (2018) will be shown at the Julia Stoschek Collection in Berlin when it reopens in September.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and C L E A R I N G, New York/Brussels. Photo: Alwin Lay

But even in 2020, with screens glowing all around us, video art remains a relatively niche field. It is still rare, for instance, to come across a figure like Julia Stoschek, a German collector who focuses

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exclusively on multimedia and video. When the art spaces Stoschek runs in Berlin and Düsseldorf, Germany, were closed in March, she collaborated with artists and technicians to upload more than 70 works from her 800-some-piece collection online. Her aim, she says, is "to make it accessible for everyone, all the time, everywhere." Eric Crosby, the Carnegie's director, feels similarly, saying that a lesson from lockdown is that "audiences should be able to encounter art regardless of whether our museum doors are open or closed." Their comments underscore the diffuse and potentially democratic nature of video art in comparison to, say, oil painting.

At the same time, readily available offerings raise questions about where exactly video art should live, and how its future might be shaped. Is its star turn on the web a sign of things to come, or just a momentary detour? Here, four video and digital artists talk about working during the pandemic and share thoughts on the field as a whole.



An installation view of Hito Steyerl's "Liquidity Inc." (2014) at Artists Space in New York in 2015.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Photo: Matthew Septimus

Hito Steyerl

For more than 20 years, Hito Steyerl, 53, has made incisive, deliriously entertaining videos that examine how images and ideas circulate. Based in Berlin, she is set to have her first survey exhibition in Germany – at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, in Düsseldorf – in September.

Most of my work has always been online. But I try not to share it on commercial or corporate platforms, so you will find very little of it on YouTube. It's mostly hidden in plain sight, meaning that it's on platforms that are not Google searchable, which technically makes them part of the dark web.

The concept of the digital sphere is not in a very fortunate moment. I've been talking for the past year about how the digital has been privatized and gentrified. It's basically monetized by four or five big corporations, and none of this has changed just because of lockdown, so I'm very

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ambivalent about the digital euphoria.

What institutions or galleries assume is that videos are available and that they can just stream them for free without taking into account any sort of production cost or anything like that because the web is seen as a sphere of distribution of things that are free. There is a sort of digital fatigue now, and I think there is a whole oversupply, and it's not good for the artwork. It doesn't get it any more attention. On the other hand, if people were to give it more time and attention, and also resources, I think it could develop a lot. The over-traveling that the art world has experienced could be reduced if there were some convincing digital platforms. But I'm not sure whether that will happen.

Basically, I think it's a good idea to expand digital distribution, but then we also need public digital infrastructure. We need, let's say, municipal digital platforms, for teaching, for schooling, for education, but also, of course, for the arts. We should also keep in mind that most of these means of production are not easily accessible — especially if we go into this video sphere, with 3-D modeling and VR, it quickly becomes very complex and expensive. And it stifles the development of modes of expression because it's just too expensive and young people have a hard time getting access to it. There is a huge difference to 20 or 30 years ago, because the camcorders were really cheap. That was my only shot at ever entering this kind of activity. But if people in Minneapolis can start thinking about how to build their security institutions, then why not a municipal digital platform? I think that's really easy in comparison — even cheap. Many things that once seemed impossible are suddenly possible, so why not try?



An installation view of Hito Steyerl's "Liquidity Inc." (2014) at Artists Space in New York in 2015.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Photo: Matthew Septimus

Rachel Rose

Based in New York, though she's been working upstate during this period, Rachel Rose, 33, shows transfixing, research-intensive videos in intimate, carefully crafted environments. Her 2016 work "Lake Valley" is on view on the Carnegie Museum of Art's website through Aug. 16, and at a solo show at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris through Sept. 13.

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The biggest change during lockdown has really been not having time. Not having child care for Eden, my 10-month-old daughter, I don't have the same amount of time to myself every day. It's more broken up and staccato. But I'm also planning for an exhibition, and I'm working on a screenplay, so the computer is all I need.

The Carnegie proposed doing an online exhibition of "Lake Valley," and I was excited about that because it felt like a nice opportunity to show it to families at home with kids, which I had always wanted to do. All of my works thus far have been developed in relationship, at least in part, to the site where I'm first showing them, because so many of them have been commissioned by institutions. So for me, the installation has always been a condition of the work. One of the gifts of the art universe is the opportunity to think through the physicality of how you view something. That's not something you get with a feature film, because it's going out to theaters or it's going out to streaming platforms. But, because none of us can be in physical spaces together, I feel it might as well be shared online.

I wonder about this period as a time for slower kinds of producing. Art is on this very seasonal cycle that parallels fashion. There are the September shows, there are the art fairs — it's this constant saturation, and I think for artists, that can often make them feel as though they need to keep up with that pace, which keeps getting faster and faster. Because of what I do, and the way in which my work has been commissioned, I've been able to work more slowly, but I notice how detrimental that cycle can be, and this could be the beginning of a new sort of time scale.

Online is essential right now, but as a long-term strategy, I'm not sure. When I open up Netflix and look at the main page, I've never heard of most of the TV shows it lists, and most of them are like six seasons in. It feels like there's so much entertainment and moving-image stuff online. In a way, I feel like the value that art can hold is parallel to that of live concerts. We can all listen to anything on Spotify or iTunes, but going to a concert is an entirely different thing. That is one of the things that museums can do for us, for art. Maybe, after Covid, art should become *less* visible on the internet. At the same time, the immediacy of "Two Lizards" [a serialized video project the artists Meriem Bennani and Orian Barki debuted in March] — what is that? It's like watching art live. And there's something really exhilarating and beautiful about that, too.



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A still from Isaac Julien's 'Lessons of the Hour' (2019). © Isaac Julien, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Photo: © Isaac Julien. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York

Isaac Julien

After having a solo show at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco cut short because of shelter-in-place orders, Isaac Julien, 60, was working in Santa Cruz, whose University of California branch is home to the Isaac Julien Lab. Known for sumptuous videos centered on radical histories, which he releases in multiple formats, from single-screen cuts to immersive multiscreen installations, Julien is scheduled to have a show at the McEvoy Foundation for the Arts in San Francisco in the fall.

Filming would be impossible right now. Maybe the gods were looking down on me in 2019, because I had the kind of mad intention of making these two gigantic projects — "A Marvellous Entanglement," on the architect Lina Bo Bardi, and "Lessons of the Hour," on Frederick Douglass — and I did. That has meant that 2020 has been the kind of year with more exhibitions and my making single-screen versions of work, so a time when it's more postproduction. If I had not done that, this would be very disruptive. There really are some things you can continue doing while social distancing, and there are some things that you cannot.

And yet, we're seeing this flourishing of video art and media works on social-media platforms. I participated in this Metro Pictures film festival, which I think was really successful. I really enjoyed seeing "Baltimore" [his 2003 short starring Melvin Van Peebles] during that time, and it was great to be able to post about it on Facebook and Instagram, to have all the responses to the work. I realized that a lot of the video artworks that one makes — they become, in a way, connected to the time when they were made. People have the memory. But it's great to be able to redistribute them on social-media platforms and to introduce the work to new audiences. Viewers were really excited, and this made me think about the possibility of how those works could live in a different capacity. When we have an exhibition of work showing in a museum, maybe we can have a single-screen version on social media simultaneously and think about both platforms as exhibition spaces.

What was good about the festival was that you got excited about who was going to be the next artist, and then you looked at the films, and you had time to look at them, and you could really learn things. Since then, other works of mine have been shown at special events. For example, in Brazil, the Goethe-Institut in Salvador showed my Fanon film ["Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask" (1995)] — it was just on for 24 hours, and it was watched by over 37,000 people. We kind of couldn't believe it when the figure came out. Funnily enough, the Fanon film was also showing in an exhibition in Singapore, and they showed it online, too, and some friends from Germany saw it. So you have this internationalization of the platform, of different people watching different works. This kind of lit the fuse. I got approached by lots of other institutions and museums, and I thought to myself, "OK, hang on here a minute. I think I might stop and think about it a little bit more, because maybe we can do it ourselves, in the studio."

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A screenshot of Lynn Hershman Leeson's "Agent Ruby's E Dream Portal" (2002).
Photo: © Lynn Hershman Leeson, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, N.Y.C.

Lynn Hershman Leeson

For more than half a century, the San Francisco-based Lynn Hershman Leeson, 79, has released feature films, cross-disciplinary scientific endeavors, interactive videos (like 1979-84's "Lorna," which concerns an agoraphobic woman) and web projects such as "Agent Ruby" (1998-2002), a chatbot with artificial intelligence that can converse with internet visitors. A survey of her work at the New Museum in New York has been postponed because of the pandemic, though she is currently developing what she calls "an occultish online game."

I probably have more time to work now because usually I run around a lot. In the past few months, I was able to finish a lot of projects I started in the '60s. I'm doing calls on Zoom, which I didn't have before, but my practice hasn't changed all that much because these things do take a long time to develop. I have the luxury of staying home and being able to commute digitally, which is something that Nam June Paik talked about — how we're becoming stationary nomads. He talked about that in the early 1980s, going all around the world without leaving your house.

I started a project called "Agent Ruby" in 1998, and nobody knew what to do with it, and I finally gave it to SFMOMA because I couldn't afford her upkeep on the net. I was told that the piece is the most-visited artwork in their collection. What really astounded me, because we did an exhibition of it in 2013, was that you do these things on the internet and they never die. The museum had collected something like 80 tons of global responses that became a portrait of what the world was thinking about all of these years.

One of the things I want to do when I have my next museum exhibition — and I don't think that any museum can afford to not do this — is really design a way it can be seen online. I think that there are ways that we can design almost telerobotic surveillance systems that allow you to see works better — really going into the piece and being able to understand it and see details of it. I haven't seen anybody, any museum, take advantage of the possibilities of how a work can be seen online.

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The viewer needs to be in control of what they're seeing and have access to the tools that will allow them to do that. The way that museums have been portraying exhibitions is that they're in control. They let you fly through a gallery, but they don't let you stop or go into something to understand it in a more tactile way.

Artists use the tools of their time and if, for instance, people who were shooting in 8-millimeter or 16-millimeter then want to convert it to video or maybe a form that may last longer, it's not the same piece. It doesn't look the same, it doesn't feel the same. You don't breathe the same way when you watch it. The light is different. We actually took "Lorna" from LaserDisc and migrated it to a DVD just because it could be shown that way. We have the original in an archive, but I kept all the mistakes in — I wanted it to look like it was made then. I think glitches are the key to discovery. They're underrated.

These interviews have been edited and condensed.

Correction: July 22, 2020

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to Hito Steyerl's upcoming exhibition at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf; it is her first survey exhibition in Germany, not her first overall survey.

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