

MARIANNE HESKE

Technology is not the aim, but the means.

Before we continue the discussion about today's video art, it may be interesting to look back at the role art and artists have played throughout the ages. So why not go way back to the time before our era, to Aristotle for example (b. 384 BC) and his view of art. "The artistic activity", he says, "derives its impulse from our urge to shape and to give moving expression. More specifically, art is a form that mimics reality. It holds up a mirror to nature". But the purpose of art is not so much to give a picture of the outside of things as their inner meaning and significance. For it is in their meaning and not in their random appearance that their true reality consists of. He goes on to say that all real art appeals both to the intellect and to our emotions, and the understanding we thus achieve gives us an intellectual satisfaction that is the highest form of pleasure.

Let us take a long step forward in time, to Schopenhauer (b. 1788). He says that the task of art is liberation from the bondage of will, the forgetting of one's own self and one's own material interests, the soul's ascent to the weak-minded contemplation of truth. Art is greater than science, because science works by painstaking accumulation of material and careful reasoning, while art goes straight to the goal by intuition and presumption. The object of science is the universal that contains many individual things - the object of art is the individual that contains a universe. So much for the philosophers.

So, who has this "universe of art" existed for, and for whom does it exist today? Let us come down to earth and see what has happened and is happening in real life.

Throughout history, art has only served privileged groups within society. Emperors, the court, the church, and the aristocracy were the patrons of art. They had specific interests and artists had to express themselves within a given framework. It is therefore safe to assume that the problem of "understanding" art was not a major issue at this time.

With the industrial revolution, the new bourgeoisie and the economic upper class indirectly took over as the commissioners of art. Artists were free to produce whatever they wanted - but the products also had to be sold. The works of art were no longer monumental works for church and state, but pictures that could be taken down from the wall and regarded as objects of transaction. They became commodities to be bought and sold in competition with other art products. This is where galleries and art communicators come into the picture as intermediaries between producer and consumer. Suddenly, the artist finds himself defenceless in a system of exploitation where the driving force is not need, but profit. And under such pressure, it is impossible to function as a free, creative artist.

We in the Nordic region are fortunately more or less free from this economic pressure (unlike the USA, France, and most other Western countries). We are privileged in this area as in so many others. Artists don't have to prostitute themselves or their art to survive. Together with the Netherlands, we have the world's (the western world's, that is) best developed support schemes for artists. We have our own professional organisations and artist-run, non-commercial exhibition opportunities, exhibition fees, etc. Theoretically, we are free to create what we want for whom we want. We have resources and opportunities for innovation and experimentation. Do we use these opportunities? NO!

Gutenberg invented the art of letterpress printing in 1444 and printing technology provided the models for serial production technology (mechanization and eventually the assembly line). Other artistic consequences of this invention can be found in Mail Art, Stamp Art, Audiotapes, Xerox etc. Today, with the help of Xerox, virtually anyone can publish any printed matter they want. Visual mass production became possible. The problems of reproduction and copyright arose in the commercial market and in relation to copyright law etc. This is a problem that applies to all cultural industries such as literature, music, film, video, photography, graphics, and probably other areas as well. But a work of art does not have to be of inferior artistic quality if it can be reproduced and multiplied.

Art academies and universities in most Western countries (and some Eastern ones) have departments for media (photography, film, audiovisual) on a par with departments for painting, sculpture, and printmaking. But there is absolutely no opportunity to get an education in this field in the Nordic region. We will be quite unprepared and defenceless when the media flood really hits us. The result must be that technology will control us, and not the other way around. We should shape the future, not the future us.

It is the responsibility of the cultural worker to ensure that these (dangerous) devices of power are not just used in the service of commercialism and flattening. Video and computer technology has long since been adopted by banks and industries, in speculative businesses such as the porn industry. Electronics is here to stay, and the development will continue. It is ostrich politics for artists to bury their heads in the sand and say that this is cold and insensitive, and we don't understand how to use it.

Typical of the Norwegian media debate is that we have gotten bogged down in financial and technical details about how much video equipment costs, what systems are available, how to prevent popular entertainment from being pirated, competition with cinemas, etc. The ethical, moral, and cultural aspects are hardly touched upon.

What other media can reach such a large audience? TV is a more relevant medium for communication than, for example, the screen. Video is an egalitarian medium and involves a unique communication process that we have only just begun to explore. Few people can afford to acquire paintings and sculptures; most people

can buy books, music, and video cassettes (when they have a TV and playback equipment).

To better understand the genuinely new possibilities and aesthetic roots of the medium, it is necessary to draw certain parallels with earlier forms and media of communication.

The first video broadcast (i.e. where sound and image came directly and simultaneously) was the transmission of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936. The first artist to use video as an independent form of artistic expression was the Korean Nam June Paik. He is a member of the Fluxus movement, which is a kind of continuation of Dadaism. Both DADA and FLUXUS are known for their unconventional use of media in their time, with combinations of film, photography, texts, music, sound, happenings etc. Nam June Paik took video technology out of its traditional and functional context, where the technique was only used to inform and reproduce.

Here we see historical parallels with other reproduction techniques that have gradually acquired their own artistic value and means of expression. The woodcut, for example, initially had no aesthetic or artistic functions. It was in the service of information and propaganda. Similarly, copperplate engraving, and lithography had a functional purpose, which included reproducing writing, paintings, and drawings. Until Dürer & Co. discovered that they could create independent images based on the uniqueness of the technique. Nowadays, until the 1960s, the silk screen printing technique was mostly used for information, advertising, poster printing and the like, until Baumeister and others discovered that this technique also had its own artistic value.

Like this, we can see how new media first try to emulate their related predecessors. This is partly due to economic interests that do not tolerate change. The first photographs (invented in 1822) imitated 17th century portrait painting. Until the Dadaists just after the turn of the century discovered the inherent qualities of photography and began to use it more freely and creatively. But to this day, photography is not fully accepted as an art form in Scandinavia.

But a photograph is not art because it is a photograph, just as a painting is not necessarily art because it is painted. If a work meets certain artistic criteria, then let it be art. Regardless of the medium.

Just as the Dadaists and Surrealists (Man Ray, Max Ernst, and others) pulled photography out of the reproductive, documentary painting equation, Chaplin and Eisenstein turned live film into an independent art form in the 1930s. After the invention of film in 1895, it had until then only functioned as an imitation of theatre.

Film is a realization of Wagner's ideal *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Here we find the juxtaposition of all the arts: music, scenography, dramaturgy, poetry, choreography, costume design, lighting, sound... These specific combinations of different art forms in a common expression are a direct precursor to today's happening,

performance, environment and video art. Based on this audiovisual tradition, we should have the ballast to go further.

Other communication media are the radio, which was invented in 1904, and the telephone (1876). One is a one-way communication device, the other two- or more-ways. Bertolt Brecht proposed in 1932 in *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst* to transform the radio from a distribution device to a communication device with an enormous channel system that made it possible not only to send out but also to send in. But this was never realized. As we mentioned earlier, television came into use in Europe in 1936. To this day, television has not broken away from the tradition of radio, even though it is a completely different medium. It has become a kind of picture radio.

Only a small percentage of the Scandinavian population goes to exhibitions, theatres, concerts, etc. And sociological studies have shown which groups these are. The rest sit at home and watch TV. It's remarkable how humanity has always gathered to stare into flickering light sources. Before it was fire, and now it's colour vision. The world is no longer round - it's square. And it has come into our living rooms. Through news broadcasts, reality has become a serial that we can follow every day at a specific time. TV has an extremely high "credibility coefficient". People consider what they see on TV to be "objectively" true. This shows the enormous power of this medium. The entire nation is fed the same visual and auditory impressions in one and the same second. Will we eventually all become remote-controlled marionets that think, believe, eat, and do the same?

With the invention of portable video equipment and home video, video is becoming commonplace. Quality is rising and prices are falling. But the applications are still mostly family-related, like photography and the Super 8 camera. People film their children and cats, tap programs from TV, buy pre-recorded tapes that are commercially marketed, etc. Only a few uses video in a more "cultural" and creative/idealistic way.

In the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, England, even in Poland and not least in the USA, videotapes created by artists are broadcast on TV. Of course, commercial forces have long since realized their opportunities. In Belgium, for example, I know of a person who broadcasts videotapes made by visual artists over his private TV cable. This acts as a commercial gallery that promotes its artists. There are collectors of video just as there are collectors of music, paintings, etc.

And it's already common for artists to number and sign their videocassettes, as is customary with prints. But there are also more social methods of distribution. Museums around the world organize video exhibitions and video biennials. For these, you send in a video cassette like you send in a photo or graphic magazine. Video libraries have sprung up, where you can go and watch videotapes or rent them to take home for a fee. Few artists can afford to buy their own equipment, so there are more and more subsidized video studios and video centres where artists can work with permanently employed technicians. A collaboration that is becoming

increasingly important as technology advances. These video studios can be compared to our collective printmaking workshops.

Until now, video has brought together artists from different fields under one roof: painters, graphic designers, sculptors, writers, cineastes, musicians, dancers, and others. A whole new aesthetic is emerging, unlike film, which relies on a painstaking chemical development process, the video recorder records sound and image electronically and directly onto a magnetic tape. This is done by millions of stored magnetic oscillations per second. The tape must pass the recording head many times faster than that required for an audio tape recorder (approx. 100 times). Like audio tape, video also began as "open reel".

The possibilities for manipulating and constructing an electronic signal are in principle unlimited. A signal can even be converted into sound. Video is a direct and spontaneous medium where new ideas are born instantly from each other. Multiple cameras can be used to layer images on top of each other to create multi-dimensional images.

Video technology is often used in the context of performance and installations, where the monitors function as a sculptural element. Video can shift time and reality. We can manipulate time, de-structure it, reconstruct it, take it into the future. The camera can also function as a paintbrush and describe a landscape, for example. At the same time as you operate the camera, you have everything under control on the monitor screen. Furthermore, you can work with a synthesizer with or without a camera. But no matter what you do, you can edit it all together as you like. You always have the same formal problems as in any other art form with colour, idea and content. "Video is a prolongation of our lives", says Nam June Paik, the father of video art. He continues: *Television has attacked us all our lives ~ now we can attack it back !!*

(Translation by Sune Nordgren)