

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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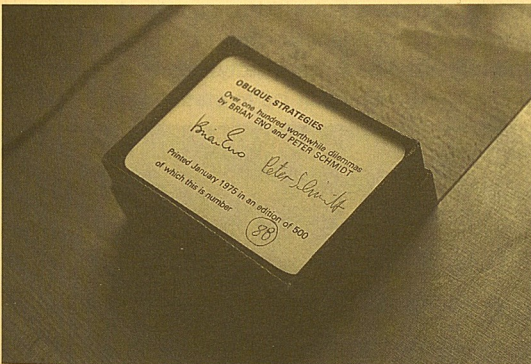
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The proliferation of histories of video art internationally in the last decade, whether in the form of publications or exhibitions, marks a struggle over historical meaning precisely as the term took its contemporary force. In less reflexive histories, 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

Jeremy Welsh (JW) in conversation with Marit Paasche (MP) & Anne Marthe Dyvi (AMD)

The Oblique Strategies are a deck of cards. Up until 1996, they were quite easy to describe. They measured about 2 3/4" x 3 3/4". They came in a small black box which said "OBLIQUE STRATEGIES" on one of the top's long sides and "BRIAN ENO/PETER SCHMIDT" on the other side. The cards were solid black on one side, and had the aphorisms printed in a 10-point sans serif face on the other.

That was then, and this is now. There is now another set of the *Oblique Strategies* in existence, and it looks nothing like this; perhaps the best way to think of the differences between the earlier versions and the fourth edition deck is by analogy. Where the earlier versions were a quiet, well-dressed neighbor who, once you got used to her/him, turned out to be a funny, intriguing, and frighteningly prescient friend, the 1996 version is the equivalent of going to the other apartment on your floor to ask directions to someplace and discovering a large, noisy party full of tipsy graduate students attempting some kind of fashionable dance en masse who pause only to give you advice in a half-dozen languages.¹



Oblique Strategies, number 88
Photo: Anne Marthe Dyvi

The little black box containing *The Oblique Strategies* is one of Jeremy Welsh's most prized possessions. As the text above indicates, there are several versions of this box. The one we are sitting with and looking at is the first—the quiet, well-dressed neighbor.

Welsh is practically an institution in the Norwegian art world. He has worked for more than twenty years in the Norwegian art schools while

simultaneously pursuing his own artistic activity. To be able to teach, one has to create as well, he maintains; one has to be active as an artist oneself in order to appreciate what drives the students.

We are in his workroom on Welhavensgate in Bergen, and all around us everything is extremely tidy. The apartment is spacious and airy, and Welsh's dog Mali is, to put it mildly, happy to have visitors. In the chair facing me sits a 59-year-old man. While we have known of each other for some time, I realize I know little *about* Jeremy Welsh and his story.² I know as much as anybody does: he built up the intermedia program at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim (Trondheim Academy of Fine Art) at the beginning of the 1990s, he has been a central figure for that generation's understanding of video, and he had a hand in instituting today's doctoral degree for artists. Our conversation will reveal that Jeremy Welsh also had a prior life, a less well-known one, where music was a kind of locus.

Welsh was born in Gateshead, a town near Newcastle upon Tyne on the northeast coast of England. He went to Jacob Kramer College of Art in Leeds and later pursued fine art at Nottingham Trent University. Toward the end of the 1970s he was also the bassist in a postpunk band called The Distributors. They may never have become world-famous, but at one point they were the warm-up band for Siouxsie and the Banshees, at the Futurama festival in Leeds in 1980. Welsh describes the concert as a turning point.

JW: When we stood on the stage and looked out at around five thousand brain-dead kids, each sitting there with their plastic bags of glue, totally uninterested, it dawned on me that music, as a political project, was meaningless. The consequence was saying goodbye to that business. Luckily, I got into Goldsmiths shortly thereafter and got access to video equipment, and through that I became involved with London Video Art, which at that time was just an artists' group. There wasn't any staff or structure, but within a couple of years they'd drummed up quite a lot of financial support, and I got a job there in 1983. From then on the path was pretty clear.

Jeremy Welsh in his studio, Winchester Artists Association, 1978



London Video Arts (LVA) was founded in 1976 by Roger Barnard, David Critchley, Tamara Krikorian, Brian Hoey, Pete Livingstone, Stuart Marshall, Stephen Partridge, John Turpie, and David Hall—all artists working with video. The objective was to improve promotion, distribution, and exhibition of video art. Part of the background for the establishment of LVA was the comprehensive and pioneering exhibition *Video Show* at Serpentine Gallery in 1975. The show featured both British and international artists working with video, and it focused attention on the lack of infrastructure around those working with the medium.³ London Video Arts has gone through a number of incarnations: in 1988 the name was changed to London Video Access and in 1994 to London Electronic Arts, before ending up with its current name, LUX, in 1996.

MP: Can you say more about the role you had in London Video Arts?

JW: My primary role was to organize exhibitions and other shows. We had weekly screenings and a relatively substantial collection, mainly from Europe and the US, built up via free submission. So we began to make presentations that could be shown other places, that could travel, and in the mid-eighties it began to take off. The requests from art institutions and libraries grew, and we even sold video art to television. We also gained entry to slightly larger venues, and gradually I worked more with curating. In 1988 I left London Video Art and, together with a film curator called Michael O'Pray, started Film and Video Umbrella. Here we worked specifically with creating traveling exhibitions that we pitched to art centers and galleries around the UK. In addition we curated programs for cinemas and film theater—for example, shows on experimental filmmakers like Andy Warhol, Maya Deren, and Kenneth Anger.

MP: And it was successful?

JW: Yes, and Film and Video Umbrella still exists; it's considered one of the leading producers of art film and video in the UK today.

MP: Just to dig a little deeper into the story before you came to Norway, on your CV it says that you also worked as a graphic designer in the eighties ...

JW: Well, sort of; I wasn't educated as a graphic designer, but I worked as one for a while to earn money. Quite "low level" designs I should say; my clients were—how should I put it?—somewhat dubious. I made, among other things, "calling cards" for prostitutes and "business stationery" for criminals.

FROM PHYSICAL FILMSTRIP TO ELECTRONIC PULSE

Jeremy Welsh gradually grew tired of living in London, and the desire for a change grew continually stronger. He applied for and obtained a job at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim (KIT), and in 1990 he arrived in Norway

in the position of associate professor to build up the school's intermedia curriculum.

JW: When I came to Norway in 1990 I knew neither Terje Munthe nor Oddvar I. N. Daren, with whom Terje worked. I didn't know about Mediateket, or anything much about the Norwegian art world for that matter. There were only two Norwegian artists who were known within the video art scene in London, and they were Kjell Bjørgeengen and Marianne Heske. There were quite a few video festivals throughout the 1980s where a lot of Swedish and Finnish artists were present, but no Norwegians. Norway was a black hole.

AMD: Did you know Bjørgeengen at this time?

JW: No, not directly, but he tended to send me video works when I worked at LUX. Marianne Heske's videos were in the LUX collection right from the start (that is to say, from the beginning of the 1970s), but for a long time she was the only Norwegian in the collection.⁴

MP: Why was Bjørgeengen sending you video works?

JW: He found out that we were distributing and putting together exhibitions of video art. At that time he produced nearly everything he made at Experimental Television Center in New York, and we had contact with them and several other artists who worked there.

AMD: Let's return to Trondheim. What did you find when you arrived at the academy there?

JW: I came to a place with tremendous potential. There was quite a generous budget for investing in equipment; the academy had been allocated one million crowns to establish the intermedia curriculum, and that was a bit of money at that time. They had purchased some equipment, but much remained to be procured, so the first thing I did was hire a technician and begin to construct a studio. I also bought a number of Macs and began teaching how to use computers. Many of the students had never been anywhere near a computer, and they had no idea how to use one. So it was pretty much about teaching them everything from scratch, like: "This is a mouse, you use it like this." The lack of computer skills applied to my colleagues as well; none of them had been anywhere near a computer before either. And even though their use was well established in the rest of Europe, they went on all the time about how this was something new.

The reason that Jeremy Welsh was at all able to apply for a job as a teacher for an intermedia program is due to the efforts of former students and teachers at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim to establish such a division. Oddvar I. N. Daren, Terje Munthe, and Merete Morgenstjerne in particular were prime movers. The academy wanted a teaching position in intermedia but had not done enough preparatory work to advertise such a position, and so they employed Morgenstjerne as a specialized

assistant from 1981–85. Morgenstjerne had a background in drawing and sculpture, and she had a master's in film from the San Francisco Art Institute. In practicality she functioned as a teacher in intermedia (with an emphasis on 16 mm film) and, along with Daren and Munthe, she laid the groundwork so that the department could announce a position.⁵ Several of the students who had Morgenstjerne as a teacher emphasize that they watched innumerable films, that they traveled a great deal, and that they had many prominent film artists as guest lecturers—including Gunvor Nelson.

JW: Merete had studied at the San Francisco Art Institute; in other words she had the same education as, for example, Inger Lise Hansen and Farhad Kalantary. When she returned to Trondheim she was employed as a specialized assistant, and she built up a workshop for film and video. So by the time I arrived, the students had worked primarily with 16mm film and only marginally with video. The transition to working mostly with video was relatively unproblematic and happened quickly. The equipment we worked with then, a 16 mm editing board for example, which people stopped using after a while, was transferred to Lademoen Artists Workshop while Farhad worked there. It was there a while before Cecilie Jordheim bought it while she was doing her master's at Kunsthøgskolen i Oslo (Oslo National Academy of the Arts) around 2009.

MP: Can you recall precisely what kind of equipment you purchased?

JW: Yes, it was of course mainly highband U-matic, that's what everyone was working with in the nineties, both cameras and editing equipment. And there was a sound studio; we had an eight-track recorder and a sampler. It was advanced then, but now ...

MP: And when you arrived you were responsible for students who had no experience using this equipment?

JW: Yeah, this was a time when video was still just an idea, but a few students who were some years into the program, like Tommy Olsson, had made a couple of videos. Anne Karin Rynander and Torbjørn Skårild were also there, as well as a few others. But it was only once I'd begun to actively recruit students to the intermedia track that there began to be something like what you'd call a milieu. The first group I started working with included Kim Hiorthøy, Helene Selvåg, and Helge Sten, among others—quite interesting people who came from a totally different area than art at that point.

Not only was their knowledge of video sparse, their knowledge of the audiovisual landscape was pretty much nil. There was after all just one TV channel in Norway at that time, there wasn't any advertising, and people had hardly ever seen a music video.⁶

AMD: This was before MTV.

JW: Yeah, I was in London the years before I came to Norway, and I'd worked with folks who were doing what we called "video graphics"

then, a mix of video and computer graphics. People here didn't understand shit about it.

MP: But you stayed nonetheless. It must have been a little frustrating?

JW: No, it wasn't frustrating; it was actually very inspiring, because the potential was so great. But at times I felt a little isolated. It was expensive to fly then, and I didn't have that direct contact with the rest of Europe that I was used to. Regardless, I started early on with building up a Scandinavian network. I was brought on by the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm to build up their audiovisual curriculum, and I was at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in an early phase.

I won't deny that it was refreshing being at a Norwegian art school. Previously I'd worked as a guest instructor at English art schools, and there the bureaucratization of art education had already reached a rather advanced stage, and so coming to a Norwegian academy was fantastic. It was a haven. Here you could do whatever you wanted.

AMD: You say that you came to a kind of open and free art academy in Trondheim. What was the attitude among the rest of the staff to your building up the intermedia track?

JW: The staff was very positive; they saw that there was a need for it. The collaborative atmosphere was good, and around 1992 things began to function very well. At that time Jon Arne Mogstad had begun as a painting professor, and he was open to getting a collaboration going between painting and video. We had Stein Rønning there, who also contributed in a positive way, and Klaus Jung, who had a background from Kunstakademie Düsseldorf and was well-informed about international contemporary art. During the years 1992–98 we enrolled many exciting students, and that period ought to be considered a little golden age. During that period I can honestly say that KIT offered the most exciting art education in Norway. But then it came to an end; I suppose we'd reached a kind of saturation point.

AMD: How did you feel about the reception by the rest of the art world of what was being produced at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim at the time?

JW: In the beginning there was certainly resistance. Many refused to relate to several disciplines at once. They wanted proper distinctions; one should either sign up with Tegnerforbundet (The Draftsman's Association/Guild), Billedhuggerforeningen (The Association of Norwegian Sculptors), or the like. These folks saw us as dilettantes who hadn't mastered anything. Gradually they saw the advantages of the cross-disciplinary approach. An artist like Kim Hiorthøy, who could move freely between drawing, design, theater, film, and music, and receive accolades ... gradually things changed. Erlend Loe had two years at KIT before he moved to Denmark and started at film

school there. Helge Sten was the first to be accepted at a Norwegian art school on the basis of his sound work alone, and he worked as a musician and with sound art during his entire student career. Helge was also quite well known as a producer before he finished at KIT.

We also had people like Geir Tore Holm and Søsna Jørgensen who early on were creating a social arena and generating a scene around themselves. KIT was ahead of things when it came to fronting the relational; it blossomed early and had ripple effects later on when the students moved away from Trondheim.

DIS-PLACED I - VI

arbeid med video, lyd & lysbilder. 1995.

Jeremy Welsh

Søndag 29 januar: utstilling har åpent i dag kl 14.00 - 16.00



Flyer for the installation *Dis-Placed* at Kunstakademiet in Trondheim, 1995

Prosjekthallen Kunstakademiet i Trondheim TMV Innherredsv. 18

MP: You used the phrase golden age and named several students from that era, like Geir Tore and Søsna, Tommy Olsson, and Helge Sten. You also had Jannicke Låker, Per Teljer, and other artists who've been central within Norwegian video art. Others started with video, but left after a while. Was video an entrance into the cross-disciplinary?

Per Teljer was part of a group called Sunny Hearts Videos that was quite active in the mid-nineties, both in Trondheim and through a Nordic network.⁷ Jannicke Låker began with video at the same time, after having pursued sculpture the first years at the academy. Both Låker and Sunny Hearts Video found a point of departure in a distinctive form of narration that tapped into early performance video by artists like Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley, and film, maybe especially B movies. Directors like Quentin Tarantino began to draw a lot of attention—and remember that this was before DVD, most people didn't own their own video players. It was common to go to the video shop and rent both the films on VHS and a "movie-box"—a little VHS-player in its own suitcase. Videos, beer, and chips: this was an essential part of the culture! Many of the artists I've mentioned now were in on an important project, a cable television production around 1994 or '95. We had Steven Bode, the director of Film & Video Umbrella, as a guest teacher, as well as David Garcia. At the time Garcia was running a weekly art-TV broadcast on cable

television in Amsterdam, and he invited us to make a one-hour broadcast with the students.⁸ KIT students and other students from around Scandinavia participated. One of them was Gisle Frøysland, then a student at Vestlandets Kunstakademi, later one of the founders of BEK, and the director of the Píksel Festival.⁹

Living in Trondheim was not just about the intermedia curriculum for Welsh. In 1997 he worked on arranging the exhibition *Screens* at Trondheim Kunstmuseum (Trondheim Museum of Art) with, among others, Bill Viola, Graham Budgett, and Fredrik Wretman. The exhibition was a part of the thousand-year anniversary celebration of the city of Trondheim.

JW: *Screens* was the most ambitious video art exhibition that had ever been shown in Norway when it opened in 1997. We filled Trondheim Kunstmuseum's galleries; we used Erkebispegården, Trøndelag Senter for Samtidskunst, Lademoen Kunstnerverksteder, and Kunstakademiet's exhibition space, Galleri KIT. The draw was Bill Viola; we had a major installation by him. And we had several specially-produced pieces, such as video installations by Gisle Frøysland, Vibeke Jenssen, Tone Myskja, Anne Katrine Dolven, Ivar Smedstad, and a number of international artists, such as Mona Hatoum. There were many, and I don't remember everyone. When it comes to documentation ... well, we didn't produce a catalogue, but we had a kind of newspaper, and I have that. Photos, hmm ... yeah, it's not so bloody long ago, but it was before digital cameras, so the documentation I have is probably on slides.

AMD: Did you work a lot with Espen Gangvik then?

JW: Yes, we worked together quite a bit. Since then we've periodically had running contact. I was on the board of TEKS,¹⁰ and I was part of the curatorial group for the first *Meta.Morf*. I have known Espen since he was a very straight sculptor. After the work with *Screens*, however, he changed directions and became more interested in electronic media.

BERGEN AND THE FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

In 2001 Welsh changed teaching venues from Trondheim to Bergen. Stephan Dillemoth, who was a professor in Bergen, had abruptly resigned his position at the end of the spring semester, and the school had an urgent need to find a replacement who could start the following autumn. They asked Welsh, and he became interested. Part of the reason was that there were a lot of exciting things happening in the photography department in Bergen at this time (it was then a division of Kunst- og håndverkskolen), and Welsh eyed the possibility of starting a collaboration between the photography division and Kunstakademiet i Bergen, a process that has now resulted in one school. In 2003 a working group was established with the objective of drawing up a plan for a master's degree program. It was approved by NOKUT, the

Norwegian agency for quality assurance in education, and they were able to start up one year later. It was natural for Welsh to take on the job of master's program coordinator, and it proved to be one that he liked.

JW: Being the master's coordinator is the most enjoyable job I've ever had; it's far better than being a dean.

AMD: How was the transition to Bergen with respect to video and media arts?

JW: The environment around Bergen Senter for Elektronisk Kunst (BEK) was already vital when I arrived in 2001. Some of the people there, like Gisle Harr and Jørgen Larsson, I knew quite well from before. Trond Lossius I didn't know, but we were quickly introduced because I became the head of the board of BEK around the same time I began at Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen. Since BEK's inception in 2000, the idea was that it ought to be closely connected to Kunsthøgskolen, which it has been to varying degrees. Several of the artists associated with BEK were former Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen students, when Karen Kipphoff and Andrea Sunder-Plassmann taught there, so a lot of them were familiar with video performance and "new media." So I wasn't starting out with total novices, as I did in Trondheim.

AMD: You have followed the development of the Norwegian system for a long time. Would you share your views about it with us?

JW: Put quite simply, bureaucracy does not help prepare students to meet the world as artists. The tendency to adapt an academic-bureaucratic model is extremely unfortunate, I think, but that is the direction that has evolved the world over in recent years. Some of the changes that have occurred have been for the better. The old academic system was built up on a noncommittal structure. It worked well enough of course for the extremely motivated and ambitious students, because they received a great deal of support and could do whatever they wanted. But for those who lacked motivation or needed help, it was entirely too easy to withdraw or drop out. So, when the process for identifying and implementing a grading system was started up, it was positive for some, but not for everyone.

MP: The choice between the old master-class model, where a romantic way of thinking pervades nearly everything and where the students are at the mercy of their teachers' interest, as opposed to the new bachelor's/master's model where one institutionalizes art education, points out a big dilemma: How does one regulate something that fundamentally cannot be regulated? Art, as a concept, is of course perpetually changing—so how can one institutionalize art? And has implementing such a system been worthwhile, do you think?

JW: Fortunately in Bergen we haven't subscribed to the most rigid model, where everything is divided into small modules and everyone has to constantly calculate credit numbers. That kind of model is

exhausting from an administrative perspective and also often results in the students losing the general overview; they quickly lose sight of the reason why they are at an art school in the first place. What's really necessary—and what is also a dilemma—is a form of regulated anarchy. One has to find ways of bending the rules to adapt to the particularities of teaching art, rather than the other way around. The problem is that bureaucrats and educational administrators usually prefer the opposite. So one has to come up with certain “stealth methods” for protecting the freedom art students have to have.

AMD: This belongs to a kind of academic history. Were you also involved in the establishment of the fellowship program?¹¹

JW: No, but I was engaged in the discussions in an early phase of the process; that was while I was still in Trondheim. In the late nineties a conference was held at Soria Moria in Oslo that was attended by representatives from the art world to discuss whether or not a doctoral degree was a good idea. Opinions were divided at that time as well. Kunsthogskolen i Bergen, with people like Johan Haarberg, Klaus Jung, Nina Malterud, and the then director of Norsk musikkhøyskole (Norwegian Academy of Music) in the driver's seat, were very keen. They were the ones who really worked hard to get it approved.

My first real experience with the fellowship program came when I began in Bergen and was Trond Lossius's advisor. Only now—after having existed for a decade—has the program begun to be visible, although much is still unsettled. The idea of “art research” is a hot item in an international context, and everyone wants ownership and defining power. The fellowship program has worked well for the ones I've advised—Trond Lossius and Pedro Gómez-Egaña—but I have also observed several who have struggled with the structure and the rather restrained and unformulated connection between artistic practice and critical reflection in the program.

AMD: You have pursued parallel courses, between teaching and your own artistic activity for over twenty years with just one (!) sabbatical year. How do you think you've been able to manage this combination?

JW: Maybe it's due to sheer willpower? These years have been a privilege, but combining the pedagogical and the creative hasn't always been easy. Quite simply, it has been a challenge. But by the same token I have been more than mildly interested in art education, and probably view it as a very central and integral part of my career. It has been a kind of mix between social contact and own production. I actually get tired of being in production mode, of being by myself in the studio.

AMD: Has this combination informed your works?

JW: The combination has in any event significantly influenced them. The dynamic connection between teaching and producing has been important, but perhaps it's easier for others to evaluate just *how* it has affected my work.

ELEKTRA AND THE MATERIAL

MP: It is an art historical hang-up to divide everything into decades, but for simplicity's sake: were there any traits specific to the generations of the 1980s and 1990s?

JW: The impression I got of eighties art in Norway when I came was that it had a strong connection to German Neo-Expressionistic painting. And at the same time, it was completely oblivious to what was going on in the rest of Europe, such as the development of video art, the development of the digital arena, the rise of sound art, and late seventies conceptual art. So the transition from cosmopolitan London to Trondheim's art scene was tough.

During the 1990s those who were working performatively and narratively with video dominated the scene in Norway. I think I also have grounds for claiming that Norwegian students were being drawn more in the direction of film and television than the more classic video art in the US and Europe from the same time period. After the millennium shift, the picture becomes more diffuse. Some of the nineties aesthetic was taken further, but the younger faction of the Norwegian art world was immediately far more oriented towards the international circuit. They were more informed about what was happening in the rest of the world, and this led to a greater diversity. Maybe it's too soon to say something bombastic about the decade we're in now, but the relationship to *materiality* is perceived as extremely striking, both here in Norway and in other countries. I was just in Dublin as an external reviewer for The National College of Art and Design, and the students there are working with almost exactly the same things as the students here. There is now an international aesthetic that everyone is influenced by.

AMD: Do you think that the interest in materiality comes from a more "hands-on" experience with technology?

JW: More indirectly than directly. Many kids these days have a totally routine relationship with technology; it's nothing out of the ordinary for them. They are far more intrigued by the things that have *nothing* to do with technology.

One of the master's programs I was an examiner for in Dublin was called "Art and the Digital World." About half of the students there don't work with digital media at all; instead, many of them work from a perspective characterized by a critical approach to digital media. They are relating, among other things, to how information exists in a digital world, how it is utilized, questions about interface, and such.

One can say that it is difficult to maintain the concept of "new media" now. There are still some strong "new media" hold-outs around the world, but lately I've noticed that they've emigrated from the visual arts over to other areas. In Bergen this is the case, for example, with literature studies. I have a good collaborative project going with Scott Rettberg, who is a professor at Institutt for lingvistiske, litterære og estetiske studier¹² at Universitetet i Bergen.

I think there are very few students at Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen who would identify themselves with “new technology” these days. Maybe a few in sound art, but even there the focus is on analog and on mechanics, physical mechanics.

AMD: A work with mechanics that are digitally controlled, where one hides away the digital components and lets the mechanical be on view is, well, a paradox, isn't it?

JW: Yes, that kind of approach can partly be the result of nostalgia. When I look back to the period 1996–98, I was quite involved in an international “new media” movement that was influenced by ideas of cyberspace and virtual reality. I was never quite convinced that we would leave reality and float out into digital infinity, but a lot of people were totally sold on the idea; they truly believed in it and were deadly serious. The funny thing is that despite inordinate discussions about what life in cyberspace would actually be like, none of these folks saw Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etcetera, coming.

Several artists in Norway worked with the physical materialization of virtual space in different ways. Just think of the big installations by Ståle Stenslie and Thomas Kvam from the early 2000s, where the sculptural, mechanical objects became the interface with a synthetic, computer-generated reality.

MP: You mentioned the period 1996–98. The notion of moving out of reality, that the material world would disappear and that we would be there—together—in cyberspace, was prevalent at about the same time that the major *Elektra* exhibition was arranged at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in 1996. Were you involved in that exhibition?

JW: I participated in the conference portion of *Elektra* as a moderator for one of the panels, as well as giving a talk, which is why I had contact with several of the people involved: Ståle Stenslie, Marius Watz, and others. *Elektra* was under development at more or less the same time Espen Gangvik and I were working out the *Screens* exhibition in Trondheim. *Screens* was not only video; we had early examples of sculpture produced by using computer-driven methods and several pure, digital projects. The catalogue came with an interactive CD-ROM, produced by Intermedia students at KHIB under the direction of Atle Barclay (who later became director of Atelier Nord). We also held a seminar that became very important, as the visual arts committee from Norsk Kulturråd attended. It was more or less decisive in establishing the committee for art and new technology, where I served as committee leader for several years.

MP: What are your views on the *Elektra* exhibition now in retrospect?

JW: The exhibition was significant because it marked a new perspective on the relationship between art and technology. Looking back, a number of the works there proved to be dead ends. One of the biggest problems with *Elektra* was that the primary focus was on

the technology, something that resulted in it quickly becoming too distanced from a contemporary concept of visual art. Several of the works shown there tended toward ghetto-building, and that was unfortunate. I was more interested in getting out of the ghetto, especially considering that video art itself constituted such a ghetto at the end of the seventies and beginning of the eighties—simply because the rest of the art world didn't really care about video.

MP: At Videokunstartkivet we are continually discussing use of the term “video art” because how the term is perceived naturally determines how the archive will be perceived. We have also been extremely deliberate about looking at video art as a part of the art world, because here in Norway it has by and large always been included as an element within the larger notion of art, especially after the 2000s. But back to what you were saying: the route from ghetto to public domain is quite short, and now we are in a situation where video art no longer exists.

JW: No, video art doesn't exist today. I took part in a seminar at Nasjonalmuseet a week ago on promoting and communicating video art, and there we talked about how the term *video art* is used. The suggestion was that we ought to talk about it as a historic event.

MP: That can be a good idea because video as a technological designation became obsolete with the digital. Digital also made possible a whole new way of looking at and working with “moving images.”

JW: But I don't like the international term “moving image.” It is too all-encompassing and imprecise. Classic experimental film shouldn't be referred to as “moving images” because it is in fact experimental film. The formal relates precisely to the tradition that the expression is rooted in. One has to understand the specifics here. Video art also had media-specific features up until its demise in the digital landscape. Now there is just an electronic medium that has much in common with many other electronic media, and so it is pointless to insist on video art as its own designation.

MP: What exactly would you say was specific to video?

JW: There were two aspects unique to video art in the start: it was a real-time medium, as opposed to film which had to be processed after the fact; and it shared a direct technical and aesthetic kinship with television. It was also important that video was an electronic medium consisting of an energy stream one could manipulate synthetically. It was no coincidence that some of the earliest tools for working experimentally with video were “video-synthesizers” or that many of those who began early on with video had backgrounds in electronic music.

In February 2013 the exhibition *Paradox: Positions in Norwegian Video Art 1980–2010* opened at Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, curated by Eva Klerck-Gänge. Jeremy Welsh contributed to the catalogue of the same

name with an essay titled "RGBD/TVOD" which discusses video as a medium and contends that television is the origin of video art. Video was "an art form that to the greatest extent was about television. Television as an object: a box with a glass screen and cathode ray tubes, a receiving device for broadcast information, a gadget or a tool that could be manipulated, misappropriated, or disassembled, used as a ready-made or incorporated into sculpture."¹³ Welsh goes on to write that video art as an "identifiable and media-specific art form closely associated with cathode ray television" ceased to exist by the beginning of the 2000s.¹⁴

MP: You put an exact date on this termination, April 18, 2012, with the exhibition *End Piece* at Ambika P3 Gallery in London with the artist David Hall, who was also one of the founders of London Video Arts. You stand by this?

JW: Yes, as a symbolic death it's quite fitting. David Hall is an important artist, considered the father of video art in the British context. In recent years his works have also been inscribed into an international canon of early video art. Hall created a work for broadcast as early as 1973 called *Seven TV Pieces*, which was shown on BBC television during primetime. In 1976 he made *This is a Television Receiver*, which was also broadcast on BBC in the middle of the evening. *This is a Television Receiver* was quite a radical investigation of both television media and the medium of analogue video. In a nutshell, it showed Britain's most renowned news anchor at the time, Richard Baker, stating what a television apparatus is and how it works. The first recording is then re-filmed from the TV screen, resulting in a slight degradation in the re-recording. The process is repeated several times until both the image and sound are reduced to something unrecognizable and abstract. The work is a precise exploration and description of how analog video behaves, as well a deconstruction of that "image of reality" that the medium of television produces. It is also natural to put *This is a Television Receiver* in the context of the investigation of materiality that was at the core of the wave of "structuralist/materialist film" in England in the sixties and seventies.

The exhibition *End Piece* at Ambika P3 Gallery in 2012 consisted of 1,001 analog television sets tuned into the signals from the remaining analog television channels in the UK. Over the course of the exhibition period, the final, nationally authorized transition from analog to digital broadcasting signals occurred. The analog signals were gradually shut down, and each time a signal was discontinued, the screen was transformed to "video snow"—that is to say, white noise. By the end of the exhibition, you were surrounded by white noise. There was just one exception, one screen showing the sole television image, played from a DVD. The image was from an earlier work David Hall made in 1990 called *Stooky Bill TV*. The work is a reconstruction of the very first TV transmission made by John Logie Baird in London in 1925 with a ventriloquist's dummy named Stooky Bill. By complete coincidence Logie Baird built his first transmitting apparatus in the same building in London's Soho district that later housed London Video Arts in the mid-eighties! It is impossible to use a media-specific term for video art from the

2000s and onward. You can visit any exhibition and see electronic images, video combined with anything and everything. It is just a part of the whole. From a historical perspective, exhibitions like *Paradox* at Nasjonalmuseet and *Retrospektiv. Film- og videokunst* at Stenersenmuseet (The Stenersen Museum) in Oslo are perhaps important because they put a spotlight on a given period and on the trends that were present then, but making a pure video art exhibition today is something I find extremely boring ... No, it's not easy putting together exhibitions at big museums. Thank heaven for the Munch anniversary! Major retrospective Munch exhibitions don't hurt a thing and are unproblematic for everyone.

However, it is interesting to identify the gaps that exist in an exhibition like *Paradox: Positions in Norwegian Video Art 1980–2010*. Nasjonalmuseet has for example primarily concentrated on the artists who have carved out a niche in Norway, while the Norwegian artists who have been abroad, or who have worked in the grey area between film and video, such as Inger Lise Hansen, Trine Lise Nedreaas, Farhad Kalantary, Ivar Smedstad, Synne Bull, Dragan Miletic, are excluded. All of these folks have played a significant role; they have created works that have been well-received internationally but have been more or less ignored by the established institutions in Norway. I think that's odd.

MP: While we're on the subject of the relationship between Norway and the rest of the world: were those working with video good at putting themselves out there and participating in the international arena, or did they mostly stay at home?

W: For many it was absolutely necessary to pursue their educations elsewhere, especially folks like Ivar Smedstad, Inger Lise Hansen, and Synne Bull—they had no choice. They had to go abroad if they were going to continue with what was interesting to them. In general there was certainly a period in the nineties when the Norwegian state educational loan fund was very generous when it came to Norwegian students who wanted to study abroad. At one point there were more Norwegian students in London than there were in Norway; the academy in London was stuffed to bursting with Norwegian students. In recent years I think the stream of Norwegian art students applying abroad has stabilized.

TALKING TO MYSELF

*I don't need a TV screen
I just stick the aerial into my skin
Let the signal run through my veins
t.v.o.d.¹⁵*

MP: You chose to open your article for the *Paradox* catalogue with this quote which describes a situation where there's no longer any barrier between human beings and technology.

All the fiddling with technology one had to deal with in the early phases of video art has today been replaced by an almost seamless and immediate manipulation of image and sound. Working with recorded images today can almost seem like talking to yourself.

JW: Yes, so much has changed. In the eighties all the equipment was so complicated, and so *heavy* and *expensive* and *difficult* to get a hold of. If you wanted to do something, you had to plan very carefully and work effectively if you were going to accomplish anything at all; it required a measure of discipline which was positive. Today you can use any old mobile phone, make a video, and put it out on YouTube, and get a million likes—the whole process is completely different. There's no comparison. I have problems relating to this new reality. I don't dismiss it, but likewise I don't entirely get how I'm to make use of it. For young people it is so innate, it seems utterly natural. A good friend of mine who lives in London has worked with video since the eighties. He teaches art at a secondary school there with a long tradition of instruction in film, photography, and video. Not long ago he told me that his students—who are about seventeen or eighteen years old—weren't interested in editing with the equipment they had at the school. They wanted to do everything on their own laptops or iPhones, and they uploaded all their work onto different websites immediately after they were finished. Their work existed on a website, simple as that. They never made any backups, so at the end of the semester and for final reviews they had to have access to a web browser, otherwise it wasn't possible see their work. That does something to the idea of an artwork, doesn't it?

MP: Yes, it exerts at least a certain pressure on traditional ideas of originality and exclusivity. One important aspect of their action is that it rattles the traditional understanding of the property right that usually follows an artwork; the other has to do with permanence and a relation to history.

JW: This is a complex issue that we can barely begin to scratch the surface of. For art historians this represents an enormous challenge. The property right doesn't disappear, but it could play out that rights are transferred from the artist and reside with the owner of the website.

AMD: But none of you were particularly concerned with preservation either when video was gaining a foothold in the eighties ...

JW: No, we didn't devote much consideration to it in the beginning. One of the reasons I began with video was that I'd worked with Super 8 and performance. Everything was temporally and site-specific then. We weren't concerned with making things that could be distributed or sold; the works were meant for the here and now and, as such, all interest in making something with a longer shelf-life vanished. The thought process was rooted in a sort of spirit of the age, which also had strong political overtones. There was, for example, absolutely

no desire to have anything to do with commercial galleries. Today, nearly forty years later, the temporal and site-specific are quite interesting, because I think nearly everyone of my generation—who were doing the same as I was doing—feel that most of what was made thirty years ago is still viable, and that there are people out there who want to collect it. It is a peculiar situation, outrageously far from our intentions at the time. We were perhaps extremely naïve. It's, well, not surprising that the generation that came after us, the YBA (Young British Artists), went in the totally opposite direction.

MP: It's difficult to escape the commercial these days.

JW: Yeah, and it's part and parcel with how today's reality is constructed. We came into adulthood in the age of punk. When the Sex Pistols sang "no future," it wasn't an empty catchphrase—it appeared to be reality. Unemployment was sky-high; we had a rather shoddy Labour government that was kicked out by Margaret Thatcher, and it got much worse after she took over. The political landscape was extremely polarized at that time: either you were radicalized by the left wing, which had no political leadership, actually, or you were sucked into Thatcher's dream and spat out as a stockbroker.



The Distributors, 1978

DISTRIBUTORS



What was referred to as "independent media" resonated during this period. Here we're not only talking about artists, but folks from many arenas. There were just as many "community-based" media workshops as there were pure video art workshops, and there was much interaction between them. In other words, they were part of the same milieu—a fact that's often lost in formal art historical treatments. In these media workshops someone might be working with political documentary while someone else was operating within a more experimental tradition. The education was usually the same.

After a while certain tendencies began to crystallize; often those who were interested in documentary disappeared into the film and television world, while those working more with video and the experimental continued with art.

Because I was involved with music, I could easily appreciate the interest in electronic sound and I had a lot of contact with contemporary artists who were into this when I was at Brooklyn School. Fluxus was also important. The perception that visual art, theater, music, and sound could be combined together pointed—via Paik—in the direction of video art. So when I went for my master's I started with video. Before that, I'd been doing performance for several years, but I burned out early in the eighties, and video became a way out.

MP: Why did you feel that you'd burnt out with performance?

JW: Performance was too idealistic and too time-consuming. Starting up the band The Distributors was an attempt to shift a measure of our artistic practice over into the rock scene. Everyone in the band had experience from either experimental theater or free drama. More specifically, two of us had backgrounds in performance, one was a classically trained musician, and the fourth was experienced in free jazz and improvisation. Two of us lived in Leeds and two in London. We released a couple of records and played on the radio, including one of the famous John Peel sessions.

The idea behind The Distributors was that we would be able to operate with a kind of alternative economy. The thought was that if we earned lots of money we could funnel it back into other art projects. It didn't work. We never made any money and, as I said before, that moment we saw the sea of stoned kids in front of us marked the end. The spirit, or the sense of spiritual community that punk had inspired, was gone, and the commercial music industry had tightened its grip on everyone. Later on I was in a band called Pure Forms (this was while I was going to Goldsmiths) and we played a kind of funky post-punk music that I still think is rather okay. But by then it was "The New Romantics"—you know, folks like Spandau Ballet, Boy George, Duran Duran—who set the tone, and we belonged nowhere in that aural landscape.

In an interview with Charles Amirkhonian at the beginning of the eighties, Brian Eno gives a fairly thorough account of *The Oblique Strategies*. The strategies came about while they were working in the studio, and they proved especially rich at stages where panic set in and it was tempting to resort to the most obvious way out of the chaos. But, as Eno states, the most obvious strategy does not necessarily lead to the best result. *The Oblique Strategies* was created in an attempt to show that you always have several choices:

The function of the *Oblique Strategies* was, initially, to serve as a series of prompts which said, "Don't forget that you could adopt 'this' attitude," or "Don't forget you could adopt 'that' attitude."

The first *Oblique Strategy* said "Honour thy error as a hidden intention." And, in fact, Peter's [Schmidt] first *Oblique Strategy*—done quite independently and before either of us had become conscious that the other was doing that—was ... I think it was "Was it really a mistake?" which was, of course, much the same kind of message. Well, I collected about fifteen or twenty of these and then I put them onto cards. At the same time, Peter had been keeping a little book of messages to himself as regards painting, and he'd kept those in a notebook. We were both very surprised to find the other not only using a similar system but also many of the messages being absolutely overlapping, you know ... there was a complete correspondence between the messages.¹⁶

MP: Do you have any recurrent dilemmas that you've wrestled with as an artist? To me it seems you've made good choices in terms of managing to keep things going but, in retrospect, is there anything you would consider redoing or have you, as Eno says, managed to turn your mistakes into hidden intentions? And what is your favorite strategy?

JW: My favorite strategy is picking something that surprises me or pushes me off balance at a decisive moment. I am very diligent about following what is described in the *Oblique Strategies*: one has to select a random card. I have a digital version on my iPhone that I hate because it's linear. Utter nonsense! To be able to browse through and choose a strategy one has a feel for is totally missing the point.

But in general I've of course asked myself many times whether things might have gone better if I hadn't had such a hostile attitude toward the commercial side of the art world, if the situation might have been better if I'd chosen the gallery way as a young artist. As a rule I answer myself with a no. The price to pay is that one is less visible than artists who have a strong gallery backing them. The gain is that I have rarely had to accept compromises in order to accommodate others' expectations. And I haven't lost my love of the art-educational arena—I'll go on teaching until the day they tell me I can't do it any longer!

Bergen, June 20, 2013, & January 17, 2014

- 1 This quote is taken from musician and theorist Gregory Alan Taylor's well-known text about Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies*. Gregory Taylor, "The Oblique Strategies," *Gregory Taylor's Virtual Campsite* (website), 1997, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/OSIntro.html>.
- 2 We both sat on a committee in Kulturråd (Arts Council Norway) that handled applications for monies earmarked for "art and new technology."
- 3 For a broader look at the history of LUX, see Julia Knight's article "In Search of an Identity: Distribution, exhibition and the 'process' of British Video Art," in *Diverse Practices*, ed. Julia Knight (London: University of Luton, 1996), 217–37. See also LUX (website), accessed October 11, 2013, http://www.luxonline.org.uk/histories/1970-1979/lva_founded.html.
- 4 For an overview of which videos by Marianne Heske are to be found at LUX, see page 30 in this book.
- 5 Merete Morgenstjerne, telephone conversation with Marit Paasche, February 11, 2014.
- 6 NRK (Norsk Rikskringkasting: Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) had a monopoly on radio and television broadcasting in Norway from 1960 until the 1980s, when the first local radio stations started up. TV Norge (TV Norway), a private television company, was established in 1987, while TV2 became a challenger to NRK's nationwide coverage in 1992.
- 7 The others involved in Sunny Heart Video were Kim Hiorthøy and Karl Ramberg.
- 8 He is now the dean of Chelsea College of Arts in London.
- 9 Vestlandets Kunstakademi: Art Academy of Western Norway; BEK or Bergen senter for elektronisk kunst: Bergen Center for Electronic Art; Pikksele Festival: Pixel Festival
- 10 Trondheim Elektroniske Kunstsenter (TEKS): Trondheim Electronic Arts Centre
- 11 In Norway a national three-year fellowship program for creative and performing artists was established in 2003 as a parallel to other research-based doctorates. The fellowship program offers candidates who have completed the highest level of art education within their discipline the possibility of being appointed a three-year salaried research fellow's position. The position has to be connected to one of the Norwegian institutions that offer one or several creative and/or performing arts degrees. The program qualifies a participant for associate professorship.
- 12 Institute for linguistic, literary, and aesthetic studies at the University of Bergen.
- 13 Jeremy Welsh, "RGB/TVOD," in the exhibition catalogue *Paradox: Positions in Norwegian Video Art 1980-2010* (Oslo: Nasjonalmuseet, 2013), 12.
- 14 Jeremy Welsh, "RGB/TVOD" (see note 13), 12.
- 15 The Normal, "TVOD/Warm Leatherette" (Mute Records, 1978).
- 16 Brian Eno, interview with Charles Amirkhanian, KPFA-FM Berkeley (California), February 1, 1980. Portions of the interview are also reproduced in written form in "The Oblique Strategies," *Greg Taylor's Virtual Campsite* (website), accessed April 12, 2014, <http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/OSIntro.html>.