

Plagens, Peter. "The Staying Inside Guide: Video Art Without Tears," *Wall Street Journal*, 22 July 2020.

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A still from Ant Farm's 'Media Burn' (1975)
PHOTO: ELECTRONIC ARTS INTERMIX (EAI), NEW YORK.

Video art began 55 years ago when Nam Jun Paik used his new Sony Portapak to document Pope Paul VI's visit to New York. He then showed the footage in a downtown Manhattan café, thus turning consumer electronics into an artist's medium. It flowered during 1960s and '70s, when, along with the emerging fields of Conceptual and Performance art, it sought to expand the idea of art beyond static objects on gallery walls and floors. The result has been work with all the enigma, surprise, delight and cultural gravitas of the best of the rest of contemporary art.

Since many art lovers still find video art inscrutable, even unapproachable, here are some of the more accessible works—some of which are excerpts and all of which are in chronological order—that might serve as an entertaining introduction to the medium.

[Ant Farm](#) ["Media Burn," 1975](#)

Ant Farm was a group of Bay Area art guerillas best known for "Cadillac Ranch," a row of Cadillacs half-buried, tail fins up, along the former Route 66 in Amarillo, Texas. (They're still there, albeit relocated by a couple of miles.) Here they concoct a tacky spectacle in which another Caddy, tarted up with a bubble cockpit and a mock jet plane's tail, crashes through a blazing wall of television sets. The event itself—an obvious swipe at popular culture and consumerism—takes only a couple of minutes, but the near-half-hour surrounding documentary provides context. Think of it as avant-garde Evel Knievel.

[Martha Rosler,](#) ["Semiotics of the Kitchen," 1975](#)

Looking much more like a '70s grad student (which she was) than Julia Child, Ms. Rosler parodies the TV cooking show. Staring straight into the camera (except when she's reaching for an implement), she mock-demonstrates the use of standard culinary tools, in alphabetical order A through T (U, V, W, X, Y and Z are done with semaphor-ish gestures). It's second-wave feminism at its angriest (forks are not supposed to be used with violent downward strokes), which is all the more frightening because it's so deadpan. One is reminded of Raymond Chandler's capsule description of the effects of Southern California's Santa Ana winds: "Meek little wives feel the edge of the carving knife and study their husbands' necks."

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A still from William Wegman's 'Dog Duet'
PHOTO: WILLIAM WEGMAN/THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

[William Wegman](#) ["Dog Duet," 1975](#)

Watching any one of Mr. Wegman's short video takes on his practically human Weimaraners (most people know the photos), you can laugh at their slow, poignantly befuddled reactions, and even utter a faint "awww" without feeling square. In "Duet" he has them looking up and around at—maybe—a circling UFO. That's probably what we'd do if we saw one, too, and that's Wegman's point. Human foibles enacted by animals in books and cartoons are a staple of modern life, but Wegman's dogs make it a...treat. (An [interview on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's website](#) shows how analytically Wegman approached his medium.)

[Fischli & Weiss](#) ["The Way Things Go," 1987](#)

"The Way Things Go" is possibly the most viewer-friendly artist's video ever. It's a Rube Goldberg cartoon come to life: A big trash bag unwinds on a rope, bumps a tire, making it roll toward a table, which then tips a teeter-totter into another tire, which rolls....and so on, through fluid spills, small fires, deflating balloons and a score of dovetailed and artfied household accidents. But what does it mean? Theologically, it's in the God-as-original-clockwinder school; aesthetically, that whatever's in your garage is gorgeous.

[Bill Viola](#) ["The Greeting" \(excerpt\), 1995](#)

"The Greeting" re-enacts in modern dress Jacopo da Pontormo's painting "The Visitation" (1528-29) in which Mary tells her cousin Elizabeth that she is with child. Mr. Viola is video art's high-tech, high-polish Romantic poet, and his work—no exception here—is beautiful in the conventional sense of the word. The takeaways are that an artist's video can be lovely without sacrificing seriousness, and that contemporary art doesn't always represent a rupture with the art of the past.

[Matthew Barney](#) ["Cremaster 1," 1995](#)

Mr. Barney was the It Boy of the 1990s art world, and the five "Cremaster" films were The Art You Had to Have Seen. They're big-budget hallucinations with the likes of a destruction derby in the Chrysler Building, a go-kart race through the Isle of Skye, and the hunky Mr. Barney as a satyr. This excerpt features a Busby Berkeley-like number on the blue Astroturf at Boise State University's football stadium. The mystery is not what this perfumed hysteria signifies, but how it ever got made in the first place. Ours is not to wonder why but instead to relax and enjoy the eye candy.

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[Pipilotti Rist](#)

["Ever Is Over All," 1997](#)

A beautiful woman (the artist herself) strolls down a street, casually smashing the windows of random parked cars with a pine-cone-shaped flower on a stem, while dreamily hummed music plays softly in the background. Passersby smile at her as if everything is perfectly normal. Of course, it's all staged: The flower is actually a metal club; the cars were placed by the video-makers; the passersby are, of course, actors. In a gallery setting, the video is a two-channel work, projected in a corner, with the other wall showing a field of flowers. On your own computer screen, just the action narrative plays. (As with other seemingly enigmatic artists, there are several informative interviews with Ms. Rist on YouTube.)

[Christian Marclay](#)

["The Clock" \(excerpt\), 2010](#)

When screened in museums and galleries, "The Clock" shows snippets from movies featuring variegated clocks and watches that display the same time as that at the viewer's location. We're talking real time; the video is 24 hours long. It's ingenious and obsessive in equal measure. This 10-minute excerpt is a sufficient—and quite entertaining—summary.



A still from 'Black Mask,' by Wilmer Wilson IV
PHOTO: WILMER WILSON IV, CONNERSMITH, WASHINGTON, DC.

[Wilmer Wilson IV](#)

["Black Mask," 2014](#)

In an unmoving headshot, a young, medium-complexioned African-American man slowly attaches pitch black sticky notes to his face, one at a time, until it's almost covered. This takes up almost all of the video. Then he removes them. It's all there: the difference between the racial designation "black" and the actual color, the cover-ups that made the Black Lives Matter movement necessary, and the question of whether a young black artist should be in a museum or at the barricades. View, think, view again, re-think...and in the end, learn something.