

LIVES AND VIDEOTAPES

**The Inconsistent
History of Norwegian
Video Art**

CONVERSATIONS

1—6

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The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art

Marit Paasche



videokunstarkivet



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Morten Børresen with two of the balloons at the exhibition
Brainspace – Spacebrain at Fotogalleriet, Oslo, Norway, 1983
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Inghild Karlsen, positions for *Reflex*, 1982
Photo: Leif Karstensen
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Table of Contents

Mike Sperlinger

FOREWORD

Mike Sperlinger 7

INTRODUCTION

Marit Paasche 9

CONVERSATIONS

Marianne Heske 15

Terje Munthe 53

Kjell Børgeengen 79

Inghild Karlsen 113

Morten Børresen 143

Jeremy Welsh 165

The proliferation of histories of video art internationally in the last decade, whether in the form of publications or exhibitions, marks a struggle over historical meaning precisely as the term took its contemporary force. In less reflexive histories, as Foster termed, a rehabilitation of analogue formats has combined with the need to identify star names to produce, as she put it, "a history of art video, or video art, that belongs in the art world and that was authored by people with definable styles and intentions, all recognizable in relation to the principles of construction of the other modern art histories." More interesting recent projects have instead situated

Inghild Karlsen (IK) in conversation with Marit Paasche (MP)

Inghild Karlsen represents a special chapter in Norwegian art history. She pioneered the use of textiles as a sculptural medium and was among the first in Norway to explore the concept of installation in relation to theater and performance. Karlsen has been quite alone in the Norwegian art world with her large-scale projects, which have often encompassed exhibition, theatrics, and performance. Movement, the relationships between interior and exterior, light and dark, as well as art history and Norway's northernmost regions have all played a key role. All her projects have been executed with a respect for process and an accent on the performative and the visual. Her collaboration with Willie Flindt and friendship with Kirsten Dehlholm, founders of Hotel Pro Forma, have also been significant.

In Karlsen's work, video has mainly been used for documentary purposes, although several of her so-called documentary films transcend that genre. In the more independent film works, such as *Fugleskremsler* (Scarecrows, 1984) and *Running* (1988), or *Bacardy og Cola* (*Bacardy and Cola*, 2010), there is a powerful, distinctive character. She herself has never felt that she has been in sync with the times. Could it instead be that time hasn't yet opened itself to the rest of us?

MP: Would you say that you've worked in a documentary way with video?

IK: Sure. At least at first. In the beginning I tended to use 8 mm, which was later transferred to video. By the latter half of the eighties the documentation was done directly with video, but it was usually others who did the documenting. Then in the early nineties I began to go around with a video camera, as I'd previously done with a still camera. Now I edit myself as well, but still with a bit of technical assistance.

MP: You have been interested in process. How do you feel that you best respected the process when you were documenting something with film or video: by depicting the action as it was, in other words as a more objective depiction? Or through a free, subjective representation?

IK: That's a difficult question, and calls for a complex answer. Whether filming should be kept to subjective or objective visual language is dependent on the nature of the project. In *Bacardy and Cola*, where I worked a lot with the relationship between light and dark, a more subjective eye and a freer editing process was more appropriate. In performances such as *Chateau Mobile*, which had to do with nature and a specific progression, a tighter and more descriptive form has worked better.¹

I'm a woman. I've been working outside the white cube and with ephemeral forms of expression. That made me aware of the value of documentation early on. I also quickly realized that the "truth," whether it's to do with photography or film, is relative. The choice of form is also at the mercy of the skill of those you have around you, the economics of the project, and whether you have much or little time. In certain films, like *Fugleskrempler* (*Scarecrows*), I've been able to manage the entire process, but I've never had the budget for multiple cameras or particularly expensive productions. Unfortunately nearly all of my short films were destroyed by a projector that chewed up parts of the film. The few that survived are *Running* and many of the performances that were filmed and transferred to video, like *Chateau Mobile* and *Namadis*.

MP: Start with *Running*. When was that recorded?

IK: That was filmed as a kind of preparation for *Namadis* in 1988. Kai Johnsen and I drove along the coast from Oslo via Stavanger to Bergen, and along the way we stopped and did some filming and experiments. We did one of these experiments by a bunker on the coast of Jæren: Kai filmed, while I ran in circles. The film is quite abstract. It lasts three minutes and is looped.

MP: So *Running*, then, was filmed in 1988. I know you included it at Festspillutstillingen in Bergens Kunstforening in 1999, but had it been shown before?

IK: No. I used film and photography like a kind of sketchbook at that time. Some of these sketches, like *Running*, "matured" with time and became slowly but surely "real" to me. That's how I work: I always just try things out directly in a visual language; some things work, but a lot is just tossed.

MP: You've emphasized that movement is important for you. "The one thing I know for sure that I want is movement," you once said.² Film and video are unrivaled in their ability to respect movement. Can you discuss your thinking around this in *Running* and other film works?

IK: Movement has always been vital for me, and in *Running* this is expressed by how the repetitive circular motion loosens up time and space so to speak. During the time I was making *Running* I knew that I was going to do *The Polygonal Journey*, and to prepare for it I studied butoh dance for three months with Shiro Daimon in Paris.³ He taught me so incredibly much—both in terms of breathing and movement—and I relied heavily on that training when working on *The Polygonal Journey*.

Movement is also essential in the five short videos I presented on small monitors at Festspillutstillingen in Bergen. The films showed a fishing boat in motion, a fantastic Brazilian dancer, children from a school in São Paulo, and a guy on skates by Rockefeller Plaza, seriously stoned. These four films are silent, and they were edited with

an emphasis on movement and a certain rhythm in relation to repetition. The fifth is edited in an entirely different way and has sound.⁴

EDUCATION

In 1968 when she was 16, Inghild Karlsen left Tromsø in northern Norway for the southern city of Grimstad where she completed the first two years of college before quitting. Her parents thought their daughter would return home after one year, but she never did. A passion for what we call art had begun to assert itself.

IK: As early as Grimstad there was something smoldering that wanted out. I began to draw and to paint. After that I started the weaving course at Husflidsskolen i Tromsø (The Tromsø Handicrafts School), and they noticed that I had a strong sense of color. I quit there after a year, too—well, there were a lot of fits and starts in the beginning. But the main reason was that I got into Statens håndverks- og kunstindustriskole (National Academy of Craft and Art Industry) on my first try and started the textile program there, focusing on weaving. Since I wasn't so interested in the handicrafts aspect, I was moved to the weaving loft. Sunniva Lønning worked there—an expert when it came to plant dyes and a woman with incredible expertise—and other extremely knowledgeable women. They gave me free rein and eventually encouraged me to apply to Kunstakademiet i Bergen (The Bergen Academy of Art), because they'd heard that the environment there was different and much more liberal.

In 1973 Kunstakademiet i Bergen (then known as Vestlandets Kunstakademi—Western Norway's Academy of Fine Art) was established as an alternative to Kunstakademiet i Oslo (The Academy of Fine Art in Oslo), which many at the time experienced as quite conservative. Inghild Karlsen was one of the first with a textiles background to be accepted there.

IK: There was no doubt that what was new was coming from Bergen and Trondheim. But even though everything was supposed to be new and free, I quickly saw the value of the basic skills I'd acquired from my crafts classes, where we had different subjects like croquis, the history of ornament, and such for the first two years before beginning a specialization. Those basic skills gave me a solid foundation and enabled me to feel secure enough in myself to not make “pretty” textiles or fall into the “good girl” category. Instead I was able to concentrate on stretching the limits of the material and whetting my appetite with things I knew nothing about, like sculpture, painting, and art history.

The teaching at Kunstakademiet i Bergen was influenced more by a kind of Bauhaus pedagogy than the concept of the golden ratio. Independence was important; we were instructed on how to do things ourselves, but in an atmosphere where it was a given that we'd help each other. This combination of independence and fellowship was also prevalent at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in the first half of the eighties.

MP: Did you know artists like Morten Børresen, Marianne Heske, and Kjell Bjørgeengen at the beginning of the eighties?

IK: I didn't really know Morten Børresen. Marianne Heske, on the other hand, I had quite a bit of contact with during my studies in Bergen. She taught there, and because of her I learned a lot about video and the conceptual. Thanks to her we knew early on who Nam June Paik was. Marianne Heske was important to me. At that time Heske and Bjørgeengen were really the only ones using video as a well-anchored component of their art, as I recall.

MP: Marianne Heske mentioned that it was quite hard to relate to the environment at Kunstakademiet i Bergen at that time.

IK: Yeah, she'd come straight from having lived abroad and collided with political art diehards.⁵

FELT, SCARECROWS, AND NORTHERN REACHES

Let's rewind back to 1975. Inghild Karlsen has just finished at Statens håndverks- og kunstindustriskole and feels an intense need to get away—indeed, to travel. The only student ticket she's able to procure is to Iceland, so that is where she goes. At the museum in Reykjavik she discovers a scrub brush made of horsehair. Inghild Karlsen is fascinated by horsehair spinning and the use of this material, and she is reminded of her grandmother's facility with an age-old skill—*fulling*, also known as *felting*.⁶

IK: It started actually with my writing an article on felt and felting of wool for slippers in the journal *Norsk Husflid* (Norwegian Handicrafts).⁷ My motivation was to prevent the tradition and the techniques from dying out. Felt is wool that has been worked with water, soap, and agitation. Over the course of working with felt and felting, I discovered that the material could be formed; it could be used three-dimensionally and was therefore well suited to sculpture. You know, at the time I arrived in Iceland, it was the men (!) who did the spinning. It was thoroughly magical arriving there, not knowing a thing from before—yes, arriving as an idiot. And Reykjavik was an unbelievably unusual place at that time; there were people from all over the world there, mostly hippies. Arriving there was like entering an inconceivably strange universe. Their modern art museum had just been established, and there were experimental concerts, people playing music on hair, all sorts of things. In retrospect I see this is a slice of time in my own life's story that I'd gladly rewind to and examine more closely. It was really unique, what was going on there then.

MP: In an exhibition catalogue from 1986, I came across the following statement by you, looking back to 1979: "I have never felt close to the European art tradition. In northern Norway, where I come from, we have cultural history but little art history. In 1979, I went there to find my own history in materials and

symbols."⁸ Felt is a material that has previously been associated with survival; it has been completely outside the realm of high artistic tradition, with the exception of Joseph Beuys's work. Did you have a personal connection to this material?

K: Some of what has been important for me stems from the fact that I am from northern Norway, an area practically devoid of art historical foundation or identity. When I discovered felt, which has both a connection to that particular region *and* can be used sculpturally, it was as if the floodgates had been opened!

At first I attached words to these works that led to them being read as political statements, but it wasn't long before I let go and allowed the sculptures to evolve and become thoroughly abstract. I had no idea who Joseph Beuys was, nor did I know anything about his felt works before Marianne Heske brought him up during my last phase at the academy. As artists we probably worked too differently for me to experience the parallel as intimidating. Beuys wrapped a kind of mythical narrative around himself and his life story through his use of felt, while I was more interested in the material's cultural-historic connotations and its use by nomadic peoples since ancient times—this was, among other things, where the project *Namadis* originated. And, unlike Beuys, I also made the felt myself.

In 1979 Inghild Karlsen experiences a kind of breakthrough: she had been working previously on weaving a scarecrow; now she is determined to make it in felt instead. It is to be a large scarecrow, about 130 centimeters tall, in dark brown and grey felt. She then decides that there will be many of them—to give them strength in numbers.⁹ This same year Karlsen debuts at UKS¹⁰ with, among other things, a group of scarecrows on poles set into a mound of soil, along with objects evocative of northern Norwegian cultural history: two huge mittens on a fish crate, a row of dried cod hanging on a line, birds, etc.¹¹ Later, several of the first "dark" scarecrows are included in other exhibitions within the Nordic countries, and the installation receives very positive reviews.

K: The scarecrows originated with the notion that the ocean in the High North needed to be protected against oil drilling. First I made the dark ones, and then came the seven light ones in white felt and silk, the *Syv søstre* (*Seven Sisters*).¹² They were envisioned as a contrast. For the UKS show I had planned that the dark and the light scarecrows would stand facing each other. But then *Syv søstre* was accepted into Høstutstillingen (the annual autumn exhibition in Oslo), which was opening at the same time as my solo show at UKS. So I had to think differently, and I included other felt objects that made reference to the north of Norway.

After the UKS exhibition, the scarecrows lived their own life. They were included in exhibitions in Germany and the Nordic countries, and at a certain point my interests turned more toward the process. I wanted to mount fifteen scarecrows out in nature and see how it influenced them. The problem was finding the right place. Marianne Heske had inherited an island or islet from her grandfather—a place called Ynsteholmen, just outside of Mandal. Heske

didn't have permission to build anything on the islet, so she told me I could only put my scarecrows out in the open there. And so that is how the dark scarecrows came to be placed out on 3.5-meter-high iron stanchions painted red, yellow, and blue on the sixth of August in 1982. The idea was that the wool would be broken down by nature and become one with it. And the idea of filming the process over one year, documenting the disintegration of the scarecrows over the course of the four seasons, was an essential aspect as well.

Three artist colleagues of mine came along and helped with the mounting, and we stayed at a campground in Mandal. Ynsteholmen lay about forty minutes out from shore by motorboat. The press release we wrote was outrageously naive, and we sent it absolutely everywhere: north, south, east, and west. I blush just thinking about it, but it worked. *Aftenposten* flew in photographer Rolf M. Aagaard, and he took the most fantastic photos you could imagine. And so the scarecrows instantly became known nationwide. The locals, however, weren't overly enthusiastic, and the reviews in the local press were consistently bad. I was encouraged to get on home to the North and so on, but I'd learned how to take criticism at the academy. I wasn't bent out of shape at all—I was just proud. That's part of the job of being an artist as well, daring to be unpopular.

Then came what *Dagbladet's* art critic, Harald Flor, called “the Night of the Long Hacksaws.” When I moored the boat to film Section 4—which was spring—the scarecrows had been cut down with hacksaws. In other words, humans were responsible. In an interview with NRK¹³ back then I said the following: “I'd thought the elements would break down the scarecrows, but I'd forgotten that people are also a part of the natural environment.” I think that summed it up well.

Inghild Karlsen,
Fugleskrempler (Scarecrows),
installation at Ynsteholmen,
Mandal, Norway, 1983
Photo: Inghild Karlsen
© Inghild Karlsen /
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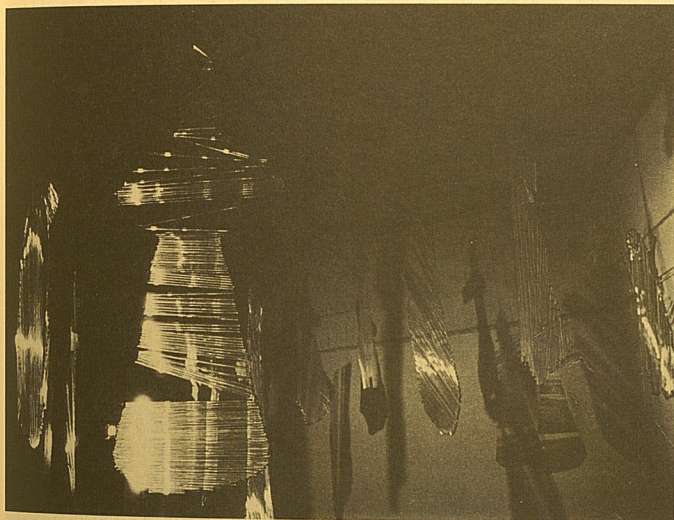


MP: What do you feel was essential to capture in the film *Fugleskrempler*? And can you say something about the choice of music, "Opening" from *Glassworks* by Philip Glass, for the images?

IK: At the time I was very interested in the processes that connect life and death. The concept was quite simply the seasons, and I shot it with 8 mm. The film had to do with the hope for eternal life versus irredeemable decay.¹⁴ The whole project was also a broad investigation of materials. How long did it take for the felt to disintegrate? What material should the scarecrows be mounted on? Steel was not an alternative; it was too brittle and would snap, so I chose twelve-millimeter-thick iron reinforcement poles.

I wasn't particularly knowledgeable when it came to contemporary music, but Henie Onstad Kunstsenter had an archive, and I sat there and listened to all sorts of things. I fell for Philip Glass's music the first time I heard it.

Inghild Karlsen edited the film at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter with Jan Schmidt, who worked as chief technician there and was educated as a filmmaker. Karlsen and Schmidt continue to collaborate; among other things, he films her performances.



Inghild Karlsen, from the exhibition *Fugleskrempler* (Scarecrows) at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1984
Photo: Inghild Karlsen
© Inghild Karlsen / BONO 2014

IK: Part of the reason *Fugleskrempler* was edited at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter was that it was going to be included in an exhibition I was having there in 1984.¹⁵ But—and it's comical thinking about this now—I remember how difficult it was to get a hold of a screen at the time. We ended up with something makeshift, with a kind of jukebox placed under the screen, which came from Filminstituttet (The Norwegian Film Institute) [*laughter*], and it stood in a corner. In addition I made memorial sculptures of the scarecrows in glass that hung from the ceiling and were movable.¹⁶ And on the walls there were photographs of the process.

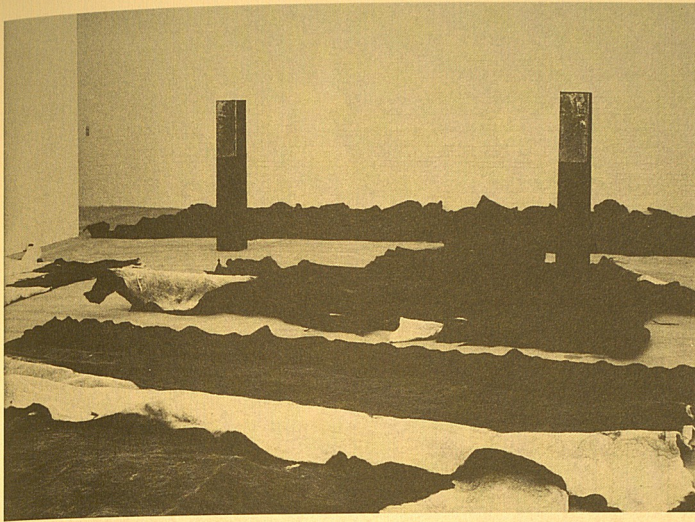
It was while I was in New York that I began working on the “heavy chapters”—that is to say, a way of making art that can be divided into long periods. At the same time I also began recycling my own work; I placed works I'd made earlier in new projects. You could say that although different projects make up different chapters, they are all part of the same book. There's also a video I made for a version of this exhibition that was shown at Kunsthallen Brandts Klædefabrik. I went around and filmed in their building; the form is rough, but the video worked well in that setting.²⁰

MP: It is fascinating that you continually assess your earlier works by fitting them into new constellations. It's as though you want to maintain the memory or experience that is manifested in the earlier work. What do you think about video or film's relation to memory? And have you ever included video documentation from earlier works in new exhibitions?

IK: Film itself is of course the incarnation of memory, and as I said, I became aware early on of the need to keep my works in some kind of form of collective memory. But the continual changes in format and the need to constantly acquire new technology has been a tremendous challenge for me, and as a result I haven't been able to use video as much as I would have liked.

Inghild Karlsen in her studio
in New York, 1984
Photo: Paul Palewosky





Inghild Karlsen, from the section called Aero at Kunsthall Brandts Klædefabrik, Denmark, 1987
Photo: Grethe Grathwol
© Inghild Karlsen / BONO 2014

THE PUNK ERA IN STENERS GATE 1

In the beginning of the eighties Oslo slowly began to develop the features of a major urban city. It was a period of upheaval, and many maintained that new art was poorly supported at Kunstakademiet i Oslo.

The administration at Kunstakademiet i Oslo needed something new, and something that could represent the new. I was brought in as an associate and, together with Michael O'Donnell, we were to establish "The Annex." In addition we were to take care of the cross-disciplinary students who were dissatisfied being in one specific division, students like Ketil Skøien and Anne Katrine Dolven. The guest teaching positions were started up and they attracted folks who were very active in the European art world. Europe came in with a bang at the academy. Performance was in the air.

I found a studio at Steners gate 1, a street popular with hookers at that time, where the shopping center Oslo City is now. The entire loft had been converted into studio spaces, and the building was home to a big, heterogeneous mix of artists, photographers, musicians, and authors. The music scene occupied the lower floors. This was the punk era in Oslo, when absolute freedom ruled, and the various branches of art and cultural life mingled freely—artists, musicians, authors. It was anything goes.

In 1982 Karlsen showed her project *Reflex-kunst* (Reflex-art) at Kunsternes Hus and Trondhjems Kunstforening.²¹ The exhibition consisted of several elements, including a performance where she finger crocheted with a light, reflective material in a dark room. During the performance visitors went around the room with flashlights held at eye level. Theater scholar Knut Ove Arntzen maintains that this is the first time we see how Inghild Karlsen uses "darkness as the impetus when she works with light," and he draws in references to Mariza Merz's works

with knit copper thread, Rosemarie Trockel's machine-knit works, and Joseph Beuys's use of felt.²² It is in connection with this project that Karlsten used video for the first time, with Camilla Wærenskjold behind the camera.

IK: Camilla Wærenskjold was 19 years old then and a student at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim when she took it upon herself to become my assistant. This was in 1982. Every day she came and picked me up on her moped and helped me out. I'd wanted to record the performances on video; already then Camilla was pretty adept at it. Still, we didn't know any better and started whispering when people wandered in while we were filming—we didn't realize that sound and image were recorded simultaneously [*laughter*]. Unfortunately works by Merz and Trockel weren't deliberate references; I wasn't aware of who they were at the time.



Camilla Wærenskjold on her yellow scooter in 1982
Photo: Inghild Karlsten

I've worked on the reflex works since then, albeit in somewhat different forms. The last was a film that builds on a recording from the production "Bacardy and Cola" that I showed at Dramatikkens Hus²³ in April 2010.²⁴ This was the film *Bacardy and Cola*. With the exception of the introduction, it is without dialogue, but with music.

MP: At the center of this film are the human body and the interplay between light and dark. The figures disappear in the darkness, but they become partly visible through the use of reflective material that lights up certain fragments and movements. This results in a visual expression where a distinctive interaction between figuration and abstraction emerges, and where movement and gesture are key elements.

THEATER AND VISUAL ART

MP: A very central fulcrum in your work is the performative. Can you talk about how you were introduced to performance and experimental theater?

IK: I came into the multimedia world as early as my student days. At Kunstakademiet i Bergen we had a workshop on masks and performance with Willie Flindt. He was the one who started Hotel Pro Forma with Kirsten Dehlholm in Denmark.²⁵ Hotel Pro Forma was a very important part of the Nordic scene. They were a prime mover, combining theater and visual art in an extremely successful way. I've always felt particularly close to theater and performance and have derived much of my formal language from people who've worked in the border zone between theater and visual art, people like Robert Wilson and Jan Fabre.²⁶ I saw both Wilson and Fabre at documenta in 1986, before traveling further to the Stuttgart festival.

I also participated at the Vintersne symposium at Geilo that included Stuart Brisley and Al Hansen as well.²⁷ I had a role in one of Brisley's performances about death. We lay in a bunk bed, me on top, him below, and we alternated reading texts he had written. Al Hansen wanted me to join Fluxus; he sent me a postcard with a personal invitation, and I inherited his hat and everything, but no, I wasn't interested. At the time Al Hansen was together with a Danish artist who lived in Copenhagen, and when I exhibited there, I usually stayed with them. In the evenings he'd sit and talk about performances with Yoko Ono, so I absorbed quite a lot. Eventually John Cage also came to the academy and gave an utterly astonishing lecture there. It was magical. He spoke so softly, but everyone heard every word.²⁸

All of my exhibitions have included a performance, but not one critic has ever written about that aspect—or about the videos, for that matter. But Susanne Rajka wrote a doctoral dissertation in 2008 on the multimedia aspect of my work from the period 1979–99.²⁹

MP: Both Willie Flindt and Kirsten Dehlholm seem to have been very significant for you. Haven't you collaborated several times with both of them?

IK: Yes, they've been very important to me. In 2006 I made a half-hour-long portrait of Kirsten Dehlholm on video that I showed in China.³⁰ It's called *Courage*. In this portrait she doesn't talk so much about art as about having abandoned her child for the sake of pursuing art.

The video is very unusual. In a way, one can say that it is documentary, but Kirsten wanted to wear a mask when she talked about this—and a lot of people find that aspect quite disturbing. I filmed it with a handheld camera and, you know, filming a director is tricky; they want to direct themselves the whole time. I gave her a few keywords beforehand: that the narrative should contain the stretch between past, present, and future, and that she should talk about giving away her child. Making this film was important to me because it tells an uncommon story about feminism, about art, and about loss

and prices paid. For her generation, giving away one's child was a non-option, and it's still virtually incomprehensible in many parts of the world.

In 1988 Inghild Karlsen carried out an ambitious, three-part project called *Namadis: Installasjon mellom teater og billedkunst* (Namadis: Installation between Theater and Visual Art) consisting of an exhibition at Bergens Kunstforening (Bergen's Art Association), a production at Hellen Fortress, and a performance at [USF] Verftet. Altogether about forty people were involved. *Namadis* was to be, according to her own project description, a kind of visual play where "rhythm's energy and the forms' monumentality resonate together."³¹

IK: As it happened I was participating in a seminar on the relationship between scenography and installation in the fall of 1987.³² Shortly thereafter I got an invitation from Bergens Kunstforening to develop a project where the relationship between theater and visual art was to be the central focus, and so I worked on several levels with *Namadis*. The overriding theme was the mythology surrounding ancient nomadic cultures. I worked with felt as well and such forms as the triangle, square, circle, and line. I worked out the forms as large sculptures at Bergens Kunstforening, such as *Pustende ballong* (Breathing Balloon), for example. This work was in translucent plastic and had a diameter of 3.6 meters. The material reflected the light from the skylight—yes, it reflected the heavens—while the other balloon was covered in brown wool—that one was *Jordballongen* (The Earth Balloon). I made many sculptural forms: the transparent line, a St. Andrew's cross, a "cube," a double pyramid, and such.

I also used the sculptures in the show held in the German bunker at Hellen Fortress. The audience was in the deepest part of the bunker, while the performance occurred both within and outside the bunker. This was a collaborative project with BIT and Sven Åge Birkeland, and it was performed during the theater festival they arranged.³³

Then in addition, with all of the wool left over from the production process, I created a performance piece that was carried out just after the exhibition opening in the screening room at [USF] Verftet. The performance lasted over two hours, and three other persons participated besides me, and musicians played as well. During the performance we worked the wool fibers into felt; we fulled the wool by hand with water and soap, and so demonstrated the origination process for the artistic material—we gave it a ritual framework, you could say.

MP: The word *namadis* means 'felt'. Fulling felt is quite physically demanding work. Those familiar with the felting process know that you have to keep at it until it's finished; you can't interrupt the process, you have to succumb to the transformation that the material's physical qualities undergo. Your work *Namadis* consisted of three rather distinct forms of presentation, which were all recorded on video. Can you relate your thoughts around using video in a documentary way in relation

to performance? Did you give specific instructions? Was there anything you felt was especially significant? And was it important that the person doing the filming had a visually formal language compatible with your own?

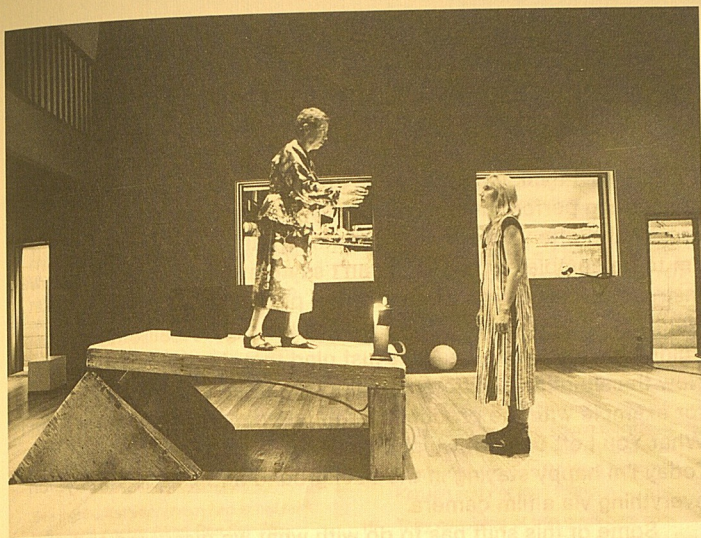
- IK: Well, the important thing about the video was to link these actions together visually. The video's no traditional documentary, but more a kind of visual connecting of the different events.³⁴ Everything was filmed by Britt Bøhme, a painter living in Bergen. We had been students together, so I knew her and had confidence in her visual judgment. To put it simply: I'm a collaborator. I'm not dictatorial, and I'm against imposing strict regulations on other artists. One has to show faith, especially when working with artists. You get what you get. For the most part, I've been satisfied, but not always.

Shortly after *Namadis* Inghild Karlsen completed a new "production" called *The Polygonal Journey*. It was staged three times at Art Space Mumonkan in Kyoto in the summer of 1989 and three times at Nordlyspanelet³⁵ in Tromsø in 1990. Willie Flindt, who lived in Japan and was an actor in the Noh theater, was the director, while Karlsen was an actor and responsible for scenography, costumes, and props. In this project, the *journey*, as a metaphor, was key—both the "visionary, vertical" and the "physical, horizontal" journey.³⁶ The productions in Tokyo and Tromsø were filmed by different people. In Japan the production was filmed by a then newly-established artist collective known as Dumb Type, which went on to have quite an artistic career.³⁷

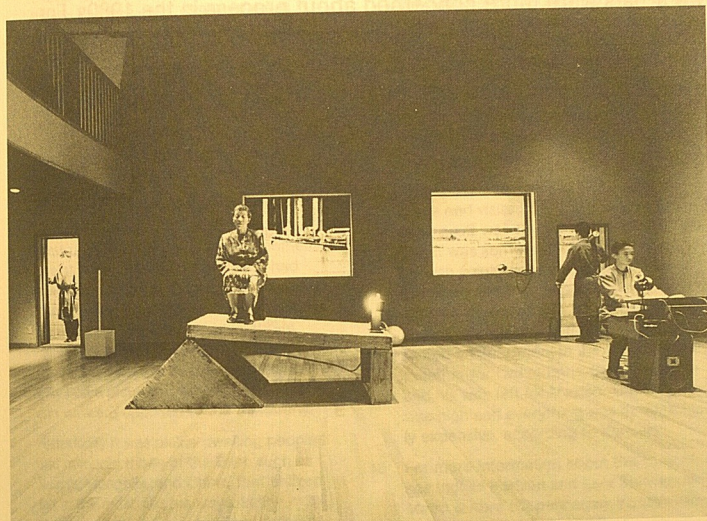
Inghild Karlsen and Willie Flindt in Tromsø, 1990
Photo: Eivind Vorland



- IK: The journey was the overriding theme, and I was very interested in the relationship between interior and exterior—a theme one incidentally also finds in *Namadis*. I worked closely with Willie Flindt on this



Inghild Karlsen, *The Polygonal Journey*, Art Space Mumonkan in Kyoto, 1989
 Photo: Shiro Takatani
 © Inghild Karlsen / BONO 2014



Inghild Karlsen, *The Polygonal Journey*, Art Space Mumonkan in Kyoto, 1989
 Photo: Shiro Takatani
 © Inghild Karlsen / BONO 2014

project. He's a Noh actor and speaks Japanese, and so he naturally had a lot of responsibility for the work with the texts and the dramaturgy. From Noh theater we borrowed the use of "credits"—there, whenever you begin a play, short descriptions of the fact that you are going from one point to another are included—and these we combined with an extract from the Norse *Voluspá*.³⁸

MP: The *volve*, or seeress, who heralds *Ragnarok* is the narrator in *Voluspá*. A striking feature of your work is the way the performative is always tied to something thoroughly concrete and material, such as scarecrows, felt sculptures, seal and whale bone, white shell sand and the like. The materials often indicate an association with the High North or the Arctic, to lifestyles and nature that are threatened with obliteration.³⁹ This reminds me of early American video art, from the 1970s, which was about

articulating positions that are not so readily apparent in mass media. Exhibitions, performance, and theater are fleeting modes of expression, and had it not been for your having filmed them, very few would know about them today.

JK: That's true. I think my awareness of that transitory aspect—especially concerning performance—came early, and so documenting was crucial and often included as a planned part of the process. But if I'm to be completely honest, I can't say that this documentation was "instructed," quite simply because the productions I did then, like *Namadis* and *Polygonal Journey*, were too big, too all-encompassing. I didn't have the time and was just glad that they were being filmed. Now the situation is different, especially when I do things for theater, for example with the production *Jeg fant det som du forlot* (I Found What You Left Behind) which I made for Dramatikkens Hus in 2010. Today I'm happy staying in the background and keeping an eye on everything via a film camera.

Some of this shift has to do with what we discussed earlier: that we artists were more concerned about process in the 1980s. For me, executing the production, the performance, that was primary; documentation was important, but nevertheless secondary. Today everything is produced as though it's to last for all eternity.

Oslo, May 22, 2014

- 1 Inghild Karlsen has this to say about the project: "I did *Chateau Mobile* together with Kai Johnsen in 1986–87 during the Polish–Norwegian art project ART-NATUR-ART in Lillehammer. Kai and I floated seven logs down the Mesna river to Lillehammer kunstmuseum (Lillehammer Art Museum), where they were supposed to lie a while and dry out. I'd made yellow plastic pipes, and each was to contain a log and a letter. When the timber was dry, each log was placed in a pipe along with a letter in English explaining about nature in Norway, and then these seven plastic pipes were sent down [Lake] Mjøsa. The idea was that they'd float out onto the seven seas. I also did a seven-hour-long performance that a cameraman from Lillehammer captured on film, in which I sent up a three-meter-long red ribbon—envisioned as a kind of red bridge from Badedammen in Lillehammer to the heavens, a link between sea and sky."
- 2 See Inghild Karlsen, *Hvem kan si nei takk til tre gode ønsker (Who Can Say 'No Thanks' to Three Good Wishes)* (Bergen: Bergen Kunstforening, 1999), bilingual exhibition catalogue (Norwegian–English), unpaginated.
- 3 Inghild Karlsen was awarded a scholarship to Cité Internationale des Arts in 1988.
- 4 Johnny Yen at Atelier Nord assisted Inghild Karlsen in editing these films.
- 5 At this point in the interview Inghild Karlsen tells an anecdote that perhaps sums up how politicized the environment was at the end of the seventies: "I had been given a box of the most delicious Kong Haakon chocolates, and my parents were visiting. We were at a restaurant called Traktøren (The Innkeeper), and none of us would touch the chocolates—they had a picture of the king on the box, and we were opposed to the monarchy."
- 6 Historically it was plains-dwelling peoples and nomadic tribes of the East, such as Russia, Mongolia, and China, that utilized felt in the most diverse ways. In the Nordic regions there are written references in the Icelandic sagas that describe saddles made of felt, headdresses, and cloaks. *Toving* or *tova* is the Old Norse word for "to felt," and in Norway the word *tove* is still used today.
- 7 *Norsk Huslid* 1 (1976), 6–8.
- 8 From the exhibition catalogue *N/ BOREALIS* (Berlin: daadgalerie, 1986), 54. A similar quote also appears in Inghild Karlsen, *Hvem kan si nei takk til tre gode ønsker* (see note 2).
- 9 See Inghild Karlsen, *Fugleskremser (Scarecrows)* (Fredrikstad: exhibition catalogue, 1984), unpaginated, bilingual (Norwegian–English). Twenty-four catskins were also included, mounted on half of a drying rack for fish. Some believed catskins were genuine—but they were also made of felt.
- 10 Unge Kunstneres Samfund: Young Artists Association
- 11 See *Accenter i nordisk kunst 1979–1980 (Accents in Nordic Art, 1979–1980)*, exhibition catalogue for Nordisk Konstcentrum, 1980, 34–39. For more information about UKS, see www.uks.no.
- 12 These are in Henie Onstad Kunstsenter's collection.
- 13 Norsk Rikskringkasting: Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation
- 14 Inghild Karlsen considers the themes in *Fugleskremser* to be a kind of continuation of the production *Vi vil det skal vare evig (We Want It to Be Everlasting)*, which she produced initially in collaboration with the Norwegian dramatist Cecilie Laveid at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in 1979.
- 15 Hovdenakk established the project room at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter where he showed works by young Norwegian artists. It started with the art group Lambretta and was followed by Inghild Karlsen and Per Inge Bjørlo.
- 16 They consisted of thin glass bars connected together with steel thread. As they were difficult to mount, they were shown only at Henie Onstad. The exhibition included photos from the process and a test-scarecrow as well. Videokunstarivet has documentation of this exhibition.
- 17 For the Bergen venue Karlsen included a performance she had done with Ketil Skøien at Verftet.
- 18 During this stay Camilla Wærens kjold came and visited for three weeks. The apartment was small, and Karlsen recalls that it was somewhat difficult to come up with solutions to practical problems. Camilla worked on paper, while Karlsen filmed a lot with 8 mm. She also got to know Terje Munthe and his wife. They rented an apartment in the West Village together for two months, before Munthe and his wife left for Mexico. The dollar was high and everything was outrageously expensive, according to Karlsen.
- 19 For more information about this project, see Inghild Karlsen and Lars Schwander, *Metro & Aero* (Copenhagen: Kunstshallen Brandts Klædefabrik, 1987).
- 20 Inghild Karlsen has provided Videokunstarivet with a copy of this video for digitization.
- 21 Kunstneres Hus: The artists' house; Trondhjems Kunstforening: Trondheim's art association.
- 22 See Knut Ove Arntzen's text "Inghild Karlsen" in the exhibition catalogue for the São Paulo Biennial, *Inghild Karlsen 1979–1994* (Oslo: Den Norske Biennalekomiteen, 1994), 4. The catalogue is bilingual (Norwegian and English). The following year the same references appear in Lotte Sandberg's text "OUTDOOR–INDOOR" in *Terskel* 14 (June 1995), 61 (also bilingual, Norwegian and English).
- 23 Dramatikernes hus: Norwegian Centre for New Playwriting (NCNP)
- 24 For more information about this

- production, see SEN (website), accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.section10.info>.
- 25 "Willie Flindt" *Gyldendals Teaterleksikon* (Gyldendal's Theater Lexicon, website), accessed June 2014, http://www.denstoredanske.dk/Gyldendals_Teaterleksikon/Dansk_1950/Willie_Flindt (translated): "Willie Flindt, b. 1942, Danish instructor and performance artist, educated in Denmark and England. Flindt belongs to an extremely exclusive circle of non-Japanese Noh actors, for which he trained, from 1965–69, at the Komparu school in Tokyo. In 1985 he established Hotel Pro Forma with Kirsten Dehlholm, and the two have collaborated on several productions. ... Flindt's aesthetic is colored by a longstanding interest in Japanese theater, where several performative disciplines meet in a taut, simple graphic expression ..."
- Hotel Pro Forma functions today as an international laboratory for performance and installation. The structure of their productions is anchored in music, visual art, and architecture, and does not follow conventional theatrical tradition. For more information see Hotel Pro Forma (website), www.hotelproforma.dk/om-os/om/.
- 26 Robert Wilson, b. 1941, is an American director who has long pursued experimental and visual theater. His most well-known project, *Einstein on the Beach*, was a collaboration with Phillip Glass. He has collaborated with innumerable other artists such as Laurie Anderson, Lou Reed, Tom Waits, and Herta Müller. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Robert Wilson," last modified April 27, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wilson_\(director\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Wilson_(director)). Jan Fabre (Antwerp, 1958) is a graduate of the Municipal Institute of Decorative Arts and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. He is well known both at home and abroad as an innovative and versatile artist. For more than thirty-five years, he has produced works as a visual artist, theatre maker, and author. See Jan Fabre (personal website), www.janfabre.be.
- 27 The Norwegian conceptual artist Helge Røed was behind the Vinterne symposium. See also *Billedkunst*, no. 4 (Oslo, 1984): 38. Al Hansen (1941–1995) was loosely associated with the Fluxus movement and was a close friend of both Yokoyama Ono and John Cage. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Al Hansen," last modified May 28, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Hansen. Stuart Brisley, b. 1933, is often referred to as the godfather of British performance. Brisley is a professor emeritus at Slade and has been a part of the British art scene since the 1960s with activity that includes painting, sound works, video, film, and teaching. His entire oeuvre is marked by a general political outlook and concern for the disenfranchised. Brisley had been in Norway before the Vinterne symposium. In 1972 he participated in the exhibition *British Thing* (1972) at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter with his *Eat & Kitchen Events*. See Lars Mørch Finborud, *Mot det totale museum* (Press forlag: Oslo, 2012), 166, 186–187. For more information about Brisley, see *Stuart Brisley* (website), accessed June 22, 2014, <http://www.stuartbrisley.com/pages/21>.
- 28 See also Lars Mørch Finborud, *John Cage i Norge* (John Cage in Norway) (Oslo: Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 2009). The book includes a CD.
- 29 Susanne Rajka, *Billedkunstneren Inghild Karlsens multimediasprosjekter 1979–99* (Visual artist Inghild Karlsen's multimedia projects, 1979–99) (doctoral thesis, Universitet i Bergen, 2008).
- 30 The exhibition, titled *Post Nora*, was held at Beijing's Today Art Museum.
- 31 Here I rely on the reprint of the project description by Rajka, *Inghild Karlsens multimediasprosjekter* (see note 29), 47.
- 32 It was arranged by Teatervitenskapelig Institutt ved UiB (The Dramatics Institute at the University of Bergen), Bergen Kunstakademi, and Hordaland Kunstnersentrum. See *Bulletin for Bergen Internasjonalt Teater* 1, 1988.
- 33 For a more detailed description of the presentation, see Rajka, *Inghild Karlsens multimediasprosjekter* (see note 29), 50–51.
- 34 Karlsen also filmed an "inflating" of the balloon in the garage at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. Unfortunately this film has been lost.
- 35 The Northern Lights Planetarium
- 36 See Rajka, *Inghild Karlsens multimediasprosjekter* (see note 29), 51–64.
- 37 Dumb Type was established in 1984 and is based in Kyoto. The artists there work within such varying disciplines as visual theater, architecture, dance, composition, publications, and computer programming. See also Dumb Type (website), accessed May 25, 2014, www.dumbtype.com.
- 38 The poem is a narrative that explains both the creation of the world, human destiny within it, and the world's future demise in Ragnarok. The poem ends with a brief and ardent description of a new and different world. This description is uttered by a *volve*, a nomadic prophetess or shaman, and is addressed to all humanity.
- 39 Inghild Karlsen has utilized white shell sand as well as seal and whale bone in such installations and performances as *Tranquillitatis* (Festspillene in Harstad, 1990), *Bragdøyprosjektet*, *Magnetford* (Poland, 1991), *Forelopig stans* (Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1991), and *Tøkt* (Goethe-Institut, Oslo, 1993). She has also explored building traditions in the High North with the stockfish drying rack that she built for the Bienal de São Paulo in 1994. The work was later incorporated into the sculpture park at MAM (Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo or the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art).