

## **INTERVIEW TO SEPPO RENVALL**

**by Lorella Scacco**

July 2022

Seppo Renvall (b.1963) lives and works in Helsinki. As co-founder of the Helsinki Film Workshop in the late 1980s, he is a pioneer in Finnish experimental film. Renvall works mainly with film and video, but also with photography, installation, happening and music.

1) When did you first start using video? What type of equipment did you use at the time?

I started with super 8mm when I was 14, later with VHS and super VHS, 8mm and mini DV. I shot mostly 16mm and edited with super VHS, because it was cheaper, and I could have included sound (1980 and later).

2) Why was video as a device particularly attractive for you at the time?

Video has the possibility to have sound and it is easy to make copies to send.

3) Where did you have your educational background? And in video how did you start?

I was first guided by my brother Simo Rista who was a famous architectural photographer. I was 14 years old when I started as a photographer. Later, I studied photography in Lahti institute of applied arts (1983-89). I did first super 8 mm and later hand processed 16mm (1980s). Important teachers for me were Arno Rafael Minkkinen and John Berger.

4) Could you talk to us about how you developed the foundation of the Helsinki Film Workshop? When and how did it start exactly? Who did participate to the members' group?

While studying photography me and colleague student from The Lahti Art Institute and painter Alli Savolainen organized an 8mm festival in Lahti in 1987 and in Helsinki. Then Sami Van Ingen asked me to start up a film workshop because he was working to establish a film laboratory in Helsinki. He knew all the materials and equipment, so we got all the equipment borrowed from the Finnish Film Archive Museum. We got some grants and were able to rent a place with laboratory, printer, sound facilities and theatre. We produced around 100 film works in the first year. Later, we started our own distribution and courses, also screenings and first large mini festival LUX SONOR with installations in Helsinki Art Hall. We had around 10 people and we worked one-year full time (we showed classics of experimental cinema and Finnish video works, I was the one who was lifted up as auteur). Helsinki Film Cop was grounded around 1990 and its starting members were Seppo Renvall, Sami Van Ingen, Alli Savolainen, Mikko Maasalo, Denise Ziegler and Marjatta Oja. Later, many others participated in the group like Marek Pluciennik.

5) What results did achieve the Helsinki Film Workshop?

The main result was that artists could work with analog film material and have their own place to process film and to share the interest. It did affect the art field on many levels. There were also many educational courses, after which many artists started to work with film, also including some who did study or work in so called "real film industry". We also

invited Philip Hoffmann from Toronto (Film Farm) and started an 'open call' called Helsinki Film co-op club evenings once or twice a year. I and Alli Savolainen continued the open call for 10 years (1994-2004), our videos distribution was worldwide (very active and good contacts). Among screenings abroad, I mention two Finnish Film Week in Anthology Film Archives (NYC) and New York Film Workshop.

6) Your films are characterized by an imagery in black and white and a non-narrative structure. How did you develop these specific themes in your practice and why video was a particularly suitable medium to do it?

I started as a photographer, with black and white film. Later, I started to do film as moving image. The miracle and beauty of film or paper in the darkroom was the starting point. I "invented" a way of working which was not like cinema and tv and did a lot of shooting and working without the camera.

Both of my parents were artists. My father was a sculptor, and my mother was a painter. My father used to shoot and to show home movies 8mm and that was magical for me.

Later I bought a super 8 camera for myself. I have made a lot of films all my life. When I was 16 years old, my oldest brother, who was an architectural photographer, taught me photography. I worked also as his assistant. Then I bought 16mm Bolex film camera, and some video cameras like VHS - 8mm.

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

First of all, video art did come to Finland by MUU ry, and by Marikki Hakola, who was one of the founders of it. She started to make video art and MUU gallery had a chance to show it. At that time, it was not cheap for an artist to buy any equipment needed. But after a short time, lot of artists started to use video as a tool. First VHS, then later 8 mm, then some other formats for a while, and mini DV, until today, when even a phone can make video.

At that time the editing was expensive and there was this "beta" system which was required to the worldwide festivals. If you wanted to distribute your video, made by 8 mm or VHS or whatever video format, you were supposed to have BETA videotape.

That is when AV-Arkki, a distribution center came along. They started the system, where artists can bring videos, and they took care about the distribution.

8) Were there some video centers with which you collaborated? How did you produce your video artworks?

There was a New York film co-op and Anthology Film Archives. London, Sydney, Canada, Berlin, Wien, among others.

I did produce all by myself with support from other artists like colleague artist Alli Savolainen, and sometimes I also got support from AVEK, the promotional Center for Audiovisual Culture.

I did everything with no funding at all. Just for the joy of doing.

Nowadays I also have producer because I have been doing recent years many films to YLE which were promoted by the Finnish Film Foundation.

My main longer films are distributed in the national channel YLE in Finland.

9) How and when did you start to realize video installations?

I did start installations with the film *Ateneum* (1997). For the Museum of Modern Art, I made installation by 35 mm film. Later, I did many other installations with video, including installations with my brother Markus. It was named *The Ballshow*.

I did have many video installations (based on the 35mm film material) to mention: "Sao Paolo Biennale" (*Wallpaper*: 3 channel video installation, year 2002).

10) You did also some happenings. Did you record them at the time?

No. The happenings were only to happen. Not to think if I needed them that time or later. Recordings of videos are difficult to find but maybe there are some photos.

11) How much did influence the collaboration with musicians in your practice?

In my works musicians mean a lot. Sound engineer in Theatre Academy, Aslak Christiansson, made at least 10 sounds for my early videos. Aslak could work in a very wide scale with sound, and he always understood my ideas and worked with many musicians.

12) Did you collaborate with any TV broadcaster at the time?

Not until 2000, when they first took my experimental film to TV, since that three times.

13) How did you show, distribute, and promote your videos in the 1980s?

Personal distribution, and AV-Arkki, the center for Finnish Media Art.

14) How were your videos received by the critics and audiences in Finland at the time?

Not much attention from the newspapers. My videos gained more attention abroad, where I had connections and more responsive audiences. Finland is a small country, obviously work was needed to distribute the videos more worldwide.

15) Which are the most relevant film festivals or video screenings in Europe and in other nations you took part in the 1980s?

In the 1990s my works were widely shown, before not much internationally.

16) Unfortunately, several early video pieces are lost today. Have you lost any of your videos from the first period? Do you still protect the original masters and where are they stored today?

It is possible that some works have disappeared: I have not been able to find earlier materials like 8 mm films, but nowadays my videos mostly are stored on a mini DVD or a hard disk. A large number of my videos are also stored at Av-Arkki.