

LIVES AND VIDEOTAPES

**The Inconsistent
History of Norwegian
Video Art**

CONVERSATIONS

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Lives and Videotapes

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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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

Introduction

Marit Paasche

Some time ago Norsk Kulturråd (Arts Council Norway) resolved to initiate a pilot project designed to rescue older Norwegian video art from obscurity and technological obsolescence. Administration of the three-year pilot project was assigned to PNEK¹ in 2013, and by extension Videokunstarkivet (The Norwegian Video Art Archive) was established as an independent entity.² Our mandate was twofold: to build a database using open-source software and to survey, collect, and digitize Norwegian video artworks from the period 1970–1990.³ Concerned about preservation, Norsk Kulturråd further stipulated that we begin with the oldest material first. To date, more than 1,400 video works have been catalogued, and many are now digitized. Significant resources have been invested in the development of new software for the database that Videokunstarkivet has created. Software is a key determinant of *how* one envisions using an archive and realizing one of its primary objectives—making the videos and other reference material available to the public, both nationally and internationally.⁴

An important premise of the project has been to give greater insight into the context and the historical conditions for the creation of early Norwegian video art. This insight is particularly relevant to the archive's function for scholars, curators, and other interested parties outside of Norway. *Lives and Videotapes: The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art* aims to provide a glimpse into the history of Norwegian video art through conversations with the artists Marianne Heske, Terje Munthe, Kjell Bjørgeengen, Morten Børresen, Inghild Karlsen, and Jeremy Welsh, each of whom in their respective ways distinguished themselves early on with their use of video in Norway.

Charting Norwegian artists' understanding of the medium of video and how video became a part of their artistic practice tells us much about art and the role of the artist in Norway during the 1970s and 1980s. This survey affords us unique access to a body of material that is only minimally represented in museums or other Norwegian institutions and which has rarely been the subject of historical writing. The conversations also attest to how the Norwegian art world of the 1970s and 1980s positioned itself in relation to international trends and perspectives on art.

WHAT MAKES A WORK OF ART IMPORTANT?

One of our ambitions has been to ensure that Videokunstarkivet functions according to the art's own premises. This is not as simple as it might seem. As the American artist and curator Jon Ippolito points out, "Every work needs individual attention."⁵ It is precisely this attention which is impossible to provide when one is working

with an archive—a measure of standardization is unavoidable. Nevertheless it is crucial that the standards one develops account for identifying the various relations the artworks have to the surrounding world. In other words one has to attempt to uncover how the artworks “behave” with respect to presentation and context and what one should do when technological development changes the conditions upon which those relations were built.

Jon Ippolito and Alain Depocas participated in developing the first and second versions of the *Variable Media Questionnaire*, a controversial questionnaire designed to help artists write guidelines for how their works should be “translated” to new media and formats when the original ones become obsolete. It is a kind of tool for documenting how one would like the work to be presented, viewed, and—possibly—recreated. Yet this tool has its weaknesses and, as Ippolito quite rightly underscores, a work is always *more* than its technological underpinnings: “What fundamentally *is* a work like *Erl King*, *Toy Story* or a Vine video? Not just what makes them tick technically, but what makes them important. If we want to preserve them, what do we need to preserve *about* them?”⁶

Where archival and conservation work is concerned, understanding what makes a work meaningful is as important as working out the technical formats. The larger context surrounding early video work is what this book is chiefly about. *Lives and Videotapes: The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art* tries to reveal how, why, and under what circumstances many of the early video works made in Norway came about—and what makes them important for posterity. How did these artists perceive video as a medium? What were their references? What conceptions of art were they challenging, and how was the medium of video involved in influencing the general perception of art?

These are profound questions for which there are no definitive answers. Just as each individual work has a unique presence, artists are also different. Nevertheless the choice of artists here is not coincidental. Each of them illustrates different aspects of the early history of video art in Norway that we find striking: the relation to other forms of art such as sculpture, music, performance, and theater, to conceptualism, or to the roles of art academies and art institutions, as well as to a new media reality.

The word *inconsistent* in the title has to be underscored as well. Although we initially had ambitions of writing the history of Norwegian video art, we chose a divergent path early on; there were too many gaps in the information about the art itself and the context in which it was made to be able to fulfill such ambitions. The best we could do was to seek out the artists directly. They comprise the largest and best source of information, both with respect to the art and to how the medium was perceived and utilized. In other words, what we have written here is no authoritative history with a capital H, nor have we any aspirations of canonizing certain artists. We consider *Lives and Videotapes: The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art* to be a piece of pure research, one in which inconsistencies and fragments are part of the larger picture.

In comparison with the USA and major European countries, video art gained acceptance relatively late in Norway, probably due primarily to the fact that its institutions rallied late. Video was not offered as part of the fine arts educational curriculum before the first half of the 1990s, and Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design (The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design) did not purchase its first work of video art until as late as 1991. There were some exceptions. Both Henie Onstad Kunstsenter and Kunstneres Hus (The Artists' House) had a radical range of operations; they picked up on the new media and promoted work that drastically transgressed the classic distinctions between the disciplines. Kunstneres Hus made marked, significant strides in achieving modern museum standards during the period 1966–1969 when the artist Morten Krogh headed its board of directors. Krogh's ambition was to break with traditional exhibition practices, and he was the first to initiate a mix of film, poetry, discussions, music, and happenings with the exhibition *Moderna Museet besøker Oslo* (Moderna Museet Visits Oslo) in November 1966.⁷ "The arts in Norway stand at ease and attention ... Something has got to happen now," he stated in the newspaper *Nationen* (The Nation).⁸ And something did happen: the institution became a pressure cooker for the new, and the public's response was exceptional. The then director of Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Ole Henrik Moe, took notice. He liked what he saw and had a similar desire to orient his institution outward and embrace what was current. In 1967 he included "Kunst og Teknikk. Datamaskinkunst" (Art and Technology: Computer Art) as one of nine new concepts for the year's arts programming at Henie Onstad.⁹ According to Lars Mørch Finborud, one can also interpret the museum's exhibition profile during this period as a part of a public education project: "It was seen as Henie Onstad Kunstsenter's duty to inform the broader public in Norway about new experimental art—art which had been repressed for the sake of formal modernism in Norway."¹⁰ Henie Onstad Kunstsenter proved to be an important institution for the artists represented in this book precisely because of its receptiveness, tolerance, and demonstration of faith in both the artists and the art.

While Norway was not a trail-blazing country, it had active, competent institutions that were pioneering in their focus on experimental work. This radical stance met with resistance, however, from the conservative segments of the arts community. Additionally, experimental and cross-disciplinary trends were overshadowed by another, much stronger movement: the intense politicization of the arts in the 1970s and the mobilization of the artists' interest organizations. By the beginning of the 1970s, the various disciplines within the arts all had their own interest organizations: Landsforeningen Norske Malere (The Association of Norwegian Painters), Norske Grafikere (The Association of Norwegian Printmakers), Norsk Billedhoggerforening (The Association of Norwegian Sculptors), Norske Kunsthåndverkere (The Norwegian Association for Arts and Crafts), etc.¹¹ Organizational zeal was not as strong among artists working with video; they did not seek each other out.¹² Perhaps they

were simply too few in number, or perhaps they didn't see the point of organizing on the basis of medium. Many of these artists were of course deliberately defying such categorization.

VIDEO AND THE MEDIA-SPECIFIC

The designation "video art" gives the impression of being one thing only, yet it most definitely is not. Video art describes a range of practices that in many instances have nothing in common except that a video camera was involved. Since the 1970s there has been an ongoing discussion of the extent to which video possesses media-specific qualities, or whether, on the contrary, it marks the end of the media-specific and should thus be deemed the first postmodern medium, as Rosalind Krauss has asserted.¹³ This is an issue we have had to bear in mind in our work at Videokunstarkivet. The archive's technological, and consequently media-specific, demarcation—video art—implies that the works that are included also fall into this category, and one can claim that this approach can be reductive or isolating in relation to the individual work. At the same time we have, in this book, tried to maintain an approach that keeps us close to art: we want to view the works within the broadest possible framework of art rather than as an isolated category (video art). The majority of artists who employ or have employed video in their artistic practice do not believe they have made *video art*, but *art*. And thus *Lives and Videotapes: The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art* is intended to nuance and supplement the archive's categorizing function.

There is nevertheless no getting around the fact that video as a means of artistic expression made a significant impact when it became available. Video's potential for accommodating a range of different forms, expressive styles, spaces, and tempos amounted to a kind of constituting heterogeneity. Here was a new medium that embraced process, thought, and perception; indeed, one that facilitated a receptiveness to the world that in retrospect appears to have been quite characteristic of the 1980s. We have tried to let that same receptiveness color these conversations. They follow no proscribed structure, but naturally enough share the common objective of getting to the crux of life, art, and videotape.

One of the challenges of writing about Norwegian art is that one has to relate to everything from proper names of educational and cultural institutions to titles of works, journals, and the like. We have resolved this by keeping the Norwegian names and translating them where they can be difficult to understand. This book does not contain CVs or rosters of all of the videos made by the participating artists, as such information will be readily available via Videokunstarkivet's database.

*

Similar to books, video is a form of memory technology. With *Lives and Videotapes* we hope to make practice-oriented information available and useful.

- 1 PNEK: Produksjonsnettverk for elektronisk kunst i Norge / Production Network for Electronic Art in Norway
- 2 In terms of organizational structure, Per Platou is project leader and Ida Lykken Gosh is general manager. An additional resource group consists of Ivar Smedstad (technology), Anne Marthe Dyvi (communication), and the author, who is responsible for research.
- 3 The choice of open-source technology was necessary to ensure that the database would be robust enough to endure frequent technological changes. It also ensured that the project could benefit from improvements in the code derived from testing in user communities. For more information on the technological structure of Videokunstarkivet, see the article "Videokunstarkivet—Norway's Digital Video Art Archive" on Greatbear (website), accessed July 9, 2014, <http://www.thegreatbear.net/video-transfer/videokunstarkivet-norways-digital-video-art-archive/>.
- 4 Interested users will be given a research key or password that will enable them to access the data and edit metadata where appropriate. Contact details for the artist/copyright holder are included as part of the entries in the event that users wish to republish or show an artwork in some form. Although Videokunstarkivet deals largely with video art, in order to facilitate further research, entries on individual artists include information about other archival collections where their material may be stored. Contemporary Norwegian video artists are also encouraged to deposit material in the database, ensuring that ongoing collecting practices are built into the long-term project infrastructure. In this way we are also facilitating the writing of art history.
- 5 See "Interview with Jon Ippolito," by Crystal Sanchez and Claire Eckert, *Smithsonian Institution Time-Based and Digital Art Working Group: Interview Project*, June 25, 2013, http://www.si.edu/content/tbma/documents/transcripts/JonIppolito_130625.pdf. Jon Ippolito is currently Associate Professor of New Media and Director of the Digital Curation graduate program at the University of Maine and Co-Director of Still Water Lab.
- 6 Crystal Sanchez and Claire Eckert, "Interview with Jon Ippolito" (see note 5), 9.
- 7 Lars Mørch Finborud, *Mot det totale museum* (Towards the Total Museum) (Oslo: Forlaget Press, 2012), 73. Artists shown included Josef Albers, Francis Bacon, Andy Warhol, Jean Tinguely, Alexander Calder, and Niki de Saint Phalle.
- 8 Steinar Gjessing, *Kunstneres Hus 1930–1980* (Oslo: Kunstneres Hus, 1980), 111. The quote from *Nationen* is reproduced in Gjessing's book and dated November 1, 1966.
- 9 While determination to show video was there, it was not until the 1980s that Henie Onstad Kunstsenter truly became a driving force for video art, when they held solo exhibitions of work by Marianne Heske (1981 and 1986) and Kjell Bjørgeengen (1984), as well as the two survey exhibitions *Amerikansk videokunst* (American Video Art) and *Norsk videokunst* (Norwegian Video Art), both in 1984.
- 10 Finborud, *Mot det totale museum*, 65.
- 11 Nasjonalgalleriet (The National Gallery, now Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design) had specific acquisition committees for painting, sculpture, graphics, and drawing, but not for photography or video. As a result no video works were purchased prior to the establishment of a dedicated acquisition committee for contemporary art in 1990. The first video that The National Gallery purchased was Kjell Bjørgeengen's *Riss* in 1991. See Eva Klerck Gange, *Paradox: Positions in Norwegian Video Art 1980–2010* (Oslo: Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design, 2013), 117–118.
- 12 An exception here is Terje Munthe's efforts to establish Mediaverkstedet (The Media Workshop) at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in 1986; see page 63–65, and 103 in this book.
- 13 Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), 24.