

## INTERVIEW WITH ERKKI HUHTAMO

by Lorella Scacco

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**Erkki Huhtamo** (born 1958) is a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles in the Departments of Design Media Arts and Film, Television, and Digital Media. He is an internationally renowned media historian and theorist, and one of the founders of the field of media archaeology. Huhtamo has published extensively, lectured worldwide, and has curated many exhibitions in Europe, the United States and Australia. His most recent books are *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (ed. with Jussi Parikka, University of California Press, 2011) and *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (The MIT Press, 2013).

LS: Apart from a few video experiments in the late 1970s, from several publications, it is known video art entered late in Finland in comparison with other Nordic and European countries. In your view, what is the reason?

EH: My reflections on this may not be very original. It probably had to do with Finland's geopolitical location at the top of Europe and between the East and the West, as well as with the Finnish introverted mentality. Although the Finns definitely looked more to the West than to the East, they did not feel part of either. The relationship with the Soviet Union was complex, and may have prevented some more radical movements from landing in Finland. Finland simply was not a similar cosmopolitan area where ideas kept crisscrossing between countries, and everything was a short train ride away. Denmark and Sweden were different. When I traveled there I felt a breath of fresh air from far - I was immediately inspired. Finland was further away, but there was also some kind of a cultural barrier - people rarely flew (they took boats and trains), and there was no internet.

LS: How artists show, distribute, and promote videos in the 1980s in Finland? Which were the most relevant film festivals or video screenings in Finland in the 1980s?

EH: Events were organized from time to time, and even some traditions developed, like Asko Mäkelä's video screening efforts at Vanha Ylioppilastalo in Helsinki. Performances like Marikki Hakola's media performance *Piipää* were highly noted events. In Turku, where I studied, there were also video art and experimental film events, but only from time to time. Events were organized by the Student Unions, the Kirjakahvila (book cafe), the regional film center, etc., often in collaboration with international cultural initiatives like Goethe Institute. Turun yliopisto, which pioneered education in audio-visual theory from the early 1980s, was involved too. There were

probably less opportunities in smaller places, although for example Oulun Elokuvakeskus and Iisalmen Kamera also exhibited experimental works. In the late 1980s, when Kuopion Videofestivaali, the MuuMediaFestival, and organizations like MUU ry and AV-ARKKI were founded, things started changing rapidly. AVEK became an important funding body for experimental work, and Opetusministeriö was also directly involved.

LS: How was early video art received by the critics and audiences in Finland at the time?

EH: Especially since the Kuopion Videofestivaali and the MuuMediaFestival the area got quite a lot of public attention in the press, and also on television (from early 1990s on, mainly; there was a regular program on YLE named *Taiteen Laita*, which featured much interesting work). However, virtual reality and interactive art, which I was centrally involved in introducing to Finland, made the attention explode around 1990. They became really a fashion, an expression of the ultimate hip. Video art itself had not achieved it. I guess it was seen more closely as an extension of experimental film, which had somehow an independent, somewhat fringe activity character.

LS: In your opinion, why video was a particularly suitable medium between 1980s and 1990s in Finland?

EH: I guess Finland was opening up internationally. Artists wanted to be part of the media arts community developing internationally, and looked for influences from the outside, while contributing own original elements. I presented many screening series of Finnish video art at international festivals in Europe. MuuMediaFestival played an important role, because it presented much up to date international work, and artists were also invited from other countries. An outstanding event was ISEA 94, organized in Helsinki in August 1994. It was a huge gathering of media artists from all over the world, really a community building event. Minna Tarkka was the chair, and I was the chair of the exhibitions committee. Finally, I want to repeat how important the financial support of AVEK (thanks to its director Juha Samola) was. There was lottery and videotape sales tax money available for creating experimental work. The Finnish TV was also sometimes involved, producing and showing radical new media art. I directed a television series on Japanese media culture and media art (including video art) called *Monitorien valtakunta* (YLE).

LS: How much attention was paid in Finland to international video art experiences? Could you talk to us about some of them?

EH: See above. MuuMediaFestival was particularly important, as well as the media attention it received. As its program director, I brought a broad range of international programs and artists to Helsinki: video art, computer animation, music video, and then of course installation art, etc.

LS: As you see it, which international video artists were the most popular in Finland?

EH: It is hard to mention names that would have been popular across the board, but big international names like Nam June Paik, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Dara Birnbaum, Joan Jonas, etc. were quite well known. Dara Birnbaum had a huge videowall installation at the Helsinki Railway Station in connection with the second Kuopio Video Festival in 1990. In 1992 I curated the exhibition of Woody and Steina Vasulka, whom I knew very well, to the Ateneum Museum of Contemporary Art (Steina showed the video wall “Tokyo Four”, Woody “The Art of Memory”, etc.).

LS: Was there interest on the part of any Finnish TV broadcaster in video art in the 1980s?

EH: Yes, but mainly in the 1990s. I guess reports about the Kuopio video festivals may have been a beginning, but I may be wrong.

LS: Could you talk to us about your contribution as curator to the dissemination of video art in Finland in the late 1980s and early 1990s?

EH: I had different roles, many of which I have mentioned. Curating the MuuMediaFestival was important, but I also traveled internationally very actively, looking for interesting work to Finland and presenting programs of Finnish video art at international festivals (many). I was also a member of the team behind *Infermental*, a yearly international anthology of video art (a series of U-Matic tapes), a kind of global overview of the field. The director was Véra Bódy, the widow of the important Hungarian experimental filmmaker, video- and computer artist Gábor Bódy. My biggest work was the huge exhibition *Outoöily / Alien Intelligence*, which I curated for Kiasma (2000), but video art was only a side issue in it.

LS: In your opinion, how much was important video art for the emergence of media art and interactive art in Finland?

EH: Video art was important in itself as an artistic medium, but the new access to shooting, editing, and image manipulation inspired some artists to try other means of expression too. Some video installations (as well as the video performances of Joan Jonas who came to perform at the MUU gallery, for example) had features that anticipated interactive computer art. Crossing the boundary from abstract video to computer animation was not always difficult, although ontologically these are different media forms.

LS: You are one of the first scholars who have been elaborated theories and concepts of media archaeology. Is there a link between your interest to video art and the beginning of this media theory?

EH: I think the link with the experimental cinema of the 1960s and the 1970's is more clear. There were radical "anti-illusionist" and "structural" filmmakers who wanted to "go back to the beginning" by deconstructing the forms of commercial narrative cinema and starting again from "primitive" silent cinema. *Tom Tom the Piper's Son* is a well-known example (Ken Jacobs). The works of Malcolm LeGrice could also be mentioned (he later made videos). Videomakers were less interested in exploring the past. They were involved with the present and the future, inventing something new and reflecting on issues of contemporary society, like video surveillance (CCTV). One media-archaeologically inspiring videowork was Zbigniew Rybczynski's *Steps*.

LS: Before moving to Los Angeles in 1999 and working as a professor in the Department of Design Media Arts at the University of California (UCLA), you taught media studies at the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi and at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki (UIAH, Helsinki, now Aalto University). How much support was given to the dissemination of video art through the activation of media art and media studies courses in the Finnish Academies of Fine Arts or Universities?

EH: I don't remember if there was much explicit support, but I certainly had opportunities of showing experimental films and video art to my students from my own collection. I acquired all those VHS videotapes directly from artists or by swapping copies with other scholars (internationally). I had complete copy of Woody and Steina Vasulka's private collection of early video synthesizer video (on VHS tapes). Steina personally made copies for a few scholars, and I was one of them. I still keep the tapes here in Los Angeles.