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from the December 13, 2002 edition



**ART THAT WON'T SIT STILL:** Bill Viola's 'Going Forth By Day' at the Guggenheim is one of several video art exhibitions in New York. DARIN MORAN

# YOU WON'T FIND THESE VIDEOS AT BLOCKBUSTER

Video is taking over as the medium of choice for artists, reinventing the language of art.

By Carol Strickland | *Special to The Christian Science Monitor*

**NEW YORK –**

It used to be, when visiting an art museum, pictures stood still and viewers moved through the gallery at a brisk trot. Nowadays, with video art seizing more territory, the paradigm is reversed. Viewers stand still while images move before their eyes.

Nothing short of a reinvention of the language of art has transpired. This means viewers must learn to translate this language, based on pictures that flow by in fast or slow-motion.

Several New York exhibitions, displayed through Jan. 12, offer a chance to experience the new paradigm. In "Moving Pictures" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the top level of the rotunda shows recent video art. Bill Viola's ambitious work, "Going Forth by Day," is installed in its own gallery at the museum. The Metropolitan Museum of Art's first large-scale video installation, "The Quintet of Remembrance," is also by Mr. Viola.

Video has entered a stage where attention must be paid.

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..... has entered a stage where attention must be paid.

As Anne Strauss, the Metropolitan's assistant curator for modern art, said, "It's a vital, thriving art form."

Begun in the 1960s by pioneers like Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, and Vito Acconci, video art was initially used to record performance art or conceptual art events. Gradually, video was used less to document art happenings and became art itself.

Now art based on moving images is "ubiquitous, pouring out of the video spigot," according to Tom Sherman, an associate professor who teaches video history, production, and theory at Syracuse University in New York.

Artists formerly working in traditional mediums, as well as young art students, are experimenting with video.

"It's a kind of explosion," Mr. Sherman says, "and I think it'll continue."

In its current form, video art is a hybrid that can combine computer graphics, digital video, film, animation, text, and special effects. And observers believe that it will only grow more widespread in this media age.

"Our visual culture is increasingly becoming a media culture, which is realizing itself in a change in art practice - in how artists work and what art is," says John Hanhardt, Guggenheim senior curator of film and media arts.

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In museums, video has moved from background to foreground. "Video used to be shown by the bathroom. Now it's in the main salon, and whole shows are devoted to it," says Jillian McDonald, a video artist and assistant professor of computer art at New York's Pace University.

One reason for its growth is the increasing ease of electronic technology. Thirty years ago, the artist John Baldessari predicted a new generation would use video as the previous generation used a pencil.

"It's been one of the main mediums artists are working in for 10 years," says Chrissie Iles, the Whitney Museum of American Art's curator of film and video. With a camcorder and editing software, "You can make a movie on your iMac," she says. "It's easier than making a painting."

Digital equipment is affordable, compact, and easy to operate. For a generation that grew up with television, movies, mass media, and the Internet, "Video is as flexible as a sheet of paper, almost," Mr. Hanhardt says.

Because of young artists' comfort level with video, James Yood, who teaches art theory and criticism at Northwestern University, notes, "It will become more and more prevalent. The genie's out of the bottle."

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In general, video art tends to be brief, a seven-to-12-minute loop of moving images.

"Conceptual narrative is the dominant mode," Ms. Iles says.

As for production values, a work can be as simplistic as home movies or "as accomplished as anything out of Dreamworks," Mr. Yood says.

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Unlike the dramatic narrative of cinema, the emphasis is on a sequence of events in visual and acoustic space more than a story.

"Artists tend to install narrative elements in nonlinear ways," Sherman says, "showing a scene where something happens, depicted in multiple ways, as in a Godard art film."

There's a strong interest, he adds, in engaging the viewer to construct the narrative.

Viola's "Going Forth By Day" involves five different video loops, projected simultaneously on four walls. Each portrays a different phase of human life: milestones from birth to the mortality of loved ones and promise of an afterlife. The viewer fuses the five scenarios into a coherent message.

In presentation, single or multiple projections on flat plasma screens are currently the dominant mode, although some artists still use monitors and some - like Tony Oursler - project videos on dolls or puppets. Increasingly, artists are sculpting space, creating video and acoustic installations like a virtual environment to immerse the viewer in the experience.

With high resolution and increased fidelity in color and luminosity, the video environments provide "almost a spiritual experience," Sherman says. "People get excited by the magic of display. Viola's projectors practically light the walls on fire."

What's brought the art form to the forefront is not the medium, however, but the content.

"The strength of the art is what's making it happen," Hanhardt said. "The reason it's recognized is because powerful ideas and innovative ways of making images are done through video."

Although the public has extensive experience viewing video on television and digital media on computer screens, some resist it in a high-art museum setting. Yood notes that audiences often complain if videos have audio components that bleed into other areas of the museum.

"The museum gallery," Sherman says, "was the last technology-free space," devoid of video displays and media. "Now it's just like the mall."

One potential problem to delay the expansion of video art is the lack of a viable economic model. Since the artwork exists only when the images are projected, it's not perceived as a commodity, and collectors have not flocked to acquire videocassettes or DVDs.

Nonetheless, no one believes video art is a passing fad.

"Artists respond to the world they're in," says Iles. "Unless computers and moving images cease to be important in our lives, it won't go away."

## MORE THAN 'JUST A MOVIE'?

But can a high-tech format inspire in viewers the depth of emotion and revelation as a still image?

Art is art, according to Iles, who believes "the medium is not important as the quality of the experience. Video can provide the same level of excellence, joy, and wonder" as other art forms.

"Great works that draw from shared experience can have that impact," Hanhardt agrees.

"Simple facts of life become the way to find a bridge and shared vision with people from different cultures, races, history, and religion," the preeminent video artist Viola said in a Guggenheim press conference.

Since video speaks the media language of globalism, this "art can go out through the whole world and link us together as human beings."

As a time-based - rather than object-based - medium, video requires patience.

To grasp its message, Viola advised, "You need to spend your own time with the work. Some walk by; others stop and study it."

Don't peruse it like a painting. The meaning, he said, "comes in on a more unconscious level," as the images wash over you.

A willingness to interact and interpret helps. "It's important for the viewer to understand what's happening through duration," Sherman says. "When you find a pattern, then you can get into it on a conceptual level to derive the artist's influences and intent."

Seeing moving-image-based art with an open and engaged mind makes it just as compelling and - yes - just as moving as any still painting or sculpture. But you have to be still in order to be moved.

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