

Interview of Urs Lüthi

The interview take place online (zoom) on the 9th of February 2023. The questions were asked by François Bovier and Stéphanie Serra (SF).

Transcription: Stéphanie Serra

The interview was conducted in English.

SF: As you might know, we are trying to reconstruct the early years of video art in Europe, and that is the reason why we wanted to talk to you. Indeed, your videos were some of the earliest ones in Switzerland.

Urs Lüthi (UL): So, first, you said that the ZKM was partner to your research project. They have collected some of my first videos.

SF: We wanted to ask you about that point. *Untitled*, from 1973, is part of their collection. Could you tell us more about that work, as it seems to be one of your first videos?

UL: I think it's coming from Graz [Trigon Archive]. They had a very professional kind of video equipment there for the festival, (Steirischer Herbst, Trigon) at that time.

They had invited me to come to Graz to do (create) something. We made there this video and I never heard anything about this video again, until this old friend Christoph Blase, head of the laboratory of antiquated video systems at the ZKM (2004 – 2010) sent me once a restored version. It's just my face or my bust, and a female hand is caressing my face. That is, in a way, the typical type of videos I made: never with a lot of action. I used video when I absolutely needed a movement, otherwise I preferred to take and work on photographs or made a sculpture. But if I needed a hand caressing my face – which is: a movement – I would use video.

SF: Do you remember if it was your first video work?

UL: The first video I realised was not this one, but a work I made in the Galleria Diagramma in Milano in 1972 [*Luciano Inga Pin*]. I made a performance in the gallery, to realise a video (without public), but I never saw the video afterwards. Earlier, I had already acquired a Sony camera and I tried to make some videos, but those I never really finished because you couldn't make cuts [as in film].

SF: So, you had your own camera.

UL: Yes, I bought once a camera, but I was disappointed with the results, because it was difficult to cut and edit.

SF: Were you editing alone, or did you have anybody showing you how to do it, a technical aid?

UL: Not at all. I learned everything alone. I was always a self-made man.

I had a lot of friends in Switzerland at that time and mostly all of them were artists.

I was very young – 23, 24 years old, and I tried to make my own things. That's how I made this first video experience in Italy. I was always working in Italy, invited by galleries and museums there, during that time. And so I was invited to do an exhibition in Florence in 1974 or 1973, in a very nice gallery – Galleria Schema –, they had a good program (Italy was

at that time the hot spot in Europe for the artists, also American artists were regularly shown there). And I made a live performance there.

I was travelling a lot and my idea was, not to travel with already finished works, but to react directly into the space. From this performance onwards, I never made a video, but it inspired me for future video works.

In Florence, there was the "Art/Tapes Group", which was more like a family, in a way, aristocratic. They had very good technical studios there, in a park, in a villa. They invited me because they have seen my performance in the gallery. And then I stayed a month in Florence to realise video works.

SF: Did you have a technician to help you?

UL: Yes, yes, because Bill Viola, and other artists were there. The "whole world" was in Florence, at that time: Boltanski, Acconci, etc. It was a high moment, with a lot of parties. And I made two videos there.

SF: How did you plan your videos? Did you make any sketches or photographs before, or did you just go with the video directly and shoot it?

UL: I had naturally some ideas of what I wanted to do: I was there with my wife (Elke Kilga my wife at that time). We decided to shoot some split images of a couple. And for the second video, there was no action except that there was a glass; and it got filled up with milk and it spills over and at the same time my wife splashes water on my face with a pistol. I think there is an association between the split image of the couple and the water pistol, like a child toy, the splash of water in my face and the glass of milk spilling over. I always said that these two videos should be shown together.

SF: As a diptych?

UL: Yes, in a way. And because I started quite early to do installations bringing together videos as I still do, for instance in Sicily, in Catania, much later, in 2002 or 2003.

SF: What was permitted by video that other mediums couldn't offer? It seems that you have often used different mediums at the same time. Do you think there is a specificity to video?

UL: Yes, to show the movement.

SF: Then, you could have also used film.

UL: Video seemed to be the simplest way to capture movement. I'm not very interested in techniques, but it is interesting for me to do different things which I can't do yet and I have to learn them first, to find out how I can do a work, otherwise, you run the risk of becoming mannerist in "making it too well" what you are making.

SF: And with video you also have a direct access to the image, whereas with the film, you've got to print it, to develop it. With video you have directly the image.

UL: Yes, with video, you have an immediate image. And I like to do as much as I can by myself. I started also very early to work with computers.

SF: A recent technology which came out and that you had an interest to experiment with, I guess.

UL: Yes, but it's not because I like experimentation as such. It's because I want to do a specific thing, and I know I could use this medium for this service. I'm not one of these artists from the 19th century where everyone had to invent a style, and to stay with it. Do you understand what I mean? I hate style. Art can't be reduced by a style. I like to start from my own interests: my feelings, my emotions, etc. I speak about our lives, our being-here. I can't really explain why I came to video. But it was interesting to have the movement, a very minimized movement in my work: that's a fact, for sure. I work in that kind of minimalisms, and I'm still doing the same today. I'm a "naturalistic minimalist" and I use it in/for the human figure.

SF: Talking about the human figure, you made a *Self Portrait* video for the National Swiss German television in 1973.

UL: It was an invitation from a friend of mine at the time, Peter Liechti, he was a filmmaker. He made some very good films and worked also at the Swiss television. We made two small films: one where I am sitting with my wife on a sofa in my apartment in Zurich, and a self-portrait.

SF: But he filmed you when you performed, basically. It's not a video, it's a film of you performing, right?

UL: No, I made it for him, for a cultural program for the Swiss television. I don't remember the name.

SF: Was it "perspective"?

UL: Maybe.

SF: Did you use your own equipment, or the technical means from the studio?

UL: We used the technical means from the Swiss television. They came with the equipment. And it was broadcasted.

SF: In the same years, you made the "Transformer" exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern (1974). Did you show any videos there?

UL: No. You know, I started in the end of the 1960s to put an end to my painting career. I started more and more to work with photographs. And then, I made for maybe nearly ten years only photographs and some videos and some live performances, mostly in Italy and in France. But I decided to stop those live performances because, once performed they were gone.

SF: In the interview to the Oral History Archiv Project (ETH), you spoke about your interest in "Tableau Vivant".

UL: Yes, because there were very few actions in my performances. Let me give you an example. In 1974, I made the performance *Mille rose rosse* at Galleria Marconi in Milan. There was one space, a large room and behind me, vases with thousands of red roses, like a flower stand in a market. I was sitting there, on a high stool as if it was at a bar. The whole floor was filled up with trash, and it also was smelling. ~~And~~ it was a quite strange mixture. In a movement like slow motion, I throw the roses, one at each time, through the space. And I made that until 1000 roses were in this garbage. It took 20 hours. It was very strong, and there were many beautiful women, crying.

SF: We spoke about your video works in Europe, but what about Switzerland? You were living in Zurich in the 1970s, right?

UL: Yes, I had my studio there, but I wasn't very often in Zurich. I was travelling a lot. Mostly to Italy.

SF: Do you recall people, except in the militant field, working with video in the Swiss German part of Switzerland?

UL: In the early 1970s, it was mostly happening in the French Speaking part, around René Berger. He was a great promotor of video.

SF: And there was no equivalent figure, in Zurich, Bern or Luzern?

UL: No. There was a very strong scene of young art in Zurich, but not specifically around video. At the time, I was sharing a studio with David Weiss, before he started working with Peter Fischli.

SF: You made your first book with David Weiss.

UL: We were working on different things and we worked in different areas. But I made my first photographic work with David. (It's an art edition edited by Toni Gerber's gallery where I had my first exhibition of my photographic work, in 1970). We had the same studio, in the Old Town of Zurich which was also a meeting point for all the artists. And one day a young artist knocked at the door; that was Peter Fischli and later they started working together, by the end of the 1970s.

There was a big scene there in Zurich. My first wife was also there at that time: Manon. She had a boutique. She made beautiful jackets, jeans, etc. Very beautiful things. In Zurich there was a strong scene of filmmakers: very good ones, and I knew all of them. But they never used video; they made either classical story film, or experimental cinema. Video is a different history/story. The main scene in Zurich for young people and young artists was a nightclub called Arte, at Platte 27, and everyone was there after 11 pm or so. They made evenings with underground movies, some from America, but no video as far as I can remember.

SF: To go back to the beginning of our discussion, you also show your works at Trigon. Could you precise exactly which ones you showed there and how was the atmosphere between the artists? Have you any recollection about the montage, and were you there physically, etc.?

UL: Yes, I was maybe there for three days, invited by the organizers. I was one between hundreds of others. And I made my videos there.

SF: There's a question we didn't ask you yet: about the galleries where you exhibited. Furthermore, did you sell your videos?

UL: Well, I have never seen a market for video. I didn't sell them. And in terms of Museums and collections, my works are in the Collection of the ZKM, for example, because the works were restored.

SF: One last question: could you tell us about the *Transformer – Aspekte der Travestie* exhibition at the Kunstmuseum Luzern in 1974?

UL: It has been very important for my success. Jean-Christoph Ammann had a big influence. He was one of these guys who were everywhere always, at the right time, and he came often to Zurich, from Bern where he worked for Harald Szeemann at the Kunsthalle. When he started as a Director in Luzern, he said he wanted to make a solo exhibition of my work. And one day he called me and came to Zurich and said that he would make a group exhibition. And that was it. I was supposed to show my work alone, and this whole sexual question wasn't my thing. This ambiguity in all my works is not only a question of the sexual side. I was a young man interested in looking at my feminine or female side, beyond sexual orientation. I worked and I still do, on different aspects and feelings of ourselves as human beings.

Yes, the exhibition "Transformer " was a very big international success and also important for my career.