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Video-Art

in the
Federal Republic
of Germany
since 1976

A Selection

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Coordination: Manfred Brönnner, München

Preface:
Helmut Friedel, München

Selection and texts:
Wolfgang Preikschat, Frankfurt am Main

Graphic design:
Gert Blass, München

Translation:
Stephen Locke, Frankfurt am Main

Typesetting:
Typostudio SchumacherGebler, München

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From the TV-Burial to a New Language of Images

The first 20 years
of artistic exploration
of the video medium
in Germany

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It is a popular fallacy that video-art and television have little or nothing in common. The challenge presented by the new medium, this wooden box that secured itself an inviolable place in the living room during the 1950's and captivated an audience of millions through the hypnotic power of the picture tube, was taken up by a number of artists in Germany at the advent of the 1960's and answered with obstruction/ destruction.

In 1935 the first television station was constructed in Berlin, thus inaugurating the age of radio picture transmission. The technical prerequisites for the electronic transmission of pictures were developed in both Germany and the United States, and the artistic utilization of the medium began almost simultaneously in both countries, albeit under different circumstances.

In 1963 the Korean artist Nam June Paik, who had been living in Germany since 1958, presented his "Exposition of Music – Electronic Television" in the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, in which he manipulated "normal" television sets by using magnets that distorted the picture as well as other modifications of the sets. The picture transmitted by the station was thus altered, and its place taken by new forms "drawn" on the screen by the artist or by anyone else. In that same year Wolf Vostell, another Fluxus artist, who had been working as early as 1959 with the deliberate blurring and distortion of the TV picture and in that same year had shown a "TV-dé-coll/age for Millions" in his atelier in Cologne, presented the first video-art exhibition in the U.S.A., at the Smolin Gallery in New York City, under the title "6 TV-dé-coll/ages – Happening – Environment". Vostell had also organized a happening at the Yam Festival in New Brunswick, N.Y., in 1963,

during the course of which a television set that was tuned into a live telecast and wrapped in barbed wire was buried in the ground, the so-called TV-Burial. During the same year Günther Uecker created his "nail objects"; in one of them a television set and its stand were nailed up. A bit later Uecker rammed a huge nail through a TV set.

These anti-gestures, destructions and functional modifications represent the first concrete involvement of German artists, and of such artists as Paik working in Germany, with television, the "tube". Their preoccupation with TV was quite different from that of the American artists, who from the very beginning were more concerned with the technical potential and pictorial possibilities attainable through video. Characteristically, the Americans tend to "overlook" the TV set itself by showing only the monitor through a passe-partout-like cut-out in the wall. In contrast, German artists relate to the whole unit, the physical presence of the new medium, and deal with it in concrete, sculptural terms. In 1963 Vostell not only showed his "dé-coll/aged" television programme "Sun in your Head"* in Wuppertal, but also led the audience that had come to the opening of the exhibition to a quarry where a TV set could be seen operating in the distance. Vostell destroyed it with a rifle shot – the first murder of the medium, not unrelated to Lucio Fontana's slash through the canvas of a monochrome picture.

When Nam June Paik distills the entire spectrum of the television programmes offered into a single Zen line and shows this line moreover on a set that has been tipped on its side or when he replaces the "unreal-real" picture on the picture screen with an actual one in the form of an aquarium or a burning candle, as he often did in later objects, and

when Wolf Vostell buries or shoots the TV set: their artistic impulse springs from the same mentality that inspires Joseph Beuys to cover the TV screen with a piece of felt ("Felt TV"), one of many artistic events since 1966 with which Beuys has demonstrated the "dull blindness" inherent in the tube. Television is used and abused here as an object. The flow of information is interrupted; the one-way flux from "Big Brother" to the passive consumer has been "rerouted".

The opportunity of electronic recording on videotape, allowing for the preservation of long, uninterrupted documentations, corresponded to the growing desire to record happenings and other artistic events, whereby it must be noted that in the beginning such works as Joseph Beuys' "Eurasienstab"* ("Eurasian Staff", 1968) and Gerry Schum's "Land-Art" (1969), which was made specifically for television, were first shot on film stock and then transferred to videotape. Nevertheless, a number of artists soon recognized the evident advantages of television over film, and their transition to the video medium was deliberate and intentional. In 1969 Gerry Schum was able to bring works by Richard Long, Barry Flanagan, Dennis Oppenheim, Robert Smithson, Marinus Boezem, Jan Dibbets, Walter de Maria and Mike Heizer in his compilation "Land-Art" via the Berlin TV station SFB into the homes of millions of viewers; and a year later when the Südwestfunk in Baden-Baden broadcast Schum's "Identifications" viewers were confronted with works by Giovanni Anselmo, Joseph Beuys, Alighiero Boetti, Stanley Brown, Daniel Buren, Piero Calzolari, Gino de Dominicis, Ger van Elk, Hamish Fulton, Gilbert & George, Gary Kuehn, Mario Merz, Klaus Rinke, Ulrich Rueckriem, Reiner Ruthenbeck, Franz Erhard Walter, Lawrence Weiner and Gilberto Zorio. Gerry

Schum's Television Gallery, which he later called Video Gallery and in which he produced a number of videotapes with artists, was not a popular success. Schum died in 1973.

Reiner Ruthenbeck's installation "Objekt zur teilweisen Verdeckung einer Videoszene"* ("Object for the partial concealing of a video scene", 1972–74) consists on the one hand of an object, a black metal plate with the typical rounded "TV corners" mounted on top of a stand, and on the other of a videotape, shown on a monitor. The tape was shot on a busy street, the plate having been placed in front of the camera. According to whether the camera was zoomed further in or out, the plate has blocked more or less of the camera's view of the "real world", thus creating an area of non-activity in the center of the video monitor: a dead surface confronted with the life around it, or, contrarily, the arbitrary bustle of the street contrasted with a zone of peace, the Absolute.

For Wolf Knobel's videotape "Projektion X"* ("Projection X", 1972), which Gerry Schum produced, the source of light and the camera were mounted on top of an automobile; as the car drove through the city at night, the light projected a huge X onto the passing houses. The light from the street lamps and neon signs left trails of illumination across the videotape.

In her tape "Die neue leibhaftige Zeichensprache"* ("The New Embodied Sign Language", 1973–76) Friederike Pezold utilizes the possibility of standing simultaneously in front of and behind the camera, of recording on video and seeing (on the monitor) what is being recorded. The monitor is the "drawing surface" on which she is represented, the

camera is the "drawing utensil". Before she starts to record her motions on video, she sketches a precise choreography of her movements in the form of diagrammes, which she then proceeds to follow during the video recording. In the monitor the different parts of her body at first appear reduced to "signs", shapes or lines as in a drawing, and then begin in the course of the movement to take on corporeal substance and thus also sensuousness. In a kind of performance for the camera, instead of for an audience, the surface area of the monitor is filled with such signs, which are in a constant state of change through their continuous movement. The uninterrupted flow of the video recording within such a fixed parameter makes the movement appear almost static.

Friederike Pezold's approach has been taken up and developed in a certain way by Ulay and Marina Abramović in their recent video production "City of Angels" (1983), in that they work with "living pictures". The movement visible in the video recording is not that of the persons portraying these pictures, but is rather the seemingly random movement of nature around them. The static character of the pictures is exaggerated by the movement of a crawling turtle or of a leaf being blown by the wind. Time, an essential feature of film as well as of video, acquires a new definition here: it means not only room for action, but also for contemplation, for rest.

In sharp contrast to this tranquil approach is Nam June Paik's "A Tribute to John Cage" (1972/73), which he produced in New York. Paik examines the mass of available television material, fragments of which he strings together in a rapid succession of cuts to form a "wild" collage, evidently inspired by the

principles behind John Cage's collages of "everyday sounds and imagination". In any case the work is reminiscent of Cage's "off-beat" musical experiments. Different series of entertaining, humorous, shocking and electronically manipulated sequences follow abruptly one after the other, demonstrating that it is possible to interconnect the seemingly unrelated.

In Germany Manfred Kage began in 1974 to work with the technique of the electronic production of images with the help of a video synthesizer, which Paik/Abe had developed in 1970. In the synthesizer Kage manipulated normal images of the microworld, transforming them and giving them a new quality of perceptibility. In the following years up until 1980 Andreas Stickel, Walter Schröder-Limmer, Hans Joachim Andree, Armin Bayer and others all began to devote themselves to the particular possibilities offered by video synthesization.

With her videotape "Glauben Sie nicht, daß ich eine Amazone bin" ("Don't believe that I am an Amazon", 1975) the performance artist Ulrike Rosenbach utilized the innate possibilities of video in an innovative way. She describes the tape as follows: "I shoot 15 arrows into the reproduction of a mediaeval Madonna (Stefan Lochner's 'Rosenhag Madonna', 1451). On the video screen one can see how the arrows penetrate the head of the Madonna, and also see my face. The two faces dissolve softly into one another. The video recording is my psychic feedback. The image of the Madonna, unapproachable, beautiful, gentle, shy and, as a cliché, fairly fatuous, is rediscovered within me. In striking the picture the arrow also strikes me."

The approach of combining the artist's own person with that of the historical artistic

paragon and cross-fading the fixed image with the image created in the performance is again taken up in Ulrike Rosenbach's video-performance "Reflexionen über die Geburt der Venus" ("Reflections on the Birth of Venus", 1976–78). The work is based on Sandro Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" from 1485. Mythology relates of Venus, as one of the few autonomous Mother Goddesses, that she rode naked on a sea shell to the shores of the Island of Cythera, accompanied by doves and sparrows, and when she set foot on the island the flowers began to bloom. During Rosenbach's performance Bob Dylan's "Sad-eyed Lady of the Lowlands" is playing in the background. She projects a colour slide of Botticelli's "Venus" on the wall, and standing in the beam of the projection she slowly turns on her own axis. As she rotates in the light her own image overlaps with that of Venus. New centres of movement develop in Botticelli's artwork, shifting in ways that are barely perceptible or explicable. The tights she is wearing are white in the front and black in the back, and when her back is to the projector the black of her tights blends in with the black background, blotting out the contours of Venus.

In "Das Propellerband" ("The Propeller Tape", 1979), "Das Softyband" ("The Softy Tape", 1980), "Das Duracellband" ("The Duracell Tape", 1980) and "Das Alliiertenband" ("The Allies Tape", 1982) Klaus vom Bruch opened a new, broader dimension for video through the quality of editing that he developed in these works. Editing is of course one of the traditional elements of filmmaking. Klaus vom Bruch picks up on certain editing techniques that are particularly common in advertising and, carrying them to an extreme, gives them new meaning and a new language of images. For example, he brings together two seemingly unrelated and incompatible areas

– in “The Duracell Tape” it is a battery and a bomber pilot – and by repeating the images and intensifying the rhythm he condenses them to such a degree that in the end one imagines that a bomb, the atomic bomb, is issuing from this seemingly harmless consumer article like a genie out of a bottle. It suggests the thesis that advertizing is a battle, a very tough business. Vom Bruch does not, however, sit back and try to indoctrinate the spectator from a distance; instead, the artist takes an active part in the occurrences and thus becomes co-responsible, just as he is also a co-victim. In “The Allies Tape” the numerous layers of images are superimposed upon each other so densely that one has the impression of seeing two different picture worlds at the same time. This kind of concentration of numerous picture fragments down to a new mosaic-like image has meanwhile become a fairly common element of the pictorial language of music clips. But the latter seldom use such elements as resolutely or with the aesthetic precision that one finds in the works of Klaus vom Bruch or of Marcel Odenbach.

In “Die Distanz zwischen mir und meinen Verlusten” (“The Distance between me and my losses”, 1983) Marcel Odenbach uses a collage technique to combine film quotations with his own sequences, but also utilizes the opportunities offered by highlighting only certain sections of the image. To do this he often shows only a narrow strip of the image fragments appearing on the screen and blacks out the rest of the picture. The effect is like looking through a keyhole: the spectator becomes a voyeur of secret, mysterious, puzzling scenes. The picture story is developed linearly in relation to the music.

In “Eleven Waiters” (1982) Ingo Günther employs only video recordings that he made

himself within a short period of time. This “raw material” is condensed on the editing table, whereby the resulting material is the basis for further concentration through editing. In this way Günther has produced a collage in which sound and image combine to illustrate a densely packed slice of reality. By tipping the monitor 90° on its side he creates an upright format and also breaks with the normal manner of watching television.

Young artists who use the video medium nowadays often approach the task without trying to separate the various techniques and materials. Photos, Super-8 films, their own video shots, recordings from television programmes, etc., are combined to form collages in which music often assumes an important function as a structuring element. “Fragment-Video” (1982) by the video group Notorsche Reflexe is a typical example of this kind of work. Out of this method of image fragmentation and mosaic formation arises a new language of images, images that need almost no words and are nevertheless able to express very complex social, political and individual topics.

Through such works a new grammar of the language of images has been developed whose foundations were already laid down in the silent films of the Twenties. Television has done away with the supremacy of literature and has become the most important medium of information for the majority of the people in our society. The fascination of the television image, which gives the appearance of immediacy and truth, cannot be denied. And yet it has not been those people who operate the mass medium, but rather artists with their limited technical and economic means who have explored, tested and developed the multifarious aspects

inherent in the medium. This achievement has not yet been adequately recognized by the general public, although the ideas and the language of images developed by the video artists have been copiously exploited and copied by the fields of advertising and entertainment.

Helmut Friedel

Further information about the historical development of video-art in Germany can be found in the catalogue "Videokunst in Deutschland 1963–1982", edited by Wulf Herzogenrath, Stuttgart, 1982.

**) The videotapes marked with an asterisk (*) can be borrowed from the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (Institute for Foreign Relations), Charlottenplatz 17, 7000 Stuttgart 1, which also provides other video productions upon request.*

Video in the Eighties

A mostly disconcerting, unbecoming, explorative handling of the video recorder gives rise to products that we generally refer to as video-art. This has to do with the fact that the aesthetically unconventional and the economically unprofitable often find their last refuge in the houses of art. For where else but in this non-utilitarian zone (a zone that is not, however, above barter) is it possible to turn the pictures upside down – and expect the observer to do the same? It goes without saying that such a haven also has its price. The notion of art is just as traditional as television with its eclectic form and aesthetics. To be sure: not everything that seeks admittance to the venerable halls under the banner of "Video" is art. Contrarily, not everything that is video-art contributes to the dynamics of creating video-specific symbols.

The first generation of video artists in the Sixties and Seventies took liberties, but they also had obligations. And one of the latter was that video-art renounce anything that savoured of entertainment, television or commerciality. In this way (to sum up the matter very briefly) the concept of video-"art" became the rhetorical constriction of a phenomenon whose impact and consequences went far beyond the intentions of those who

produced it. One must realize that the picture screen was by no means made exclusively for watching videos or for television. It serves as a monitor, as a plaything, as an instrument, as a controlling device. The picture screen can be found everywhere. It has emancipated itself from television. And anyone who works with video works before a backdrop consisting of a network of work stations, terminals, monitors, etc. Anyone who works with video also does this because the cross-references to music, to film, to the computer, etc., can be made productive: Coppola edits his films on videotape, Antonioni makes video clips, clip director Julien Temple makes feature films; some people develop computer graphics, others design advertising – on the same facilities, not always at different times. Every definition is a de-definition.

For the video pioneers of the Sixties the rules of the traditional forms of *mise-en-scène* were still largely valid. Gradually a generation is growing up that has worked with video from the very start, that thinks electronically. For them video – not only as a means of making art – is a primary means of experience. And these experiences can be quite diverse. Consequently, the results are also rather heterogeneous: associative, graphic, biographic, neo-narrative, pseudo-documentary, entertaining, artistic videos, music clips, video-performances, video-sculptures, video-environments.

In international comparison the national differences in videographic styles remain very visible, although these differences do not bear up to any strict definition. French productions are different from Italian, American different from German productions. Inasmuch as the symbols of the modern – and post-modern – world are created on the picture

screen, these symbols also point to a kind of time-lag between the national video scenes (as well as technology standards and media norms). Related to Germany: the history of video in Germany can only be understood in connection with the hostilities toward electronic technology, with the undisputed monopoly of television as a public institution whose policy is pluralistic equilibrium, and with the imperative demand for a content that determines its form. Furthermore, the alternative video scene never had any great illusions about non-publicly run, i.e. commercial television options and tended to orientate itself toward television's conventions. Symptomatic is also the fact that the only really successful political movement in the Federal Republic was the fight to prevent the census from being taken. Another factor is that the computer and the micro-chip were among the sworn enemies of the Left and the Liberals, that video is considered a swear-word, and that the technology dispute has polarized the cultural scene in Germany.

Even today, 1985, it requires a great effort in a city such as Frankfurt – a city of banks and commerce, a crossroads of communications and transportation – to get hold of a U-matic recorder. German advertising still campaigns with the irresponsible ingenuousness of pseudo-scientific conviction – half a century after Werner Heisenberg formulated his uncertainty principle –, and the exaltedness of the luxurious and the debonair is avoided if at all possible. Is it any wonder that numerous German video-makers – Ingo Günther, for example – have developed an unmistakably transatlantic (perhaps even Pacific?) style while working in the United States? It is only there that they could find the facilities and the mentality that they needed for their artistic endeavours. Even the ARD, the first German TV station, went to the U.S.A. to

have a new station identification logo made up, when at the same time German video-artists were not even being let into the studios. And while their American colleagues drive down to Los Alamos, New Mexico, to stock up on the refuse of American armaments research, German students, entrenched in the equally fortified film and television academies, practice the terminology of video techniques in the classroom.

The history of German videography has its own punch line. The lack of technique, the time-lag in research, endow German video-art with elements of timelessness, while the Americans, their eye on the television audience, rush from one technical gag to the next. The gloss and well-roundedness so typical of high tech, the result of a constructive idea having petrified into an apparatus, are missing in Germany. There is something incomplete, something still developing that is expressed in this simplicity and roughness. When German artists duplicate discoveries or experiences some years after they were originally made elsewhere by others, they are simply different experiences. National as well as personal history comes to light in the works of artists such as Klaus vom Bruch, Marcel Odenbach or Norbert Meissner. They evoke reminiscences of a time that is older than the artists themselves: for this generation history, as the denial of narration, is the history of images that are called up in an intangible process of re-symbolization, repetition or suspense. The post-War German reconstruction – particularly in the West – was also carried out on television. No FRG without ARD*.

It is perhaps also specifically German that anyone who works with video in an artistic-experimental way has to possess a strong will to survive. For many years the German

video scene lay in the hands of a few committed souls whose enthusiasm vouched for the continued existence of this genre in a cultural form. Even today one is more likely to run into German video artists abroad and to find their tapes in American or French museums. The willingness to support videography is comparatively limited in West Germany, although changes are apparent everywhere. Though not readily admitted, this might have to do with the fact that the inauguration of private TV and the commercialization of television, the abolition of the monopoly of the publically run institutions, at least in their programme structures, all contribute to allowing an infrastructure of small producers to develop. Moreover, producers and audiences are paying more attention to television aesthetics.

A superficial survey of the West German video scene should not overlook the establishment of a prize, the First Marl Video-Art Prize, which was awarded to Odenbach in 1984. The applications sent in to this German video competition, which gave a representative picture of the video production of the last two years, have raised hopes in a productive, imaginative young generation of video-makers. In 1986 the prize, which was jointly established by the Grimme Institute (the association of German adult education institutions), the Second German Television (ZDF) under the auspices of the staff of the cultural programme "Aspekte", and the Secretariat for Cultural Cooperation, Gütersloh, will be awarded for the second time. Each year the Berlin Film Festival screens a selection of international videotapes, which always stand under the shadow of their "Big Brother" film, but nevertheless are quite popular with the audiences. The Cologne art society, Kölner Kunstverein, under its director Wulf Herzogenrath continues to present

videotapes and artists within the framework of its exhibition programme. In the form of an anthology the German video magazine "Infermental" summarizes the broad spectrum of film, music, performance and art videotapes. Produced in turn by different editorial staffs, the magazine also contributes to the international exchange of ideas. Lastly, we do not want to forget the "Kleines Fernsehspiel" of the ZDF, which always leaves a niche open for video productions and has produced, among other videotapes, "Video 50" and "Stations" by Robert Wilson, "Der Riese" ("The Giant") by Michael Klier and "Der Unbesiegbare" ("The Invincible") by Gusztáv Hámos.

Wolfgang Preikschat

**) ARD is the abbreviation of "Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten Deutschlands".*