

LIVES AND VIDEOTAPES

**The Inconsistent
History of Norwegian
Video Art**

CONVERSATIONS

1—6

Lives and Videotapes

The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art

Marit Paasche



videokunstarkivet



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Author: Marit Paasche

Editorial Collaborator: Anne Marthe Dyvi

Foreword: Mike Sperlinger

Copyediting: Melanie Eckner

Translations: Katia Stieglitz

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Morten Børresen with two of the balloons at the exhibition
Brainspace – Spacebrain at Fotogalleriet, Oslo, Norway, 1983
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Inghild Karlsen, positions for *Reflex*, 1982
Photo: Leif Karstensen
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The proliferation of histories of video art internationally in the last decade, whether in the form of publications or exhibitions, marks a struggle over historical meaning precisely as the term took its contemporary force. In less reflexive histories, as Foster termed, a rehabilitation of analogue formats has combined with the need to identify star names to produce, as she put it, "a history of art video, or video art, that belongs in the art world and that was authored by people with definable styles and intentions, all recognizable in relation to the principles of construction of the other modern art histories." More interesting recent projects have instead situated

Morten Børresen ^(MB) in conversation with Marit Paasche ^(MP)

I am yearning. For the big cities I will seek when I'm finally out, for the noise, the speed, the frenzy, where life is for burning. I'll manage to get hot again. And rise up into the sky like a star.

John Ege¹

Morten Børresen's story is remarkable. In 1968 he began studying electronics at NTNU, but after one year he put these studies on hold.² He went on instead to complete a degree in odontology, moved to Sweden and established himself as a practicing dentist. This period was, according to Børresen, draining. He was unhappy and, on a fluke, he turned to art. In 1978 Børresen applied for admission to Statens håndverks- og kunstindustriskole (National Academy of Craft and Art Industry) and was accepted into the sculpture division where Eilif J. Mikkelsen was a professor. Eventually he transferred to Kunstakademiet i Oslo (The Academy of Fine Art in Oslo), which he attended from 1979–85.

There was an emerging punk culture in Oslo at this time, along with a certain pressure to be something. New media burst forth and the ensuing media revolution sprinkled stardust and rebellion over the younger generation. *Himmelhunder* (heavenly dogs), as John Ege dubbed those seeking fame, were in abundance. In the first half of the 1980s, Morten Børresen was extremely productive. His video works from this period feature a singular mix of conceptual art, toying with the medium, and a running dialogue around what is described by the word *self-image*. For example, in *The Man on the Screen*, made in 1982 and just over two minutes long, Børresen uses video in much the same conjurer's way evidenced in George Méliès' *Un homme de têtes* (*The Four Troublesome Heads*, 1898) or in René Magritte's paintings. He manipulates the image of his own body such that it takes different positions around a table (which itself is repeated so that a row of tables runs inward in the image). The tables and chairs are placed out in nature. Toward the end the man is replaced by a monitor on the table, and on the monitor's screen we see the man's face.

MP: Many of your early works suggest a conceptual game around an "I" and various images of this I. You must have found something about video that really worked for you, because you made quite a number of video works at the beginning of the eighties.

MB: Yes, working with video had an almost catalyzing effect on me personally. Discovering this medium led almost to a kind of spiritual and intellectual awakening. I managed to break free of many chains within myself. Through video I could view myself in the third person; I could look at myself from the outside. Much of what I did at the time

was about this, like *Man on the Screen*. The video presents a manipulation of the self, call it a liberation of the self even. It is a journey with an I-person and that person's self-image. He's sitting at others' tables and trying to introduce himself to himself.

Today I think it's okay to say that I used video to exploit the dynamics of my own mind, which was quite divided at that time. I spent a lot of time on the editing. The video consists of an inordinate number of cut-ups, and it was edited at Sony studio, which was in Skårer, outside of Oslo. They let me sit there and work a while.

MP: Toying with self-conceptions runs through several works, including the very original *Akademistudenten* (*The Academy Student*) and *The Man and the Sea*. What can you say about these videos, and about how you first came in contact with the medium?

MB: The reason I began working with video was that Kjartan Slettemark held a workshop on video performance at Kunstakademiet i Oslo. It must have been in 1980. The workshop was unbelievably good for me; it opened up a whole new landscape. And my friendship with Slettemark was also very important.

The idea for *Akademistudenten* came about because one of the professors at the academy, Ludvig Eikaas, hounded me about having to turn up at the life-drawing class. I wasn't the least bit interested in drawing from the model then, and I discovered that I could be present in the form of a video image instead. I could be there as an electronic person. So I made a video recording of myself that was shown on a monitor. Next to the monitor there was a camera and a tape recorder. I asked the staff to turn me on at 10:00 a.m. and turn me off at 4:00 p.m., and asked them to film the model as well. That's how I solved the problem—I could be in more than one place at the same time [laughter]. I also interviewed myself as an academy student. I have to add that this work was not exactly well-received. I don't think Eikaas had a clue what I was doing, or many others for that matter.

In *The Man and the Sea*, Irja filmed while I directed.³ The video follows a very simple idea: it is about the self's journey in several dimensions. You have to remember, it was very intense for us back then to see ourselves on video or in Polaroids. Nobody is indifferent to their own image, even today. But a "selfie" taken today can't compare to one taken back then. For us it was on a par with revolution, while today's generation practically consumes its own self-images.

MP: You wrote somewhere that you were exceedingly interested in video's new dimension—immediate feedback—and that it is "technology's answer to the East's third eye." There is a particular mix of conceptual strategies, humor, and a touch of "new age" thinking in your videos. *Akademistudenten* is both thought-provoking and funny. The same can be said of *Videobaby*, which is perhaps your best-known work.

MB: *Videobaby* was envisioned as an installation. I was among the first fathers in Norway who got out there and pushed the baby buggy.

Or at least it felt that way. Norway and the rest of Scandinavia were just entering the equal rights age. Well, so I had a baby buggy, and I put a hidden camera inside it and a monitor on the pillow. Everyone's first impulse when they encounter a baby buggy is to peek inside and coo and babble with the baby lying there. In *Videobaby* you stand there cooing with an image of yourself.

In 1982 Børresen was invited to show at Fotogalleriet. For the exhibition, which opened on November 16, 1983, and was called *Brainspace – Spacebrain*, Børresen pursued the idea of self-images and journey quite literally. He emptied the exhibition space save for himself, a Polaroid camera, and a container of helium. With the camera he took a picture of every person that came to the opening, roughly 150 people. The entire project was recorded on video, tightly orchestrated, and divided into two acts. According to his notes, the following was to occur in the first act:

Morten Børresen arrives a quarter of an hour [after the opening] with a briefcase full of balloons. He presents himself as M.B. "right" and art historian Jan Åke Pettersson as M.B. "left" (sides of the brain). The balloons are filled with helium while M.B. takes Polaroid shots of everyone present. The portraits are each attached to a colorful balloon and then released to float up to the gallery's ceiling. Within half an hour the entire gallery is filled with balloons and pictures.⁴

The notes go on to state that "on November 17 the gas will slowly leak out and the portrait-balloons will hover around weightlessly." On November 18, "the exhibition is winding down," and by the following day it "is on the gallery floor." Then it is time for the second act. On Sunday, November 20, at 2:00 p.m., the balloons will be refilled with helium. The visitors will take their respective portrait-balloons and gather outside the gallery. "Then the entire exhibition will be released into the sky. A cosmic touring exhibition!" Every Polaroid had been signed (with an M), return addressed, and affixed with a postage stamp.⁵

MB: It was pretty funny. I do remember that I called it a cosmic touring exhibition. Of the 150 or so balloons that went up, the first photo came in the mail exactly five days later. After a few more days, a little package arrived with a bunch of them from a forest area in Fallköping in Sweden.⁶ I was actually given a three-day series and lifetime membership in *Dusteforbundet*⁷ on the basis of this project. Talk about exclusive publicity!

I also did a stunt where I got into a hot air balloon, rose up into the sky, and called down to a video image of myself with a mobile telephone.⁸ Then self-conception as subject matter wound down in 1987 with the project *Polaroidtreet (The Polaroid Tree)* outside Bergens Kunstforening (Bergen's Art Association) in May.⁹ The art association had invited me to show out in the square in front of the institution, as a kind of sideshow to Gunnar Torvund's exhibition. For the opening of Festspillene (Bergen International Festival) I planted a tree, the leaves of which were Polaroids I'd taken of the passersby.

I'd planted a similar tree before at Solastranda,¹⁰ and I received invitations to do the same in New York and Paris. But by that time our kids had increased in number—four in total—and that complicated matters. It became more difficult to make art, and I took a long break.

HIMMELHUNDER AND CRITIQUE OF THE ART WORLD

Morten Børresen's stunt with the huge hot air balloon received considerable publicity, and it was included as a part of the exhibition *Mortenstua i den superluminente videoskogen* (The Morten Cabin in the Super-Luminous Video Forest) at Cafe Våra at Steners gate 1. In a commentary in *Dagbladet* Børresen stated that the basic premise was about a change of dimension. He said: "The artist will be set free and rise up with a hot air balloon filled with video equipment. At the same time his image will remain down on the ground, on the video screen. I will conduct a video dialogue between Morten B above and Morten B below."¹¹ Børresen received the following message from Kjartan Slettemark in connection with this launch: "Børresen = Bør - rese - sen = Bør - komme - ned - igjen" [translated literally: Børresen = Ought - to travel - later = Ought - to come - down - again].

The exhibition, "the Morten Cabin" itself, housed Børresen's highly personal take on Norwegian folk art, folktales, and rosemaling (traditional Norwegian rose painting). It contained painted furniture, video tapestries—that is to say, lengths of loose video tape draped over a pole and painted in shocking colors. In connection with the opening, Børresen climbed up on the bar of Cafe Våra and read aloud from his own folktale, "Per, Pål og Espen Dusteladd" (Per, Pål, and Espen Dunce Cap). In this story he describes Per and Pål as successful artists, while Espen Dusteladd just fools around in the video forest. After much nagging, Espen is finally allowed to accompany his brothers on a visit to the king:

When they arrived at the royal court, Per and Pål passed themselves off as post-modernist, trans-avantgarde artists who had been part of all the leading art movements in the great beyond, while Dunce Cap was immediately rowed out to an island called "the Art World." Here it is said that everyone learned to do as everyone else. "So maybe you'll even get to be an artist as well," said Per and Pål, and laughed.¹²

Børresen emphasized, in other words, that the exhibition could be interpreted as commentary on the contemporary art scene itself.

MP: Many of your works carry an element of institutional criticism, but it is usually playfully formulated and always cloaked in humor, as in *Automatisk videosvarer* (*Automatic Video Answering Machine*) from 1982.

MB: Yes, you're right about that. *Automatic Video Answering Machine* was shown on a monitor, and it was created out of pure exasperation with the fact that answering machines exist—video itself, with its feedback, is a kind of automatic answering machine. It was also a

little jab at all the artists who'd been abroad, seen things, and then come back home and presented them as their own ideas.

You could say that I used the video camera like a revolver in intellectual self-defense. I used it in opposition to the established art scene. The answering machine's recorded message was: "This is an automatic video answering machine. Remember conceptual, professional." You know, everything was supposed to be so terribly international, and a lot of people involved in the arts were driven by a fear of not making it big or international enough.

MP: Did you find the art world to be "stifling" at that time?

MB: Very few breathed easy, if I can put it that way. Basically, I had contact mostly with Kjartan Slettemark. He was living in Sweden then, but was often in Oslo, and I also often went to Sweden to visit him.

MP: There was a lot of debate around video as a medium early in the eighties. One of the recurring arguments was that it undermined other media, such as sculpture. According to the press, you held a well-attended "video fair" at Moss Kunstgalleri (Moss Art Gallery) and a presentation of video works at Moss Kunstforening (Moss Art Association) in 1983. You also arranged a performance there on January 30, in collaboration with the painter Wolf Wolfsmoon, which became the basis for *Videoportrett* (Video Portrait) in which you discuss the portrait genre in relation to video (and painting). You pose as the model, and the camera is pointed directly at you. A monitor is placed right next to you and displays the subject. The point is that Wolfsmoon paints directly on you (the model), adjusting and correcting his work with the help of the monitor.¹³

MB: Yes, Wolfsmoon was German and an old-school, romantic type of painter. My idea was to break with the age-old way of looking at pictures, but I think the content of this performance was probably a little over the heads of the audience, sitting there prim and proper in their chairs.

MP: You mentioned that *Videoportrett* hasn't been shown very much. Is that the case for *Nasjonalgalleriet* (The National Gallery, 1981–82) as well, where you draw attention to the relation between video and sculpture?

MB: Yes, it is. When I started at Kunstakademiet I was pursuing sculpture, but I became increasingly frustrated. It was the human form itself I was interested in working with, not modeling the human form. So I grabbed my video camera, went down to Nasjonalgalleriet, and made a kind of video performance where I appeared right beside the sculptures there.¹⁴ I made myself into a living sculpture. The soundtrack is Johann Sebastian Bach's *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. I didn't ask Nasjonalgalleriet for permission; I'd only have been refused.



MP: So you placed yourself, and thus the present time, into the collection?

MB: Yeah, there was an element of rebellion to it of course. Those of us working with things like video were *personae non gratae* at that institution.

It is perhaps an ironic twist of fate that Nasjonalmuseet has in fact shown two of Børresen's works since then, during the exhibition *Paradoks: Posisjoner innen norsk videokunst 1980–2010* (*Paradox: Positions in Norwegian Video Art 1980–2010*) in 2013. One was the widely known *Videobaby*, and the other was called *Grace Jones*. The latter was one of Børresen's earliest videos, made in 1981, the same year that Grace Jones released her legendary album *Nightclubbing*.

MB: I saw *Grace Jones* again for the first time during the *Paradox* show, and it's aged well! It was made during a video course in Umeå, which Marianne Heske also attended. The arrangers of this course had managed to get hold of a video synthesizer that made it possible to manipulate the colors, and I spent a lot of time experimenting with that. The soundtrack in *Grace Jones* also influences the color creation.

MP: Many say that you actually quit Kunstakademiet after the workshop with Kjartan Slettemark; is that true? Didn't you also do an exchange year at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1982?

MB: Well, I didn't quit. I just wasn't there so much. I remember a lecture Joseph Beuys gave at Kunstakademiet where he said that art schools as places were great: they had walls, ceilings, and floors, and one could get a scholarship to go there. For Beuys the main thing was to plumb the depths of himself, and I suppose that was the primary thing for me as well.

My time at the San Francisco Art Institute was actually disappointing. The school mostly favored classic film, 16 mm, short film, that sort of thing, while I was interested in TV and video. We weren't a good match. Maybe I'd also reached a saturation point where schooling was concerned. I went to London, too, with John Ege in 1982. We went around and checked out a number of venues for video art, like the ICA Videotheque and London Video Art Gallery.¹⁵

MP: You had a piece in *Kalejdoskop* (Kaleidoscope) no. 3–4 from 1983 where you mentioned a performance you and John Ege did together at Club 7 in September of that same year. This performance later became a video titled *Video ved Morten Børresen* (Video by Morten Børresen). What can you say about your relationship with John Ege and the concept behind this performance?

MB: We hung out in the same places, and we just became friends. The concept at Club 7 was pretty simple: we wanted to make technology physical. So we got down to work, simply and physically. John tore out pages from a book that were then glued to him, while I pulled videotape out of a cassette and attached it to my body. I became video, and he was book; it was a kind of modern arts and crafts.



Morten Børresen and John Ege in their performance *Video ved Morten Børresen* at Club 7, Oslo, 1983

MIRROR, MIRROR ON THE WALL

Kjartan Slettemark was unquestionably a central figure in Børresen's artistic career. In November 1981, Slettemark was also awarded the "Morten Børresen grant for artists who poke fun at the Norwegian people's taste." The grant, amounting to 10,000 Norwegian crowns, was established with a nod to an accusation the art critic for *Morgenbladet* leveled at Edvard Munch in connection with his exhibition at Tostrup gård

in 1892. The critic wrote that "the artist makes fun of people's taste." For Børresen, having fun with people's tastes was well worth subsidizing, and Slettemark was given the prize for the reception his works *Kryss nr. 1* (*Cross no. 1*) and *Av rapport fra Vietnam* (*From a Report from Vietnam*) received from the critics. In his justification Børresen wrote:

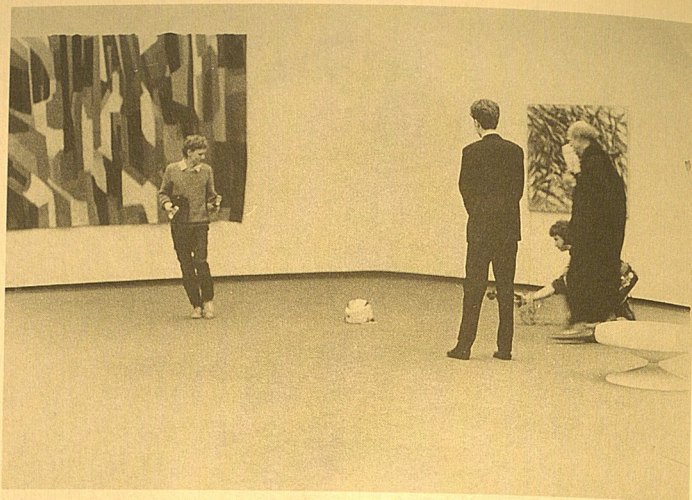
KjARTan is also awarded this grant for his later contributions to art in Norway—for not allowing himself to be deterred by harsh treatment, and instead returning magnanimously at Høstutstillingen in 1967, where cultural history was once more made when he gave us our first happening. Furthermore KjARTan receives this grant in acknowledgment for his identity visions of Nixon ('73), his poodle performance ('75), and last but by no means least, for his introduction of existential video and Polaroid to Norway ('79-'81).¹⁶

Kjartan Slettemark's attempt to make man art and art man was something Børresen could appreciate. In 1983 they worked together on a project called *Toilet Mirror*, which was carried out at three different locations: Villa Casba (a former nightclub in a stately villa on Drammensveien in Oslo), Henie Onstad Kunstsenter's men's room, and at Trondhjem kunstforening (Trondheim's Art Association). Børresen himself described it as a kind of "inverted art exhibition in three parts." Inverted because the people would be the art. The first venue was to open as a traditional exhibition, but with slides of art projected on the walls. Here the art was experienced in the third person. Then, according to the project description, one was taken on various media tours where everything from backstreets, the pyramids in Egypt, pine forests, cathedrals, storehouses, and stave churches were projected. Parallel with these journeys Børresen took Polaroids of the persons present and enlarged them up on the screen. At this point the audience saw itself in the second person.

At Henie Onstad Kunstsenter there was a little twist: the journey ended in the men's room there, where the audience could view itself in the mirror (art in the first person) while video cameras and walkmans buzzed. Børresen ends his project description with the following: "The audience here could carry out a mental purge of self-conceptions and chatter, as a media alternative to the traditional art exhibition." It all ended with remote-controlled potties for mental purging being sent into Henie Onstad's exhibition spaces with the inscription: "Outreach service! TO DO OR NOT TO BE."¹⁷

MP: This was a project you did with Kjartan Slettemark, wasn't it? From the press coverage in any event it seems that he is the one who had a kind of performance with the chamber pots at Henie Onstad, right? In a statement to the newspaper *Dagbladet* in connection with this exhibition you said: "All art is boring. It doesn't concern us, doesn't speak a language we understand. Norwegian art is twenty years behind. Video and Polaroid are the new media putting man in the center. Man is art, technology is the medium."¹⁸

One of the remote-controlled potties for mental urging in action at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, 1983
Photo: Torill Ek



From the slide show (a part of *Toilet Mirror*), 1983
Morten Børresen in white t-shirt, Jan Åke Petterson on his right side



MB: Yes, this was a collaboration with Kjartan. He had the role of living sculpture. I spent three quarters of a year preparing this project, but by the time it was supposed to be realized at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, apparently Per Hovdenakk had changed his mind. We were so incensed that we decided to show it in the men's room there instead.

MP: Later in the *Dagbladet* interview you say that "video captures images of yourself that you perhaps wouldn't show to others or confront yourself. You can prostrate yourself in front of a video camera, play with roles, masks, let go, discard the mask."¹⁹ Bearing in mind today's media reality, how do you feel about this now?

MB: At that time video was perceived as a revealing medium, both in relation to power and to self-image. When I came with my video camera, people fled. They took cover and absolutely did not want

to look at themselves. Today the situation is completely different. Filming capability is built into every mobile phone, and everyone is accustomed to seeing—and *editing*—images of themselves. For the young, video represents perhaps more a form of technology they can hide behind. It functions almost like a kind of filter, or protection against visibility—paradoxically enough.

Oslo, May 6 & 9, & June 10, 2014

- 1 John Ege, *Sputnik* (Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1983), 134.
- 2 Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet (NTNU): Norwegian University of Science and Technology
- 3 Irja Apeland is married to Morten Børresen.
- 4 See Børresen's notes in National Museum's files.
- 5 The exhibition was announced and reviewed in several newspapers: Harald Flor, "Happening med helium" (Happening with helium), *Dagbladet*, November 19, 1983, and (according to Børresen's notes) by Ulf Renberg in *Arbeiderbladet*, November 18 and 19, 1983, as well as on Radio Oslo, Radio Nova, Kulturradioen. Børresen made a follow-up exhibition to this project together with Johan Sandberg and Arvid Aakre, at Drammen Kunstforening (Drammen Art Association) in May 1986. See the newspaper *Fremtiden*, May 5, 1986. This exhibition was reviewed: Åsmund Thorkildsen, "Idé eller bilde?" (Idea or image?), *Drammens Tidende*, May 7, 1986.
- 6 According to Børresen's notes, these were the Polaroids of Harald Flor (art critic for *Dagbladet*), art historian Jan Åke Pettersson, Else Munthe-Kaas, Kjartan Slettemark, Pål Rødahl, Anna Rennan, and author John Ege.
- 7 Dusteforbundet (the Dunce Club) was the title of a legendary satirical daily column that Fredrik Stabel wrote for *Dagbladet* during the period 1950–90. See also *Wikipedia*, s. v. "Fredrik Stabel," last modified January 28, 2013, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fredrik_Stabel.
- 8 According to the permit granted by the Oslo police authorities, the hot air balloon was launched on November 4, 1984, from a parking spot by Steners gate 1. The weather, however, was too poor, so the launch was postponed until the spring and took place at Akershus Festning (Akershus Fortress).
- 9 See also Ulf Renberg, "Trives bra i sur nedbør" (Right at home in acid rain), *Arbeiderbladet*, May 25, 1987.
- 10 See Trond Aglen, "Til Sola med kunnskapens tre" (To Sola with the tree of knowledge), *Morgenbladet*, July 1, 1986.
- 11 See "Til himmels med Morten dusteladd" (To the moon with Morten dunce cap), *Dagbladet*, October 19, 1984 (unnamed journalist).
- 12 Morten Børresen also published the text "Eventyret om Per, Pål og Espen Dusteladd" (The tale of Per, Pål, and Espen Dunce Cap) in *Klassekampen*, November 7, 1984.
- 13 Morten Børresen carried out another version of this performance with Barbara Czapran at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, but has not been able to confirm the year it was held. The date is, however, known to have been October 23, at 5:00 p.m.
- 14 Nasjonalgalleriet (National Gallery) later changed its name to Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design (National Museum for Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo)
- 15 Nasjonalmuseet's archives contain brochures from these places. On the back of one of them, Børresen listed some of the video works he had seen. Jeremy Welsh's *Monkeys* (1982) was one of them.
- 16 See Børresen's typewritten notes in Nasjonalmuseet's archives.
- 17 See Børresen's typewritten description in Nasjonalmuseet's archives. Videokunstarkivet has video documentation of this performance.
- 18 Sissel Benneche Osvold, "Videokunst på herretoalet" (Video art in the men's room), *Dagbladet*, April 21, 1983.
- 19 Benneche Osvold, "Videokunst ..." (see note 18).