LIVES AND VIDEOTAPES

The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art

CONVERSATIONS
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The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art

Marit Paasche

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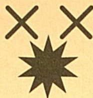

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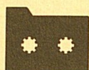

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Morten Børresen with two of the balloons at the exhibition *Brainspace – Spacebrain* at Fotogalleriet, Oslo, Norway, 1983
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Inghild Karlsen, positions for *Reflex*, 1982
Photo: Leif Karstensen
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Kjell Bjørgeengen (KB) in conversation with Marit Paasche (MP) & Anne Marthe Dyvi (AMD)

Kjell Bjørgeengen is a highly respected man in the Norwegian art world. He has been working as an artist since the beginning of the 1970s, and video crept in as his primary medium of expression early on. A hallmark of his oeuvre is a sense that nothing is a given, neither the world as we experience it nor the ideas we employ in order to comprehend our surroundings. Thus Bjørgeengen has never considered the video camera's immediate representation of reality as "true" or "natural." A video signal is rather a basis for a form, and the possibilities inherent in this signal are what he has pursued systematically over the past three decades. This pursuit has earned him a central position in Norwegian art history. It ought not be forgotten, however, that he also has considerable international standing. Peer Bode, an American video artist and theoretician, emphasizes the "exceptional sculptural value" of Bjørgeengen's works and singles him out as an important artist in an international context.[1]

Sound and video have in common the fact that they are both waves, and since as early as the beginning of the eighties Kjell Bjørgeengen has worked closely with such accomplished musicians as Svein Finnerud, Marc Ribot, John Tilbury, and Keith Rowe. According to Bjørgeengen himself, this work has been instrumental in that it has challenged his own aesthetic preferences and deepened his understanding of such key notions as "art" and "artist."

We agreed to meet at Kunstnernes Hus (The Artists' House) for this conversation, but forgot that it is closed on Mondays. Litteraturhuset (The House of Literature) came to the rescue. An obliging employee there kindly let us borrow the Amalie Skram room, and we started off the session by spilling coffee all over the table and floor. Roughly twenty paper napkins later, we got underway. But when Anne Marthe wanted to photograph our subject, he flinched. His reluctance to be photographed was obvious. "Can't you use some images from my works instead?"

MP: I read somewhere that your "multidisciplinary form of work stretches back to the first video piece *Fade In,* which came in 1981." Is that correct, that your first work was made then?

KB: That sounds about right, 1981, yeah, I guess, or ... I used to have a CV where I had written in when all the different works were made, but now ... I think that's right, that it was in 1981.

MP: It was in connection with Svein Finnerud's Trio?

KB: Yes, should we start there? I didn't start off working with video, but with photography. I was a photographer at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter for four years from 1970 until 1974, which meant that

I documented everything and had to chat up and work with all the artists, such as Tadeusz Kantor[2] and all those folks. It was, in a way, my education. I learned a lot from Per Hovdenakk[3] as well. We often sat in his office and chatted for hours.

Svein Finnerud (1945–2000) was a jazz musician (piano), painter, and printmaker. Finnerud studied under Chrix Dahl at Statens håndverks- og kunstindustriskole[4] from 1967 through 1972 and was familiar on the jazz scene in the sixties as a member of Knut Audum's orchestra, for one, where he played with guitarist and bassist Bjørnar Andresen. In 1967 he started the free jazz band Finnerud Trio together with Bjørnar Andresen and Espen Rud, which they kept going until 1974. The band became known for toying with genres; for example, jazz and visual art were included as equally valuable components. They collaborated with, among others, Peter Opsvik and Carl Magnus Neumann, and with Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. The group released *S. F. Trio* (Norsk jazzforum, 1969), *Plastic Sun* (1970), *Odin Records* (1993), and *Thoughts* (1974/1985), and gave sporadic performances up until Svein Finnerud's death.

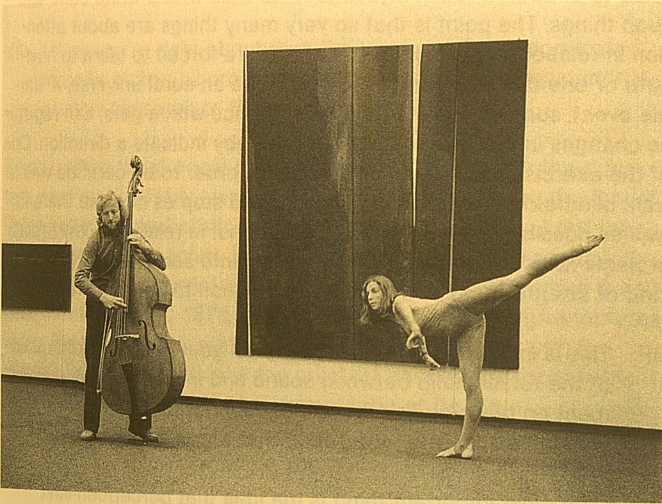
Svein Finnerud playing at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in 1971
Photo: Kjell Bjørgeengen

MP: How old were you when you began to work at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter?

KB: Nineteen, twenty years old maybe. But even though I really related to the artists who were out at Henie Onstad, my world had more to do with the Svein Finnerud Trio. Svein Finnerud and Bjørn Andresen were the ones I hung out with. I started first by working with documentary photography, but gradually it became more about art, although I never thought I'd become an artist. At Henie Onstad I had access to a darkroom, and there I began to make very process-oriented photographs, without a camera, based on chemicals that burned into the photo emulsion at an extremely high temperature. The result was an amalgamation of painting and photography. Sometimes I used a kind of graphic exposure of the paper and ran the chemical process on top of that; other times I ran it without any model.

MP: You were rather ahead of the times with this?

KB: Yes, I certainly was; there weren't a lot of people doing this kind of thing, but it was seriously unhealthy as well. I stood there in the chemical fumes and inhaled. Olav Strømme[5] was a major source of inspiration then, so the images are to a certain extent reminiscent of Strømme's pictures; there are black images that contain a figure. These images became the basis of a series, and it was the *passage of time* in this series that began to interest me. The video *Fade In* was made after this series. In the video I laid out a series of pictures and worked out a plan for how the camera should be led over each individual image. These dissolved into black, so you could "fade" to the next image. A space arose where you could move into the next image without actually noticing that you had left something. *Fade In* is a work I ought to have restored, because it's not possible to play it on a U-matic player. Regardless, I recorded the video in a studio in Oslo without knowing a thing about video—I had never even held a video camera. But I had a cameraman who followed my instructions while filming and who also edited it according to my instructions. Afterward I took it out to Henie Onstad, where the Finnerud Trio recorded live music right onto the U-matic cassette. That was the first video work I made.



Hal Clark and Høvik Ballett performing in Olav Strømme's exhibition at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in 1971. Photographer unknown

MP: Which studio did you use?

KB: It was called Power Video and was run by a guy called Styrk Jansen. The studio was in Skøyen, and I began to work for him as well for a while. In 1972 I had a solo exhibition at Henie Onstad with a series of pictures. There was a lot of rinsing and downtime working on these photographs that I put to use sitting in the library and studying. It was an ideal educational situation. Influences came from Olav Strømme's paintings, John Cage's chance logic, blended together with *I Ching* ideas about synchronicity—in other words, rather different and unresolved ideas lay at the heart of it. The final "stage

of development" in this series was a bit more radical: it consisted of pictures where I had smeared chemicals onto the paper and then let it burn. In other words, I took the logic of chance to the extreme, as far as it could go. I remember I had reviews which read "Yes, here the artist has been concerned with human nature, tissues in the human body, forms in nature … " So then I thought, no, I can't be bothered with this anymore. And I stopped making pictures. All my artistic activity came to a halt. The following year, in 1973, I started at the University of Oslo.

MP: What did you study there?

KB: First I studied psychology; I thought I'd become a psychologist. I was very interested in R. D. Laing and David Cooper[6]—I'd already read everything on anti-psychiatry before I started the basic course. We had seminars together with the majoring students, I remember, and were tremendously argumentative. But there was a waiting period for going further in psychiatry, and during that period I began working at a school for the blind, something that's in fact interesting in this context.

I was going to be a so-called *mobility-trainer*—someone who teaches the blind to go to the store, etc., to orientate themselves. So I had to of course teach myself first—to walk with a white cane and such things. The point is that so very many things are about attention in relation to perception. The blind are forced to learn to navigate or orientate themselves in relation to an aural universe. A simple event, such as a car driving past a fence with a gate, can register as changes in the "soundtrack" and thereby indicate a direction. One of the exercises we had to go through in order to be certified was to walk blindfolded down a long corridor and stop as close to the end wall as possible, just with the help of sound. In relation to my artistic projects later on, this experience tapped into something crucial: a kind of attentiveness and flexibility in relation to perception.

MP: This is interesting in connection with your ongoing exploration of the relationship between sound and image. Can you comment on how you link the use of sound to this experience? In your works it's often the sound that "directs" the imagery.

KB: I think the most important thing is the idea that perception isn't a given. One aspect of this is how our attention is steered by the search for meaning, something that often leads to the fact that what isn't immediately "useful" has a tendency to disappear. Working at Huseby blindeskole (Huseby School for the Blind) gave me the ability to hear differently. The same can be said of vision as well; what we see also has a physical dimension. Beyond all this lies a larger discussion of concept formation as such, and in this context I maintain that an understanding of work has to have a central position. Work is our fundamental means of relating to the world. It is through work that we create the possibility of consciousness.

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Kjell Bjørgeengen manages to get himself a kind of "internship" with John Godfrey at his studio Electric Film. Godfrey had collaborated on videos with Nam June Paik and Keith Sandborn and was involved in so-called "high-end production"–that is to say, advanced editing.

KB: Godfrey did auto-assembly editing, a suite where you have tape machines where you punch in all the time codes and the machines cut automatically. I walked into the studio, and he showed me around, and I understood *nothing*–I just saw the machines were cutting and Godfrey wasn't doing a thing. I felt fairly stupid and had to say quite simply, "Hey, this here, I'm not enjoying this. I'm not getting anything out of this." To which he replied, "Well, you'd better take a course then." The course was at Downtown Community Center and was aimed at the poorer representatives of New York's youth. I learned nothing about cameras there, but more about the fundamentals: a bit about video signals, about splicing in U-matic, and how to handle U-matic machines. In addition I arranged an agreement with Portable Channel in Rochester.[10] It was vacation season when I arrived there, as I recall, and so I had a week-long workshop alone with Jeffrey Mead, who ran the place. During these seven days the task was to learn to use the big, heavy U-matic camera during the day and to edit in the evenings. Jeffrey also gave me a good deal more on theory and signals, something that I could well appreciate since I'd pursued the English curriculum at school and wasn't technically adept.

A four-hour bus trip north of New York took one to Experimental Television Center in Owego, a facility that would prove to have a major impact on Bjørgeengen's development as an artist. This is where he found his "element."

KB: Owego was both an industrial and university town, and that's why Ralph Hocking went there. Hocking was a sculptor, but he gave up on art. He turned his back on the whole art scene and instead started to experiment with video.

Experimental Television Center (ETC) was officially founded in 1972, but it has a history. As early as 1968 Ralph Hocking started a project called Student Experiments in Television (SET) on the campus of Binghamton University.[11] During a three-year period he introduced students and residents to portable video equipment, techniques, and production methods. One of the iconic works that came out of this project was Angel Nunez's video *The Bedford Stuyvesant Kids*, which was made in the summer of 1969. It was a street video that documented how the police arrested neighborhood kids stealing from a factory. Widely shown in the US, the video was persuasive in efforts to gain funding for several anti-drug and social-welfare-related initiatives.

In the period 1970–71, SET was incorporated as a part of a non-profit media center called Community Center for TV Production, and Hocking continued his socially-oriented work in a new location in downtown Binghamton. Through meetings with Nam June Paik, however, he also became interested in artists' use of video and started up a program to encourage new technology. This facilitated, among other things, the

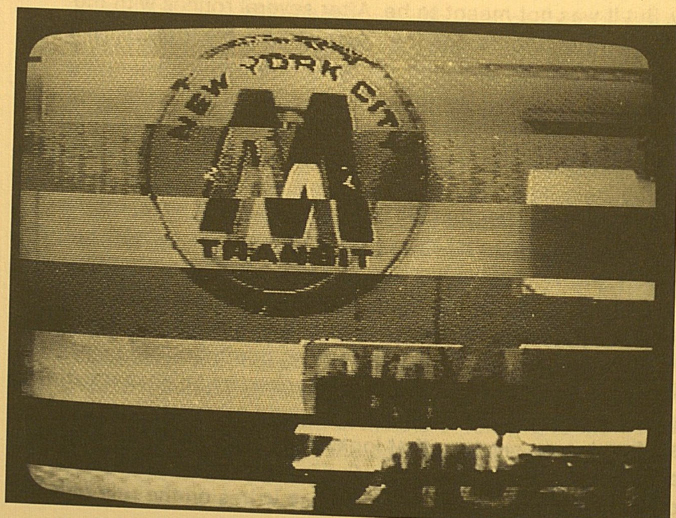
in the catalogue for my exhibition at Museet for samtidskunst (The Museum of Contemporary Art) in Oslo in 2003.[8]

MP: What was it that got you to start working with photography?

KB: I met Robert Meyer at an opening at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, and he asked if I was making pictures. I said no, not any longer, but that I still wanted to. Meyer said I could borrow his darkroom for free. That was tempting, so I went back and resumed working on some of the things I was doing before.

I made a lot of photograms as well as paper sculptures where the expression was kept to a modulated grey tonal scale. Shortly after that I made the *Fade In* video with the Finnerud Trio, and then I applied for a travel stipend of 20,000 crowns. At that time I knew that things were happening in video in New York but, as I said, I knew nothing about the medium from a technical perspective. I wrote letters to different institutions—the University of Buffalo, for example, where Hollis Frampton and Morton Feldman were. *That* is where things were really happening, something I almost didn't realize before it was too late. But, after having made some contacts, I traveled to New York in 1982 and sublet an apartment for two months from Steven Petronio, who was a dancer in Trisha Brown's company. This came together with the help of Jan Groth, who I knew because I'd documented his exhibition at Henie Onstad.

When I arrived in New York, Steven was about to go on tour in Europe and asked if I wanted to come to the rehearsal. So I spent my first day in New York sitting transfixed in a loft watching the run-through of the entire repertory that was to be the tour. That same night I was at club and saw Cecil Taylor[9] play—quintessential New York romantic, in other words. But there was a downside as well: the apartment was totally infested with cockroaches, and 8th Street in New York was a relatively dangerous area to move around in at that time. Walking down the Bowery was hardly romantic, with all the prostitution on display and the junkies shooting up.



Kjell Bjørgeengen,
New York 10010, 1984
© Kjell Bjørgeengen / BONO 2014

Paik that I know of is the motorcycle made for the Kongsberg Jazz Festival in 1997.

FREEDOM AND SIGNALS

MP: I would like to return a bit to what you said in the beginning about working without a camera and talk about representation. You have on occasion expressed a kind of resistance to representation. Can you elaborate on where this resistance comes from?

KB: Some of it comes from the influence of painting—such as that from Strømme—where the artist is always doing something directly on canvas or paper. When you work with a camera, that creative process becomes somewhat automated. I have always felt that video, as opposed to film, doesn't have a literary model in reality. The video signal is more of a fragile physical dimension that actually is connected to a more traditional view of art. I know that Hocking also thought the same—that the video signal can be shaped and adapted just like clay. The paradox lies in that one has to get in with lots of machinery in order to arrive at the point where you can work with the plastic aspect, and it takes *time* to get beyond everything that is already automated. This process is interesting in a political context. My political background is, as mentioned, rooted in Marx, and in an understanding that technology is not neutral, but rather formally determined. In the Marxist tradition one can say that art is not subsumed under capital, and therefore you can develop a technology within art that doesn't follow the same logic of subordination.

The point is that when one works with art, when one is trying to probe something, the material provides resistance. There are no set solutions, and you have to work slowly. You have an entirely different register to play on as an artist than as an employee in the industrial television world. Therein lies a certain freedom, a possibility to represent things one could not envision in advance. So it's about formulating a system that makes such representations possible.[16] Then one has the ability to go into a space that is completely thought out in advance. This means as well that the production becomes not just the realization of a given idea. Instead, one works in an area where the ideas themselves are put under a magnifying glass, precisely by virtue of the fact that they are conveyed through a material undertaking. They both leave traces in and find their answer in the material result.

MP: So you consider the creation of art as something that doesn't have a purpose, but nevertheless results in something determined. Do you think then that the unpredictable can be identified in the technology or in the working method itself?

KB: It is difficult to distinguish between the two. Part of it is inherent in the technology, because you have so many parameters that are interdependent. Let's say you're at ETC working from a tape or a recording, then this material is at the core. In addition you are able

development of the Paik/Abe video synthesizer at the center in 1972. Meanwhile Hocking maintained his fundamental belief that artists and "ordinary people" should meet and work together in an open TV production environment, and that whatever was developed there should benefit the common good, artists as well as others. The American curator David Ross notes that Paik and Abe's video synthesizer and their "Chroma Key Switcher" were made available to other artists—quite an unusual practice at the time.[12]

KB: Ralph Hocking and his wife, Sherry Miller, were quite good friends with Nam June Paik and Shigeko Kubota.[13] Paik, it's true, came up with the idea for the synthesizer, but it was his assistant Abe's job to make it a reality, and it took a lot of time. All Paik did was go around vacuuming the whole time, because of course it had to be extremely clean there—they were dealing with electronics, you know.

The bond between Hocking and Paik was tight. Paik has stated that Ralph Hocking is the greatest of all video artists, and Hocking is truly an original. Among other things, he made many erotic, processed videos of Sherry, and, just to make clear, that wasn't exactly the type of video that went over at that time. Paik called him a "video hermit" too. And it's true; Hocking has now completely withdrawn and lives way out in the woods. They started with a little cabin, but they got friends to pitch in once a year and help build onto it, and now it's a fantastic place with an equally fantastic collection of video-technical equipment. I've incidentally heard that he's trying to sell this collection now; ETC folded some years back.

Kjell Bjørgeengen met two very good friends and collaborators at ETC: Peer Bode, who was a project coordinator there, and David Jones, who worked with electronic instrument design and who helped develop new video processing tools.

KB: If you want to understand more about this period, Peer Bode, an artist and teacher I met when I arrived at ETC in 1982, is a good source. David Jones as well. The two of them were the core of the scene I got into, and both of them were so important to me.

MP: I logged onto and read ETC's homepage and saw that they've initiated something called the *Video History Project Website*.[14]

KB: It's Sherry Miller who's started that. I don't know too much about the project, but in a way I'm a part of it myself. They've also put together and released a box of five DVDs on the history of the TV center.[15]

It was in fact Sherry Miller who came up with the idea for Paik's *Video Bed*. He stole the idea from her and never gave her any form of credit—something she never got angry about; she actually though it was sort of amusing. When I was in New York again in the spring of 1992 I got the chance to see Nam June Paik's retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art. An entire floor was dedicated to the exhibition and it was quite good—you really got Paik up in your face! It was maybe Paik at his best. The last good piece by

very difficult. How does one actually assume such a position when one works on a daily basis in a kind of limbo producing things one doesn't entirely recognize or understand? Lynn Cooke said that I sabotage my own project all the time, and I think she may be right about that. I could have made something much more beautiful or more accessible. Instead there is a kind of undermining critique of my own endeavor there, something that screws up the expression in the expression itself. Sometimes it's as if there's a self-critical component in the presentation itself, a resistance to the work considering itself finished.

MP: At the same time I experience many of your works as very sensually powerful.

KB: Yes, that's also strange, because many times you don't quite realize where that sensual quality comes from. It comes from something subliminal ...

MP: But would you work against that if you saw it coming?

KB: No, no, quite the contrary. Sometimes totally abstract and unrecognizable figures trigger an emotional response. I notice this with work in the studio—that a sound-generated and totally weird image can resonate somehow, that I can neither explain nor manage to figure out what it's rooted in. It's as if one is a child facing a new world.

On a more concrete level, I can mention the collaboration with the musician Marc Ribot[17] called *True Blanking.*[18] There we had processed recordings, from the Jewish graveyard in Warsaw, among others. Ribot has a strong connection to Jewish culture, and in this collaboration his Jewish melancholy came in as a very emotional element, one can almost note the apportioning of emotions in the material. I remember that what I wanted from Marc was a music that could be placed within an area of noise, but that nevertheless indicated a structure.

Very many of those who have seen *True Blanking* describe it as a very persuasive and intense experience. Technically, image and sound work both with and against each other in this work. The images are from such places as the Jewish graveyard in Warsaw, as mentioned, and buildings in the South Bronx, both qualified by a sense of desertion and decay. As another, and more private category of association, there are also images of a bathroom in London. All of the visual material has been put through a classic electronic image-processing technique that results in details and other information "falling out." Thus the visual is inscribed in another system and is introduced on a new level in Marc Ribot's real-time compositions, which migrate between two poles: a form of non-structured sound and something that teeters toward becoming a melody.

KB: Actually I wanted the installation to have a much harder expression; that is to say, I realized that *after* the installation was finished. So, almost as a critique of what I'd done together with Marc, I made *Synaesthesia* with the Japanese musician Uchihashi Kazuhisa.[19]

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It was characterized by a tighter connection between sound and image, a kind of stereo image of the sound moving vigorously back and forth, presented in double projections that stretch the image through the space. The viewer here gets a direct and physical experience of image and music.

MP: Just like sound, a video signal is a wave. A lot of your output implies that sound generates image and vice versa. You exploit, in other words, the formal similarity between sound and video in order to question the measure of truth in perception. But, in continuation of what you said about the artistic process and the significance of getting beyond the automated, it strikes me, the power that lies in being able to manipulate, shape, or control electronic signals. Today this kind of power is the reserve of technological experts, something that for example the Edward Snowden issue has broadly illustrated.

KB: I don't quite get the leap from an artistic redefining of reality or perception to the use of data in surveillance. That technological development is driven by economic and political interests is a given. That American and European governments endorse comprehensive surveillance of their own citizenry just demonstrates that these governments are at their core undemocratic. Giorgio Agamben believes we should look at state-of-emergency laws in order to understand the role of government. In these laws the state derogates itself—and thus democracy—in order to defend democracy. This is because it only appreciates democracy as a collection of equal commodity-providers in a market, and therefore rejects the possibility of taking collective action to improve the state of things. State-of-emergency laws are essential for understanding a state's administration of power.[20]

CHALLENGING ONE'S OWN PREFERENCES

MP: In all of the installations of your works that I've seen, how the space is handled seems crucial. Does space mean a lot for you?

KB: I spend a lot of time on it, yes. And nearly all of my works are site-specific; that is to say, they are made for the space they will be shown in, like *True Blanking* at Kunstnernes Hus or in the installation with Aernoudt Jacobs that was shown at Bergen Kunstmuseum.[21]

MP: The tower room is an unusual space because of the cupola that functions almost like a kind of "hat" in relation to the rectangular space it rises above. Aernoudt Jacobs is both an architect and a sound artist. Can you describe how you worked with space, acoustics, and the visual aspect in this project?

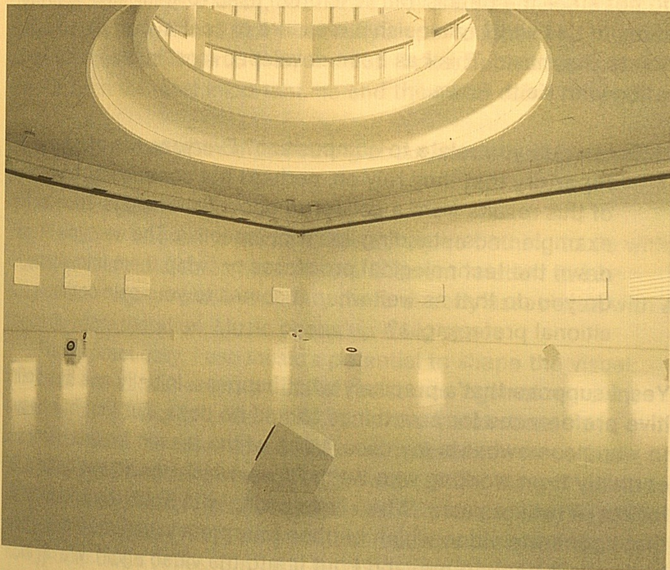
KB: I struggled for a long time to find a good solution for this space. It was only once I understood that I needed the sound to fill the space

and so give the video a less dominant role that things began to fall into place. First Aernoudt and I worked together in the room. The sound material was played out into the space and then re-recorded. In this way the sound became colored by the surroundings. Our interpretation of the architecture was that it, in a way, fell apart; that it was a tower with a room underneath. The idea was to try to bind the two parts together into a uniform space.

The solution was to make a totally white space where the light was reflected back toward the tower. The videos consisted of fine light lines, and all the material lay in the image's brightness; that is to say that these bright, light images were produced out of very high-frequency sound.

We had sixteen different channels of sound; some were spread around on the floor via recessed speakers at different angles, a heavy bass was placed under the floor, and some came up from the tower room. I think we managed to achieve a balanced whole. The exhibition was up for six months, and the nice thing was that a number of people went there and stayed in the room for a long time.

MP: The interaction between the abstract and the concrete is interesting in your works. It gets me thinking about the relationship between what makes itself and what is coaxed, because what seems at first to derive from something unsystematic, proves to be directed nonetheless. In your flicker works it is the sound that drives the image creation. Can you say something more about the situation or issue they arose from?



Kjell Bjørgeengen and Aernoudt Jacobs, *Kjell Bjørgeengen / Aernoudt Jacobs, Videoinstallation and Sound*, Bergen Kunstmuseum, 2007
Photo: Salvatore Panatteri
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: Strictly speaking, a flicker work is a sound-generated image with extremely fast shifts between various grey tones. It's not a strobe, where one shifts between black and white at a high tempo; there is a softer image at the core that shifts between light and dark. The

shifting is the result of a sound signal (that comes from an oscillator) that is translated to video. This happens when synchronizing signals are added to the video. The technique was devised by David Jones at ETC. I stumbled upon the flicker aesthetic by accident and have spent a long time refining it.

When I showed my first flicker works I had become tired of that exhibition situation where people come into the space, glance at one picture, and move on to the next. In a situation like that, you don't really need to think about anything. I wanted to break with that logic; with these works I wanted to say either you have to really look, or you have to leave. So the flickering in the image has to be overcome before one can see the details. If the image is frozen, it looks a little "mushy," but in motion it becomes hard and conjures a sense of color—even though the video is in black and white. There is, in other words, a threshold that has to be crossed before you can see what's in front of you. This was an issue when it came to showing the works publicly. Later on their content grew; while the first works were static, the ones in my more recent exhibitions are more dynamic, in the sense that there is a developmental path in the works that unfolds over time.

I don't perceive the works, fundamentally, as abstract; the images aren't abstractions of something, but rather concrete representations from sound. They comprise a visual universe that represents a break with the generally accepted understanding of what a picture is.

As for the relationship between the directed and what makes itself, well, everything is produced within a framework. But it's true that within this framework there are automated processes where I do not steer the details. Music is often used to steer the image creation. In this way I relinquish a measure of control over the visualization to the music. This has been developed most in the live collaboration with Keith Rowe.

AMD: How do you relate to composition? Everyone has of course a repertory that they rely on, perhaps not consciously, and much of this results from a collective pool of knowledge, such as for example understanding linear perspective. The way you break down the technological processes or "whip them into shape," do you do that as well when it comes to your own compositional preferences?

KB: Yes, I suppose that's precisely what happens. Initially one has definitive preferences for how things should be done, but that has begun to wane somewhat in my case. Much of the reason for this comes certainly from working with Keith Rowe, which has meant quite a lot for me in recent years. When I'm working with Keith the situation is that I generate video which he then interprets in various ways. Then he sends it back to me, and I put it into the video again. We sit in a feedback situation, and it's a bit of a knife's edge—both of us can fall off. If I do something, you can hear it in the sound portion, and if he does something with the sound, you can see it in the video. This feedback situation isn't always there, only in certain periods. The point is that he makes decisions from a musical standpoint, while

I make them from a visual perspective. There have been times I've completely ruined the sound—and vice versa; the music can be brilliant, while the image looks like hell. And what do you choose then? This is happening live, so the sorting mechanisms aren't there, and then I'm aware of my own preferences and the pressure they exert.

The advantage is that when one can't push through one's own biases, then they also lose their weight and one becomes capable of reevaluating what is "right" or "wrong." In a live situation the audience's reactions are also important, and this equality of the artist vis-à-vis the audience is something I like. My own cocksurety is challenged.

MP: How did your collaboration with Keith Rowe come about?

KB: I heard an album of his called *Harsh*.[22] It was all about extremely hard sounds, something that reflects the fact that he experiences the world as an extremely cynical place where abuse and exploitation of people is systemic. Rowe was educated as a visual artist, so I remember I invited him to give a guest lecture at Kunstakademiet i Oslo (Oslo Academy of Fine Art). Then I recommended him for Ultima in 2005.[23]

MP: You have in fact collaborated with musicians during your entire career as an artist, and …

KB: Yeah, it dawned on me early that there has to be a sound track [*laughter*] … At first I was completely engrossed by pictures, all I could think about was images, but then I realized that there was of course sound as well, and that was really much tougher. No, it goes all the way back to Finnerud Trio, and Jon Balke, but it's really Keith who has been the most important, he and then also John Tilbury.[24]

MP: But there must also be something about music that fascinates you?

KB: Yes, I've always listened to music. It has surely something to do with music's abstract character. Music has a different relation to language than imagery—which is usually more directly associated with a linguistic representation. Music opens up a big space.

Purely practically, I use music's potential to shape the visual. That it, as mentioned, exerts a kind of resistance against my own autonomy. Also, I like to collaborate. All of the installations have most often been the result of a collaboration between myself, a musician, and David Jones from ETC. Several of the things I've made have only been possible because of Jones. Works like *Shift*[25] (1995) and *Relative to Zero* (1997) are based on custom-designed technology from David Jones. Gary Hill is David Jones, so to speak, all the way. Jones and I continue to work together. He is still in Owego along with Ralph Hocking and Sherry Miller.

MP: One of our tasks at Videokunstarkivet (The Norwegian Video Art Archive) is to survey Norwegian video art. The more we research, the more apparent it becomes that when all is said and done there wasn't a video scene here in Norway in the seventies and eighties, but rather a number of individual artists who worked with video. What was the atmosphere for video like at Statens Kunstakademi i Oslo[26] when you worked that as a professor of digital art from 1996–2002?

KB: There was certainly a measure of resistance to video.

MP: Terje Munthe also said that there was entrenched resistance to video at Kunstakademiet i Oslo, but not in Trondheim.

KB: Yes, I remember when they announced a professor position with responsibility for intermedia at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim. Both Jeremy Welsh and I applied for that position, and he got it. About six years later a professorship was announced in Oslo. It was placed under graphics but then redefined to include reproduction techniques. Meanwhile Jeremy had been working like a lunatic to build up something in Trondheim, and so wasn't able to produce much work himself. I on the contrary had made lots of works in the meantime, and this time I got the professorship.

Before then I had a professor II position under Robert Meyer in photography in Bergen, which I left when I started in Oslo. Over the years there had been a kind of "bottlenecking" of people here in Norway who wanted to learn photography. I applied myself to a fantastic photography school with incredible teachers in Santa Fe in 1970 and was accepted, but I didn't get financial aid from Lånekassa, so I couldn't go.[27] Yeah, God knows what might have been if I'd been able to. Everything would have been completely different.

The students I had the first year in Bergen included Mikkel McAlinden, Vibeke Tandberg, Ole John Aandal—I'd been served up the cream of the crop and lived for a while with the delusion that this was what it was like to teach. I could just come with ideas and suggestions about projects, and they latched on immediately and the works went in all directions. Ole John did everything *while* making dinner for everyone. In a word, it was damned fun. At the same time I was working as a commercial editor, but had begun to tire of it, so I took more and more guest-teaching jobs. In the end I got to the point where it was entirely natural to seek a professorship. But it was quite a shock to find out that the students were not exactly like the ones at Robert Meyer. In addition I got the situation that was happening at Kunstakademiet i Oslo at that time right in my face—it was actually quite awful.

MP: But surely you must have done a lot right, because several of your students have gone on to have a strong presence in video?

KB: Short version: we managed to dismantle the power that the professors wielded in Oslo, and that enabled the students to study across disciplines or modes of expression. So gradually I had students from all areas of Kunstakademiet. The first year I had graphics students after Zdenka Rusova. Stian Grøgaard and I ran this together. We set up seminars and thought deep down that it was really great, but it didn't last long before there were some students who thought it was absolutely gruesome. [*laughter*] When I look back on the period now, it was rife with internal politics and conflicts on much too large a scale, and the students probably suffered somewhat, but the result was—in the end—a better academy.

Much of my time went to procuring equipment. The school had sought 200,000 crowns' worth of equipment but didn't get it, so there was *nothing* there when I arrived. I had to quite simply start by building up a department. In general I believe that students should have access to the same quality of tools as those working commercially. So I worked like mad to get in a Spanish system called Jaleo, which maybe meant a steep learning curve for some. But one could choose to use it in a simple way also, just to cut and paste, so to speak.[28]

But you asked about the students. Of all of "mine" I would say there are three that distinguish themselves in the sense that they have used the media in a specific and personal way, and luckily, quite differently. They are Bodil Furu, Unn Fahlstrøm, and Tor Jørgen van Eijk. Tor Jørgen is perhaps the one who's got the most out of being able to work with an advanced piece of digital equipment.

MP: Let's talk a little bit about exhibition prospects. It was not particularly easy to get video works shown early in the eighties, was it? The art institutions' enthusiasm was not exactly overwhelming?

KB: No, it wasn't. One of the few who were favorably inclined was Per Hovdenakk at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. This changed somewhat with the nineties, but before then the possibilities were meager. I mostly sent works to festivals, but seldom went to the festivals myself. The problem is that you can't live off this, so in reality I have always been working double—I have always had to have a day job—up until I was finished as a professor and got the guaranteed annual salary for artists. One of these day jobs was working as a cutter or editor, for sky-high hourly pay and enormous stress.

MP: Was this in advertising?

KB: It was almost everything: NRK,[29] advertising, industrial profiling, etc.

AMD: How was it being an artist in such a commercial setting?

KB: It meant being polite and subordinating yourself because the customer is paying. I learned that fast. Take the coat, hang it up, and smile. I'm sure it was the only way I could have really learned the craft so thoroughly, but it is without a doubt difficult to be in a

learning process while the customer is breathing down your neck. Interestingly enough, what had seemed incomprehensible to me at John Godfrey just a few years earlier was now my daily routine.

MP: Interesting experience in relation to having a political project and in relation to freedom.

KB: The point is that I earned money, a lot of money—I've never earned so much money as I did working as a video editor, and it made it possible to buy some of the "hardware" that David Jones from ETC developed. So I have a "Jones Colorizer," a "Jones Sequencer," and a "Frame Buffer."

Another point was the possibility of comparing the communications model between the cutter and the producer, and what one has as an artist over one's own work. In the former it's about finding fast, functional solutions. The first time these two models collided I was at ETC and had run into a problem. Suddenly I discovered that I unwittingly was in the process of seeking the quickest, easiest solutions, that I was in the process of transferring the methods of working in the TV industry over to my own work—in that moment my desire to work as an editor bottomed out! In addition, one gets tremendously tired of these advertising people. They were so trendy, you wouldn't believe it. At that time we worked with tape, nothing was digital. We had big, 10 inch reel-to-reel tapes and you edit on a timeline and outward. But what if the customer suddenly says that, no, that scene there needs to be five seconds shorter; what do you do then? Either you have to copy the entire stretch that comes after, and so, go down a generation in quality, or you have to edit everything all over again from precisely that point. This is the kind of thing one likes to avoid as an editor, so the editors I knew put in some clearly deliberate mistakes in the product. They put in mistakes that were easy to discover, and *very easy* to correct. [*laughter*] The customer of course always had to have something to say, you know, and that's what they got there.

MP: But getting back to the issue of the exhibition climate: Didn't a kind of transformation occur for you in relation to attention and exhibition possibilities when you moved over to sculpture, when your works took on the form of installations? The exhibition *Riss* at Galleri K in 1991 represented perhaps a kind of dividing line?

KB: Yes, there was a dramatic change in response when I started to make objects, such as *Riss*. Then it suddenly became art, you know. Then people thought about Paik: video bed, video garden, that you just take any old object and turn it into video. My work *Video vei* from 1990 was actually the breakthrough. *Video vei* consists of sixteen small monitors set into a cobblestone path. One of the points here was the contrast between stone, withstanding slow erosion, against video's transitoriness. The video showed processed clips from communication situations, from the bridges in Manhattan and the subway.

Video vei was the first video-object, and an ambitious installation project. It took a long time to get financing in order. But now

I've quit with objects [*laughter*]. Morten Børresen's baby carriage [*Videobaby*] was by the way also a kind of Paik-variant, as was that pole by Munthe. Obviously there was an influence there.

AMD: Can you remember anyone who was active but just disappeared quietly out of history?

KB: No, I can't say. But there again, I didn't have so much contact with people either.

MP: Tell us a little about Mediaverkstedet (the Media Workshop) that was established at Henie Onstad in 1986.

KB: Since I was working analog, Mediaverkstedet's technology wasn't for me; I knew nothing about computers. One of the positive things that came out of Mediaverkstedet were the fantastically fine *One Bucket* videos by Sven Påhlsson. Those works, I think, are just brilliant. Sven's unceremonious humor is fantastic.

MP: I think Terje Munthe felt that he received very little response to his efforts to carve out a niche out there, that he felt he was a little on his own. The price to pay was also quite high because all his time went into it, and so he didn't get to produce own works.

KB: Yes, one has to produce works to maintain visibility. Working double is tough, and it can quickly affect personal relationships when there just aren't enough hours in the day. Peer Bode made a choice similar to Terje Munthe's. He worked as the project coordinator at ETC and was the one who received everyone who arrived at the center. You got one day of instruction, and then you were on your own. If there was any problem, he was the one you called. Bode is a great talker—really one of a kind in many ways—always up on the latest in philosophy and the field. He teaches at Alfred University now and has made many great videos, but I think he is probably a better teacher than artist.

MP: When we spoke with Jeremy Welsh he mentioned that there were video works by you and Marianne Heske in LUX's collection when he worked there at the beginning of the eighties. You two were the only Norwegian video artists known outside of Norway, according to him.

KB: Really?! I didn't know LUX had any of my work. Hmm, in fact I think it's rather surprising that so many people out in the world have known about my work at all. I just went out to the mailbox and mailed some envelopes with tapes. During the eighties, as I said, I had family responsibilities, as well as working myself to death as an editor. In between I traveled to the USA and made my own things, but there was quite a long period where the only thing I made was what I did at ETC. I had maybe between two to three weeks effective work time there a year.

MP: It's rather interesting that you seem more active today that you were earlier on.

KB: Now I don't work as an editor any longer and I have so much more time. I also receive the guaranteed annual salary for artists and that has been important for me and made it possible to have a relatively large output.

MP: Are there any Norwegian exhibition venues you would like to show at?

KB: Yeah, I wouldn't mind showing at Kunstnernes Hus in Oslo again.

MP: You are one of few autodidacts in the Norwegian art world. Are there advantages to that?

KB: The advantage of not having a formal art education is that you're not socialized into the whole artist-role or whatever take on art happens to be prevalent at the given time. On the other hand you lose out on the network of course. At university I learned that one doesn't always grasp what one studies, and that one also ought to have a critical approach to one's own understanding of things. Reading Marx and Hegel and others was important for me because it gave me the ability to understand where I fit in the work process itself. I wrote about the concept of work in Marx and Hegel. Parts of these issues I'm working on and reading about still. Sometimes I wonder if I made the wrong choice … no, I don't know …

When one belongs, or is part of a group or environment, it implies that one becomes vulnerable to a number of self-reinforcing mechanisms that make one lose some of that critical judgment. Restrictive environments interest me. I like to read about them and look for them, but have always, myself, been more or less on the fringe—well, I suppose I am still a part of the scene from ETC, even though the group identity is pretty weak. I went in fact down to the Inferno festival, was there for three days and heard *everything.* Three full days of black metal. It was unbelievably fun to be somewhere I didn't belong. I could just hang around and read off all the markers.

EXIT

The poet Nils Christian Moe-Repstad (b. 1972) has just come out with his seventh publication, *Teori om det eneste.*[30] In earlier publications he has gained renown for his explorations of language from European classicism, romanticism, and modernism. In this book he compares "two grammars"—his own and that of science. Moe-Repstad broke his neck in a diving accident when he was 19 and the event left him with a particular language about the bodily freedom that he was instantaneously robbed of. This he compares with the freedom that exists (and doesn't exist) in that language that studies everything living and dead: science. Last year Kjell Bjørgeengen collaborated with Moe-Repstad.

KB: Yes, we did a kind of performance called *Night Gets Five Exits* during the Punkt Festival in August 2013 at Kristiansand Kunsthall. At the opening of the festival Nils Christian read from his recent collection of poems, *Teori om det eneste.* I had five screens set up and did multichannel flicker works at the same time. It was actually the first time I did several channels live simultaneously. All together it lasted maybe a half-hour. So we recorded his voice, and I set in some other material as well that I thought fit. It stood there the rest of the festival and hummed.

I've spent a lot of time probing the issues that his collection of poems represents. Perhaps it has something to do with age, that one gets slower or more meditative with the years. But I must say, I really like the intense existential seriousness in Nils Christian's poetry. And I see a certain correspondence in the "straight-to-the-bone-directness" in our works.

Kjell Bjørgeengen and Nils Christian Moe-Repstad, performance, *Night Gets Five Exits*, Kristiansand Kunsthall, Kristiansand, 2011
Photo: Erlend Larsen
© Kjell Bjørgeengen / BONO 2014

MP: *Teori om det eneste* is an unbelievably powerful collection of poems. Since the subject and the question of freedom are so central in the poems, I would like to ask you a question about the artistic subject in your output. You mentioned that you like the equality that arises between the artist-subject and the audience when you are working in a live situation, and that your own self-assuredness is challenged. But have you ever got to the point where you would like to let go of the biographical, yes, let out all the stops, like Moe-Repstad does here?

KB: I think the biographical, or perhaps rather the psychological background, is directly present in the works we are making. As a visual artist I can say fuck the language and let the work stand as the sore that it is.

MP: At the start of this conversation you said that you never thought about becoming an artist. So why did you then?

KB: There is something satisfying about putting things out in the world.

Things that never existed before, other than as possibilities. Art is possibilities made real, often in a form that surprises and gets us miserable wretches to think a little.

MP: Moe-Repstad closes his collection of poems in such a fine way with the words: *jeg har lært nå / at jeg oversetter verdener for de få* (I have learned now / that I translate worlds for the few). Do you recognize yourself in that?

KB: I refuse to believe it.

Oslo, December 2013 & March 2014

1 This statement is from Peer Bode's text "True Blanking" (1998), which can be found on *Galleri K* (website), accessed March 13, 2014, http://www.gallerik.com/artister_texts.asp?m=9606&s=10726&ss=10728&dynid=12. Bode was one of the founders of Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), and he worked at the Experimental Television Center. Today he is a professor of video art at Alfred University. See Alfred University (website), accessed March 2014, http://www.alfred.edu/gradschool/faculty/profile.cfm?username=fbode.

2 Tadeusz Kantor (1915–1990) was a well-known Polish painter. He also worked with performance and appeared at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter.

3 Per Hovdenakk was a curator at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter from 1969 until 1988 and then its director from 1989 until 1996.

4 The Norwegian national academy of craft and art industry

5 Norwegian artist, 1909–1978

6 Both were leading figures in the field of anti-psychiatry.

7 Kommunistisk Universitetslag, the university's communist party, was established in 1973.

8 The Museum of Contemporary Art is now part of the National Museum of Art, Design and Architecture in Oslo.

9 Cecil Percival Taylor (b. 1929) is an American pianist and poet. His background is in classical piano, but today he is considered one of the pioneers of free jazz. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Cecil Taylor," last modified June 5, 2014, accessed June 20, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cecil_Taylor.

10 "Portable Data Channel," Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago (website), accessed May 27, 2014, http://www.vdb.org/artists/portable-channel.

11 Information on this program can be found at "ETC History 1968–1971," Experimental Television Center (website), accessed February 25, 2014, http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/etc-history-1968-1971.

12 See David A. Ross's essay for the exhibition catalogue *Work from Experimental Television Center Binghamton, N.* (Syracuse, NY: Everson Museum of Art, September 19–October 2, 1972): "Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe built a video synthesizer and a chroma keyer in Binghamton, but unlike synthesizers built for relatively restrictive TV studios, the ETC synthesizer is available to artists from all over as well as those interested within the greater Binghamton community. To my knowledge, this is a situation without comparison anywhere in the country." (At the time David A. Ross was employed as a curator of video arts at the Everson Museum of Art).

13 Kubota (b. 1937) was born in Japan but lives and works in New York. She has worked with video, sculpture, and performance and is known best for her works from the 1960s and 1970s when Sony's portable Portapak began to become popular with artists. Kubota is a key figure in the Fluxus movement and has worked with Nam June Paik and John Cage, among others. See *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Shigeko Kubota," last modified May 14, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shigeko_Kubota.

14 See "Video History Project," *Experimental Television Center* (website), accessed May 2014, http://www.experimentaltvcenter.org/video-history-project.

15 *ETC: Experimental Television Center 1969–2009* (5-DVD anthology and catalogue, 2009), Electronic Arts Intermix (organization website), accessed March 2014, http://www.eai.org/title.htm?id=14719.

16 Jørgen Sandemose touches on the same issues in the text "Galileis kurér: Kunst, vitenskap og vareproduksjon" [Galileo's courier: art, science, and the production of goods], in exhibition catalogue *Kjell Bjørgeengen: Nye videoarbeider* [Kjell Bjørgeengen: New Video Works], (Oslo: Nasjonalmuseet/Museet for samtidskunst, 2004), 22.

17 Marc Ribot (b. 1954) is a renowned American guitarist, songwriter, and singer. See also Marc Ribot (website), accessed March 2014, http://www.marcribot.com/.

18 The work was shown at Kunstnernes Hus in 1997.

19 This work has only been shown once, at Stavanger Kunstmuseum (Stavanger Art Museum) in 2001.

20 See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

21 The exhibition *Kjell Bjørgeengen / Arenoudt Jacobs* was held in 2007. A corresponding catalogue was published: *Kjell Bjørgeengen / Aernoudt Jacobs* (Bergen: Bergen Kunstmuseum and Galleri K, 2007).

22 The album was put out by Grob (Germany) in 2000.

23 Kjell Bjørgeengen and Keith Rowe played together during Ultima at Blå in 2005. Keith Rowe is considered one of the leading expounders of experimental music today. Rowe has been at the forefront for many decades and has become especially known through his releases with the recording company Erstwhile. Rowe has collaborated with many prominent musicians such as Axel Dörner and Toshimaru Nakamura. See Piero Scaruffi, *Keith Rowe* (website), 2003, http://www.scaruffi.com/avant/rowe.html.

24 John Tilbury (b. 1963) is a British pianist and considered one of the leading interpreters of Morton Feldman's music. Tilbury is a part of the free improvisational group AMM that Keith Rowe was a part of, and the two have also worked together in the electro-acoustical ensemble M.I.M.E.O. See *Wikipedia*, s. v. "John Tilbury," last modified June 1, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tilbury.

25 *Shift*, Galleri K, 1995, and *Relative to Zero*, Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, 1997.

26 The Norwegian National Academy of Fine Arts, which is now part of Oslo Academy of the Arts.

27 The Norwegian state educational loan fund.

28 During the interview Bjørgeengen informs that after he left Kunstakademiet i Oslo, Dagmar Demming dismantled of the entire Spanish system: "800,000 was earmarked for maintenance and upgrading the system, and the monies were redirected to establishment of a new position, and then everything fell apart. Jaleo is now called Mistika since film and video evolved into one technology. Today it's the main software used in *The Hobbit* and many other major film productions. If Kunstakademiet had held to the original plan, they would have had 3-D film–all those things. It's quite a shame to think about." Bjørgeengen explains that NOTAM (Norwegian Center for Technology in Music and the Arts) saw the value of the Jaleo systems and took them when Kunstakademiet wanted to get rid of them.

29 Norsk rikskringkasting AS, (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation).

30 *Teori om det eneste*, Bok I og II (Theory of the sole, vol. I, II) (Oslo: Flamme forlag, 2013).