

INTERVIEW WITH PERTTU RASTAS

by *Lorella Scacco*

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Perttu Rastas (b. 1952) lives and works in Helsinki. He was Senior Curator of Media art at the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki from 1996 to 2016, and previously Director of Operations for the Finnish Media Art Archives (1989 – 1994). In addition to his institutional job, Rastas has also been working as an art critic, producer, and editor.

1) When and how did video art start in Finland?

It is known from art history that no type or category of art is born on a given day but is always the product of certain developments and conditions. Video art is heavily dependent on various production techniques of TV technology, and the phase of audiovisual culture named as an art form in the 1970s has developed in the footsteps of experimental film and music, as part of the concept of pop art and general happening culture of the 60s, and gradually found its own more independent production and screening method.

Even in Finland, the first experiments referring to video art took place within television - I am mainly referring to a few experimental TV program experiments by Antero Takala (b. 1939). An interesting and early technological development took place in the *Video Colorizer* (1971) made by YLE engineers according to Takala's instructions for the Romeo and Julia TV-program, which is parallel and simultaneous to Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe's video synthesizer. Another equally early experimenter in Finland was Erkki Kurenniemi (1941-2017), whose interest in electronic music and the development of digital instruments since the early 1960s is truly an internationally significant pioneer production of media art.

2) Apart from a few video experiments in the late 1970s, from several publications, it is known video art entered late in Finland in comparison with other Nordic and European countries. In your opinion, what is the reason?

This is true. The actual first wave of video art was shown in Finland slowly in the 1980s. When the first Nordic video art conference was held in Hanasaari in Espoo in 1983, video art was seen by the art critic who was present as "too inferior to even criticize and is not very high". In the early 1980s, of course, young artists didn't even have the technology needed to make video art, and there was no basic training or education in the field. Only slowly after the mid-1980s, especially the video workshops established in towns around the country and the video technology intended for home use, this made it possible, for young artists, to become interested and produce their own works, and a little-by-little growing interest also within the institutional art field and museums. Muu ry, the first Finnish organization mainly created to promote video and performance art, was founded in 1987. In connection with it, AV-Arkki was also founded, which focused on presenting and distributing the resulting works. Its initiative also gave birth to the first international video art festival, which was organized initially in 1989-90 in Kuopio and then in 1991-1998 under the name of MuuMediaFestival in Helsinki and Espoo at the Otso gallery. Similar smaller events had already been organized a little earlier, such as Rauma Art Museum's electronic art events and the Lahti AV biennial.

3) In your opinion, why video was a particularly suitable medium between 1980s and 1990s in Finland?

The power of video art is based on small-scale production culture, the video camera is an electric paintbrush, 'Cine-Eye', its speed for documentary and the possibility to meet the audience practically at the same time. Video art has always included two types of genres, documentary event-based recording and camera image narration, and on the other hand, the development of experimental audiovisual expression, which is based on experimental film. After entering the institutional art world such as the performance spaces of museums and galleries, video art quite quickly adopted the multi-screen aesthetics and the concept of visual space as its own, although of course multi-image productions had already been made since the early days of experimental cinema. Why has development been so fast in the 1980s and 1990s? Simply because the technological development of video and audio technology created the conditions for it, which then digital technology and the internet exploded

into a global operating culture. Erkki Kurenniemi envisioned this as early as 1971 in his article “Message is massage”, whose description of the development of the artist’s personal means of production has been realized almost word for word.

4) How artists show, distribute, and promote videos in the 1980s in Finland?

In the 1980s, from today’s perspective, everything was small, just wobbly steps. Video art appeared in discussions of the concept and in some articles, some artists presentations, there was no research or higher-level teaching about the field. The key factor was the video workshops that were born all over the country, part of the cultural policy of cities and municipalities, and part of the guidance products of the adult education system. A similar development was experienced in the field of local radios, where since 1985, stations that were growing little by little around the country were tried out, which became commercialized and chained into the current multi-channel commercial radio network.

I was involved in producing through AV-Arkki’s works our first international video festival, MuuMediaFestival (1989-1998), whose curator Erkki Huhtamo, the current professor at UCLA, got slowly many of the world’s key media art pioneers to visit Finland and participate in the festival with his versatile international contacts.

5) Which were the most relevant film festivals or video screenings in Finland in the 1980s?

As I already said, MuuMediaFestival was the first wider international event of video art and experimental film. I remember when Huhtamo and I knocked on the door of the Finnish film archive in the late 1980s and asked if we could watch works of Finnish experimental cinema, the answer was that no one had asked the same before.

Of course, the key was how to get the attention of already existing larger events such as film festivals or museums. The central short film festival in Finland is the Tampere Short Film Festival, whose program we tried to include video artworks - initially with the worst results. In the early 1990s,

we were able to show video works outside the festival program by bringing our own performance equipment to the festival bars and restaurant lobby's.

Nowadays, this kind of thing has been completely forgotten and video works appear in normal festival program and in the special own series of screenings. I think that the same development has happened also with other international short film events and festivals. Another larger discussion took place in the museum world, where it was certainly easier to open doors.

The widespread presentation of video art took place within the framework of the ARS 83 large-scale contemporary art event in National Gallery, when NYC's MOMA video curator Barbara London put together a diverse international program and wrote about the role of video art in the art world.

In 1983 was also first time when we had small but important screening for video art in USA, in Long Beach Art Museum, where curator Kathy Ray Huffman organized screening together with Asko Mäkela, who run small gallery at Old Student house in Helsinki.

A year earlier, in 1982, the Goethe Institute organized an international screening tour of German video art curated by Wulf Herzogenrath, which showed works by Nam June Paik, Wolf Vostel and others from Germany. Screenings were in Helsinki and Tampere; this was first bigger program and possibility to see major international collection of video art.

However, the key initiative discussion was related to our attempts to get the domestic broadcast network, i.e., the Finnish Broadcasting Company, to be interested in experimental TV production, which can be estimated to be the majority of art videos.

6) How was early video art received by the critics and audiences in Finland at the time?

Rauma Art Museum organized Electric Art events (video art screenings), small exhibitions and artists talks regularly during 1987-1998 mainly

because museum director Mr. Janne Koski was keen on the subject and phenomena of Media art. In Lahti, I think mainly because of the strong focus of Lahti Institute of Design and Fine Arts education of young photographers and growing video and film studies needed new kind of public screening platform to recover older style multi-visions - so that's why the Lahden AV-biennial headed strongly showing more and more video and film-based works.

And of course, in Kuopio, where was strong to invest at local video workshop, organizing professional courses by the young film director Olli Väänänen, also needed to some new kind of public screening publicity. It was easy to start cooperation with our suggestion to organize festival over there, so that's our first bigger independent video art festival happened in Kuopio in 1989-90 together with AV-Arkki and Kuopio video workshop. Festival moved then in Helsinki because it was easier to have bigger audience and even small support. So, in 1991 the festival changed name for MuuMediaFestival and big part of it was in cooperation with Otso-gallery in Espoo, where gallery's director Päivi Talasmaa, then for next decade, was very important supporter and organizer for bigger exhibitions. She also hired Erkki Huhtamo as guest curator.

7) Was there interest on the part of any TV broadcaster in video art in the 1980s?

Of course, we had strong interest about Finnish Broadcast Company because we understand that if we could have some screening time and possibilities with them, we could have more audiences, and also nicer publicity for this new art for which fit perfectly in TV-context. So, we knock all the possibility doors there, usually having polite answers but hardly any real success. We made proposal for special curated screening slots and finally we got it under name "Videopolis" and under that title we could air some new experimental video - and film-based works in late hours starting at the beginning of 1993. Then, as part of MuuMediafestival 1996, we even got first time special program under title "Media arts evening", where we had new works and discussions. We have also had another kind of cooperation with YLE, like our MuuMediaFestival guest artists Paul Garring, who, well known for his cooperation as Nam June Paik's video editor and collaborator, gave a workshop on the use of new

video editing possibilities for regular YLE editors. We also organized discussions with other guest artists and media art theorists, like Gene Youngblood, who visited Finland with Woody Vasulka. In this occasion, we had seminar concerning new audiovisual arts possibilities.

8) Could you talk to us about your contribution as curator to the dissemination of video art in Finland in the late 1980s?

I don't have any background in art history or much even contemporary art. I was working in KSL adult education organization and worked long time as free-lance culture journalist mainly leftist and union magazines. I was also editor in critical leftist discussion magazine *Uudistuva Ihmiskunta* in the beginning of the 1980's. But then small video recorders and editing possibilities came slowly in the market and I started with KSL staff to think how to use them as tools for adult education and document events, interviews, and discussions. We're following mainly what was going on in UK - let's say we translated Len Masterman's book *Teaching the Media*. Main discourse was how normal people and, of course, their organizations can turn the "camera eye" against the right-wing political power and cultural class. What concerns to the artist discourse, I was mainly following things in London, places like London Video Arts and the overall video art movement in England. That's why the first international guest in our festival in 1989 was Jeremy Welsh, who was an active member of London's video art scene. Jeremy lately moved to Norway where he has been artist and professor at visual art in universities of Trondheim and Bergen.

9) Since 1996 you worked as responsible and curator of the collection and exhibition department of Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art for many years. What results did achieve the Kiasma collection in media art during those years?

As I said, I was a little bit surprised for this position as senior media art curator at the contemporary art museum and new building. As I understood it, the director of new contemporary art museum, Tuula Arkio, wanted to have somebody who had a little bit longer experience for

organizing video and Media art events and had strong relationships for Media art world. And because I was the only one who had that kind of practical experiences after organizing MuuMediafestival and after running AV-Arkki – our only video art distribution organization, I think they were thinking that they needed my very practical experiences when they wanted to start new museum and building new program and working with collection – and specially thinking about Media art. Thus, they gave me quite independent position, own budget, small gallery space just for media-based works and possibility to also organize bigger exhibitions like *Artificial Intelligence* that we organized in 2000, again with Erkki Huhtamo as curator.

10) Unfortunately, several early video pieces are lost today. How did your curatorial labour contribute to protect the original masters? And during your work in Kiasma Museum?

Of course, we knew quite early that video art as based on fragile analog technologies like VHS, U-matic and another tape formats which will lose its quality fast and come unusable. So already in 1989, as part of building AV-Arkki, at that time MUU ry:s board (there were already well known media artists in the board like Marikki Hakola, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Marita Liulia, etc.) made statement that “hey, we know this problem, we’ll need to do something about it, we need to support process of long term archiving as at the same time we’re building our new distribution channels”.

So, I went to the Finnish Film Archive to meet the director. The discussion was based on the new Finnish law from 1984 where Finland audiovisual productions archive policy includes the idea that Finnish Film Archive, as legal state founded archive, has to archive all existing professional audiovisual works that has been shown publicly. We said that “hey, this has to concerns also professional artists video screenings in galleries, museums and festivals”.

They were not so interested - of course they didn’t have any professional staff for this - I do remember that film archive director that time even cursed slowly and finally said: “OK, bring your fucking tapes here but

that's all". It took more than a decade to have normal relationship with film archive but now there are right open connections and daily based routines for archiving video art-based works directly to the AV-Arkki distribution catalog to the National Audiovisual Institute KAVI (former Finnish film archive).

Thus, after AV-Arkki, I asked to start a new work in contemporary art museum Kiasma where my role was senior curator in exhibitions and collections. One of my secondary assignments was also to organize museums media-based works archive. We got also small special support from the Ministry of Education and Culture to do some limited archiving and cataloging process with artists and archive especially some historical works. I believe the most important thing was that we could purchase in Kiasma's collection the whole catalog of some artists production, like experimental filmmakers Eino Ruutsalo's and Pasi Sleeping Myllymäki's films, Erkki Kurenniemi's large and versatile archive and our first feminist video artist Mervi Kytösalmi's all works.

11) How much support was given to the dissemination of video art through the activation of media art courses in the Finnish Academies of Fine Arts or Art Institutes? When did it start?

The support was always friendly but weak. I have been visiting quite rarely in art academy, lecturing Media art and its history in Finland. But there were also other colleagues for that, so I don't mind. We also contributed and part of Kiasma's program to some of major first studies for Media art - like Petri Kuljuntausta's *On/Off - From Ether Sounds to Electronic Music* (Like/Kiasma 2002), which covers history of electronic music and experimental in Finnish soundscape, and collection essays *Electronic Forest - History of Experimental Film and Video art in Finland 1933-1998* (National Gallery 2007).

From my position and working history, I think the major work thinking of Finnish view of International Media art history was the whole collections of different studies and effort with Erkki Kurenniemi's work and life. It includes Mika Taanila's documentary film *The Future Is Not What It Used*

To Be (2002), organizing Kurenniemi's collection in National gallery's archive, few major exhibitions like Kassel Documenta (13) and Kiasma in 2012 and also *Writing and Unwriting (Media) Art History: Erkki Kurenniemi in 2048* (MIT Press 2015) edited by Joasia Krysa and Jussi Parikka.

Kurenniemi is an important pioneer in electronic media and art's history. And I'm truly happy that we have been able to cover and save his works and ideas almost as a whole now in archives.