Video Without *Video*. The Situation in Estonia in the 1970s and 1980s
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Jeremy Welsh has distinguished between *video* as a technology and video as a cultural form. In his opinion, it doesn't matter what *video* is used for, because it is only a tool for processing information and "therefore, can be endlessly expanded, and new functions added". The images that are processed through *video* have more or less the same meaning when entering the "matrix"; they do not belong to anyone in particular and form a language without structure that can be surprisingly easily adapted to the needs of the user." [1] Welsh meant that the birth of video presupposes that the cultural coding of the *video* image exists, i.e. for example, for police evidence or video art. However, it is also possible that cultural coding takes place without *video* being technologically available. In the case of Estonia, and probably several other Eastern European countries, we can talk about a cultural form even before we can talk about *video* as a technology. *Video* arrived in Estonia in the mid-1980s when an increasing number of people brought cheap hand-held VHS cameras back with them when they returned from foreign trips, and you could also purchase VHS tapes and (pirated) video cassettes on the black market or in hard currency shops. Even Estonian Television did not acquire its first portable and mobile video cameras until 1981.[2] At the same time, it can be said that, paradoxically, video as a cultural form, i.e. the spread of certain artistic ideas and practices, preceded the arrival of *video* (as a technology) in the local cultural field. During the 1970s and 1980s, one can find some individual phenomena that are definitely related to video art in its various forms.

Jüri Okas's (b.1950) work of the 1970s is associated with the practices of conceptualism, minimalism, land art and video art.[3] He has rightly been considered one of the most important and bravest experimenters of the decade in Estonia as well as in the entire Soviet Union.[4]

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[1] J. Welsh. "Synthese und Konstruktion. Video und das 'Sampled Image'", *Kunstforum International*, Vol. 117, 1991, p. 151

[2] H. Peep. **"**Televisiooni lähiajaloost: video, värv, videofilm." *Teater.Muusika.Kino* no. 12/ 1984, pp. 23-27

[3] Elisabeth Jappe treats conceptualism, land art and action art as analogous phenomenon. All of them proclaim: "out of the gallery, away from the concretised object of material" and mentions the use of video cameras as the technological parameter that unites them. (E. Jappe. "Performance, Ritual, Protzess". *Handbuch der Aktionskunst in Europa*. München: Prestel Verlag, 1993, p. 27)

[4] A. Juske. "Kurvitz ja Zeitgeist", *Vikerkaar* no. 5, 1992, p. 334; J. Sobolev. Virtuaalne Eesti ja mitte vähem virtuaalne Moskva, in the collection *Tallinn-Moskva 1956-1985* (ed. A. Liivak, L. Lapin), Tallinn: Tallinna Kunstihoone, 1996, p.25

Between 1970 and 1976, when he was an architectural student at the State Art Institute of the Estonian SSR (ERKI), he produced a total of about ten short 8-mm and 16-mm films. His film work can broadly be divided into two categories: some document an activity, i.e. an action, or happening, in which nature is actively intervened with, while others observe an object without interfering with it. In all of them, the camera was only a witness to all the ongoing processes. The films themselves were simple and brutal, and usually without any montage. *Water Digger*, made in 1971, documents one of Okas' first actions on the Vääna beach, near Tallinn, where he made most of his films. As in other parts of the Soviet Union, the authorities' control over the public spaces in the rural areas was weaker, thereby making it easier to operate there. In *Water Digger*, we see a man digging a ditch into the sea from the seashore. The man's activity, which becomes more hysterical as the task become more hopeless, could be interpreted as a kind of absurd Sisyphic act. The climax is reached when the man is pushed into a hole dug in the beach sand. In a sense, this is analogous to a video performance, to the way video is used elsewhere, i.e. the film, as a "reproducing medium, had to function as a means of demonstrating an idea."[5] In his films documenting land art events, Okas often violates the principle of "the equilibrium of nature, by wedging square, artificial, artistic and other civilised fictions into the landscapes."[6] However, some of his other films observe objects without interfering with them. An example is *Plastic* (1972), in which the camera simply follows a plastic bag fluttering in the wind across the beach landscape until it finally drops into the sea. In this film*,* what Peeter Linnap has called the poles of the philosophical tension fields in Okas's work, i.e. the contradiction between entropy and civilisation, i.e. "the game on the border of nature and culture and their interrelationships is perhaps most clearly manifested".[7] An important additional dimension was added to the films by how and in what context they were shown, i.e. at the ERKI parties organised at the time. At these events, Okas would project the films onto a wall while manipulating them by turning the knobs of the film projector to the rhythm of the music. Thus, it could be said that Okas was also Estonia's first VJ. For example, his *Weekend in Vääna* (1972), which depicts the young artists gathered at the Okas family's summer cottage on the bank of the Vääna River,

[5] H. Friedel. "Film und Video. Verändern die technishen Medien die künstlerische Aussage?" , *Kunstwerk I*, 1980, p. 45
[6] P. Linnap. "Entroopia, Ruum, Pilt", almanac *Kunst* no 2, 1994, p. 29
[7] Ibid, p. 25

playing with inflated plastic objects, which was said to have been accompanied by music from Frank Zappa's album *We're Only in It for the Money*[8].

During the *Fluxus-Music-TV-Action: Exposition of Music – Electronic Television* event that took place in Wuppertal in March of 1963, it is said that Nam June Paik, in the euphoria of experimentation, placed thirteen broken televisions next to the musical instruments and exclaimed in front of the zig-zagging images: "I have invented abstract television!" In some sense, the same could be said of Kaarel Kurismaa's (b. 1939) (video?) sculpture *TV-set Avangard Nr. 855* (1980), although formally, the work is perhaps more similar to Paik's installation *Candle TV* (1975)[9]. Kurismaa has removed both the screen and the kinescope from the television leaving only the empty box. Thereafter, a kinetic and abstract sculptural composition in pop-art colors has been placed inside that starts rotating on its base when the TV button is pushed. The artist appeals to a simple play on words, i.e., an ideological paradox based on the fact that the one of the Soviet-era TV brand was called Avant-gard, while the status and fate of the artistic avant-garde in the Soviet regime was often problematic and even tragic.

Leonhard Lapin's (1947-2022) production of *The Multiplied Man* at Estonian Youth Theater in Tallinn in 1980 was also an important landmark in the context of local video and media art in general. The performance, based on the futuristic poetry of Johannes Vares Barbarus, a radical and controversial avant-garde poet of the 1920s and 1930s, was part of the cultural program of the Moscow Olympics [10] and, according to the author, expressed "in the form of poetry, the emergence of life and man from the void of space, and the modification of geometric man, the original being, into a social man when impacted by social processes".[11] The performance combined constructivist aesthetics and modern technology, the Olympic Games and cosmic music to produce an "augmented spectacle".[12] Lasers were used in the performance and the music was composed by Sven Grünberg (b. 1956), an Estonian electronic music pioneer. During the performances, images of the Olympic Games were shown on various TV monitors to illustrate the situation of modern man in a technologically

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[8] S. Helme, *Jüri Okas. Näituse kataloog*, Tallinn: Eesti NSV Riiklik Kunstimuuseum, 1987, p. 3
[9] The work is part of his *TV-Buddhas* series that he started in 1974, wherein Buddha figures are placed opposite old-fashioned and empty television boxes.
[10] The sailing events of the Moscow Olympics were held in Tallinn.
[11] *The Multiplied Man*, accompanying text, NU Performance Festival newspaper, (ed. A. Härm), Tallinn: Kanuti Gildi SAAL, 2007
[12] Ibid

complex society. In both works, one cannot overlook the media criticism hidden behind the humour, or the seriousness of the event in the context of the totalitarian society at that time.

1986 is one of the most important years in the history of Estonian video art. That was the year when a video camera was used for the first time in an artistic context, i.e. when art students from Tartu University recorded the video performance called *Aida* using barely functioning Soviet equipment, and the same year that the first independently produced amateur video was completed. It is probably from this moment on that one can speak of *video*-based videos existing in Estonian art and culture. In 1987 and 1988, several performance artists, primarily Siim-Tanel Annus (b. 1960) and Jaan Toomik (b. 1961), who were members of Rühm T, used *video* to document their actions. (In the early 1980s, the actions of Annus were also recorded on 16-mm film by amateur filmmaker Tõnu Aru.) In the 1990s, several of them, including Raivo Kelomees (b. 1960) who took part in the *Aida* happening, Jaan Toomik and Raoul Kurvitz (b. 1961) who was a member of Rühm T, transformed into video artists. Thereafter, they started to integrate the medium into their work more emphatically, by producing both video performances and video installations. In 1989, the first comprehensive Estonian-language article on video art was published by Raivo Kelomees [13] although, as he has himself has admitted, he hadn't seen any of the works at that time.

Today, it's probably hard to imagine the power that a tiny technological gadget can have when it's available to everyone, everywhere. However, in the Soros Center of Contemporary Arts, Estonia (CCA), which was founded 1992, there was a small hi-8 camera, which artists could borrow for free at the time, and which, without much exaggeration, laid the foundation for video art in Estonia. The video technology, which by that time was freely available in re-independent Estonia, was simply too expensive for the artists in post-socialist countries, and this is why Mare Tralla (b. 1967), Ene-Liis Semper (b. 1969) and other Estonian artists who emerged at that time, who were perhaps less well-known internationally, produced their first videos with this one and only camera. During that early phase, cooperation was also organised with the national TV company, Estonian Television (ETV), which recorded for example several of the actions organised by Jaan Toomik. The reason is that their Beta camera was only one available to them as the artists could not afford to rent cameras from a commercial TV production companies. Technological art as a whole, and video art in particular, emerged (a development that was significantly impacted by the cultural political

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[13] R. Kelomees. Videokunst, almanac *Kunst* no. 73/1, 1989, pp. 30-35

and social processes at the time that cannot be discussed in more detail here), took root, developed, internationalised and established itself in the local cultural field in about five years from 1992 to 1997. Unfortunately, this development falls outside the scope of this book.[14]

When it came to video as a technology, Estonia was a very latecomer to the international media art field. However, if we consider video art as an artistic way of thinking, we can assign Jüri Okas, and why not Kurismaa and Lapin as well, a much more important position in the history of these practices.

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[14] an E-media centre was founded at the Estonian Academy of Arts, where, in addition to video and video montage, the basics of new media and interactive art were also taught. In the same year, the French-Baltic video art festival began to take place. In 1995, the foundation was laid for the Interstanding Conference, a series of international art/media conferences and exhibitions, in conjunction with which an international new media exhibition developed in 1997.