

LIVES AND VIDEOTAPES

**The Inconsistent
History of Norwegian
Video Art**

CONVERSATIONS

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The Inconsistent History of Norwegian Video Art

Marit Paasche



videokunstarkivet



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Inghild Karlsen, positions for *Reflex*, 1982
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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

Terje Munthe ^(TM) in conversation with Marit Paasche ^(MP) & Anne Marthe Dyvi ^(AMD)

Terje Munthe escorts us down a narrow flight of stairs that leads to a basement den. The steps are carpeted in green felt, and there is a faint odor of mold. Opening the door to this den, which doubles as a work room, reveals a rather small space crammed with things. The ceiling is low, and the walls are covered, floor to ceiling, with row upon row of books, LPs, videos, and DVDs. There is also a collection of speed skates and three English beer taps (Terje makes his own beer). Four electric guitars are lined up on the floor along with a couple of amplifiers and a small pile of computers. A few pictures hang on the walls as well. One that stands out is a little photo Munthe took of the renowned video artist Nam June Paik sitting on a chair, fast asleep, in the video studio at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.¹ This photograph hints at one of the missing stories in Norwegian art history: a story about the time when video technology came to Norwegian art schools, about artistic outlooks and the relationship between an artistic career and a kind of freedom.

Terje Munthe has a complex background. He grew up on the island of Madagascar, the son of missionary parents. In 1961, when he was twelve years old, the family returned home to Norway, to Sauda, where his mother was from. Terje's father was extremely interested in the Madagascan language and history and completed his doctoral dissertation on the subject shortly thereafter at the Sorbonne in Paris.² He later worked as a teacher at a missionary school. Terje Munthe, however, did not choose to follow his father's religious path. He started off as a musician and, in the summer of 1974, he was one of the founders of the rock band Stavangerensemblet (The Stavanger Ensemble).³ Munthe played bass and guitar and was deeply interested in Jimi Hendrix and other experimental musicians, such as Karlheinz Stockhausen. Stavangerensemblet had great ambitions for creating a new form of advanced rock with symphonic elements, but Terje Munthe left after about two years. He felt that he would never be good enough.

"I'm a man of many interests, as you can probably tell," Munthe says, gesticulating with his arms. "One of the biggest is science, in most of its variants. Zoology, biology, astronomy, and physics—that's what I read all day long, but my approach to these disciplines belongs to the arts. I began as a zoology student, but I realized that I mostly sat and dreamed and drew—that's exactly what you cannot do if you want to be there."

LOW TECH, HIGH TECH, A PLANK, AND A VIDEO SYNTHESIZER

1978. Terje Munthe turns thirty and is becoming a grown man. He travels northward and begins at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim (Trondheim

Academy of Fine Art) under Georg Suttner, Richard Warzinsky, and Miles McAlinden. He is initially inclined toward drawing and painting.

TM: Kunstakademiet i Trondheim was quite liberal at that time. Oddvar I. N. Daren [who was a year ahead of Terje], Lars Paalgard, Audun Sørsdal, and I formed the artist group Nye alle fem (The All-New Five), as a kind of retort to the “old” Gruppe 5 (Group 5). It was meant to be funny—there were of course just four of us.

The original Gruppe 5 came together at the start of the sixties and consisted of Lars Tiller, Håkon Bleken, Ramon Isern, Roar Wold, and Halvdan Ljøsne: all of the artists from the Trondheim region who were pursuing a non-figurative style of painting. Nye alle fem was interested in technological innovations. They soon discovered a little shop on Innherredsveien that rented out video cameras and other equipment. They became frequent customers there.

TM: I think this was around the beginning of the eighties, the age of innocence.⁴ We approached the administration about access to video equipment, banged our fists on the table, and insisted this was the future. We finally convinced them to buy a Sony camera with a recorder and a monitor. And so it was that Kunstakademiet i Trondheim became the first Norwegian art school with video equipment. But there wasn't any particular interest in the medium among other students or the teachers. Instead there was a good deal of skepticism about what this could possibly do for art. I remember Håkon Gullvåg for one; he didn't have much faith in it. The teachers didn't either; they thought this could never amount to any form of art.

AMD: Do you remember what kind of cameras you worked with then?

TM: We rented a JVC as far as I can remember. Junk, basically; primitive stuff compared to today's technology. I even managed to wreck one. I mounted two cameras on an iron pole, one on top of the other, which I then dragged along the pavement behind me. As a result, one stopped working. So I went back to the rental guy and said, “Hey, there's something wrong with this camera.”

MP: Were there any others, other than you, who were working with video?

TM: No, and we actually raised some eyebrows. But it was a tumultuous time, and the administration was open and willing to give it a chance. Because we'd lost Georg Suttner and so, since we didn't have an advisor for a year or two, we were given, as a kind of compensation, the opportunity to suggest guest teachers. We invited Marianne Heske up to give us a one-week intro course. We were allowed to borrow equipment from NTH for this course.⁵ The equipment was pretty simple, black-and-white, and big and heavy, and not easy to handle, but it made a difference to us just the same. It wasn't U-matic or VHS—it was reel-to-reel.

The intro course was held at Bakke Gård, and it was just us four guys and Marianne Heske. Jo Stang and Lars Tiller were also at Bakke Gård at that time. They sat in a corner drinking red wine and entertained us while we were doing our thing. Marianne had been to Maastricht. She was a window on the world. She gave us names, literature, and contacts. The only drawback was that she wasn't very interested in the technical, and the technical was a big obstacle in those days. There was an enormous amount of trial and error, because we didn't really know how to use the equipment, especially when it came to editing. Most insufferable of all was that there was this man at the teachers' university at Ringve who was a world champion. He knew all there was to know, but he wouldn't do anything for us, other than to say, "Nah, that's not possible." He was so extremely irritating, because we *knew* these things were possible—we just didn't know how to make them happen.

I remember especially well a party we had at the academy where we showed video art, both our own pieces and things we'd rented—pop videos and all sorts of stuff. Audun, who was the most technically adept of us, had jury-rigged something so you could switch on and off between different video players and monitors in an intricate system of cables, planks, and hinges—it was low tech and high tech in perfect harmony. I don't know if there are very many who remember that Saturday night, but we certainly enjoyed ourselves.

AMD: Are there any photos from that night?

TM: No, I don't think so. Or at least I've never seen any. People weren't so good at documenting things then, and that's a shame. I realized myself early on how transitory the medium was and could easily have shoved a camera in my pocket, but no.

Although the scene around video was small and interest from the general art world was not exactly incendiary, there was in fact a fair amount of contact between Kunstakademiet i Trondheim and NTH.

TM: Our contact was mostly with the architecture department and a number of the laboratories at Gløshaugen that were working with computer graphics. The first time I saw true computer graphics was in Düsseldorf. But the year after my stay there, I was back in Trondheim on a short trip and got a chance to see color management programming. It's my impression that the people doing this were way ahead of things.

I was fairly up to date myself then, and I'd been keeping up with the computer phenomenon since the fifties. I was convinced that it was just a question of time before it became the next big thing. In Düsseldorf I saw PCs in shop windows for the first time; in fact I bought my first PC there, a Sinclair ZX 81. I treated myself to double the memory capacity—from 8 to all of 16K! [*laughter*] I learned programming on that machine; or more accurately, I fooled around and had a lot of fun. Sinclair was started by an English man, and their computers were cheap. There was a TV program that ran late Sunday evenings on German TV that was about the computer

revolution, and the host on the show said: "Buy this PC; it doesn't cost much and will surely need replacing soon, but in the meantime you'll get an idea of what this is all about." And so I did.

THE QUEST FOR AN ELECTRONIC AESTHETIC

Three members of the group Nye alle fem received stipends to study abroad after their years at Kunstakademiet i Trondheim. Lars Paalgard and Oddvar I. N. Daren went to Maastricht. Terje Munthe applied to Düsseldorf, for one very particular reason.

TM: The reason I applied to Kunstakademie Düsseldorf in 1982 was that Nam June Paik was a professor there and taught a video class. But the experience turned out to be a let-down, not because of Paik per se, but because the institution didn't require much more of its professors than to turn up now and then. Paik, you could say, was just taking advantage of flaws in the system, and the school, for its part, was just interested in the status that came with his name. Nothing more. In total, he came to the school maybe two or three times during the entire year I was there. Instruction consisted mainly in Paik taking us all out to a restaurant where we'd hang out and chat, and he'd pick up the tab, then be off again. The actual teaching job was done by an associate professor with some familiarity with video. She was frustrated and took it out on us; so, no, it wasn't terribly well-organized. But there were some good technicians there and a fantastic library—I spent a lot of time there. I tried to make the best I could out of it.

MP: So the technical program at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf was in other words not as good as you'd hoped it would be?

TM: No, I had thought the difference would be much greater. The best thing Paik did in terms of teaching was to bring along a young guy from the US—one of his assistants who was a real computer genius. This guy had a video synthesizer with him that he'd made himself, and he demonstrated it for us. It was incredible. Just the kind of thing I'd come there to experience: people who knew the mechanics, but who also had a feeling for the aesthetics.

After a while Camilla Wærenskjold came down and studied in the painting department, and that was great. It was great to have a friend down there; suddenly Düsseldorf became more interesting to me. Camilla's friends became my friends, and we often went to Maastricht to visit Oddvar and Lars and had a lot of fun.

MP: Did you think about going to the US?

TM: Sure, and eventually I did. Nam June Paik put me in touch with people he knew, and he did another nice thing for me: as soon as I was finished directing *Video – Audio – Ago*, Paik took the video and sent it over to some colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Quite simply, he got them to include my video in MoMA's collection.

As soon as he returned to Trondheim after his stay in Düsseldorf, Terje Munthe undertook a new application process. His wife had completed her studies and taken a teaching job at Værøy in Lofoten, where the terms were quite favorable; one could work for four years and then get a paid, one-year sabbatical. In 1984 Munthe received a stipend for travel to the US. Paik helped him and facilitated a place for him in Professor Phil Orenstein's class at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, south of New York City. Orenstein was teaching "computer graphics."

AMD: Did you make many contacts within the wider arts community? Did you see a lot of video art or other art?

TM: The primary agenda for me was to gain access to the scene and to get an overview of the literature. Rather than experience everything that was being done in video art, I felt it was more important to immerse myself in computer graphics. That was my priority. We sat in front of primitive Apple computers and an IBM, aka Incredibly Big Mistake. Actually, I sat and watched an introductory tutorial with information like "this is a mouse," etc., that level. This was where I also made my first computer drawings; I held onto some of them for a while.

Money, however, was quickly running out, and in the end Terje Munthe and his wife packed their bags and more or less absconded to a little city in Mexico where the costs of living were much lower. They lived well there for three months before returning to New York to complete the residency.

TM: We took stock and realized that we needed to borrow 50,000 crowns (roughly 8,500 US dollars) in order to stay the rest of the semester. My wife had a job to return to, and so we did have a measure of economic security. Camilla Wærenskjold showed up in New York at that point; she'd received a grant from PS1. For a time we shared an apartment with Inghild Karlsen and Svein Mamen.

MP: What was the support or interest from the Norwegian art world like when you came back again in 1985?

TM: It was quite disappointing actually. I'd bought several expensive U-matic tapes with demos while I was in New York with the idea in mind that I could sell them later to Kunstakademiet i Oslo (The Academy of Fine Art in Oslo) at cost. I took it for granted that they would be interested in buying them, but they weren't in the least. So I'd spent several thousand crowns on something no one was interested in. The stuff is still around here gathering dust. Kunstakademiet i Oslo didn't pick up on video until a decade later; they really missed the boat, you could say. Kunstakademiet i Trondheim was considerably more attentive.

But one thing that had a major impact on the discipline was the establishment of Kunstnernes Mediaverksted (The Artists' Media Workshop) in 1986 at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter at Høvikodden

[a suburb of Oslo]. I applied for the position as director and got it.

The idea of an electronics workshop for artists "came about in response to the 'video explosion' in the early eighties," as it says in Attachment VII to the final report for Kunsternes Mediaverksted. Norges kunstnerråd (Norwegian Artists Council) had long striven to realize such a place, and on October 7, 1985, they voted at an extraordinary meeting in favor of establishing Kunsternes Mediaverksted. It was to be established at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter as a three-year test project. Norsk kulturråd (Arts Council Norway) financed the initiative, although Norges kunstnerråd was owner. In his opening speech for Mediaverksted, Munthe made mention of two major challenges: already outdated equipment in need of upgrading and the need to establish a presence in many professional arenas. The following excerpt is from the speech:

Mediaverksted will become an embarrassing joke in this connection if all relevant parties do not participate in the 'quest for the electronic aesthetic'. Universities, art schools, art institutions, and not least individual artists themselves have to participate if the workshop is going to be able to develop into a genuine popular forum and a multi-disciplinary arena.⁶

TM: It is of course typical that an undertaking like that was organized as a three-year test project with extremely limited resources. In a way it was doomed from the start. We could tell from the budgets that there was no way the project would be able to sustain itself after three years. So I bought an Amiga 500 out of my own pocket in order to augment the meager cache of equipment we had at our disposal.

The most important thing I did during those three years was to hold courses for academy students from Bergen and Trondheim—they were the most keen. And then a number of students came from Kunst- og håndverksskolen i Oslo⁷ as well, from the industrial design department. That was a great department; they were curious and saw the writing on the wall early on.

There was a young guy from Kunstakademiet i Oslo also, a Swede called Sven Pålsson.⁸ He practically lived at Mediaverksted. We gave him free rein and he did a lot of great work. But the instructors at Kunstakademiet snubbed him; they had no idea or any interest in what he was doing. Fortunately I knew Irma Salo Jæger, who was a professor there and Pålsson's teacher. We had a good relationship, and I remember we had a serious chat about him. The message was that she should just forget everything that had to do with the smell of turpentine and oil on canvas and accept that this kid was just as serious as any other. He represented the future. After that Pålsson was finally given the green light, and everything was okay.

MP: What about people like Kjell Bjørgeengen and Marianne Heske? Were they part of the group around Mediaverksted?

TM: Kjell Bjørgeengen was actually one of the other applicants for the job as head of Mediaverksted. He didn't have a background from

the academy; he was self-taught. And then there was Jan Gjessing who was very interested in stereoscopic images. I don't think Borgeengen was actually very interested in the position. Gjessing was, though. But they could tell perhaps that he was a bit single-minded. In retrospect, neither of them contributed very much to the place; they were never really much support. For the most part there was a gang of young guys who were active, and Kristin Bergaust as well. She did a lot. And luckily this group lived on. They got into Atelier Nord and continued in a logical progression there after Mediaverksted came to the "bitter end."

Marianne Heske had a hand in Mediaverksted inasmuch as she was on the board. I thought that she would be a real catalyst, but she maybe had enough on her plate at the time. The other board members were the author Thorvald Steen, the ceramicist Ole Lislerrud, and Cecilie Ore, a composer. They were enjoyable and interesting acquaintances, but unfortunately the board was no more than a rubber stamp in a hopeless structure.

In retrospect I think it would have been wiser to locate Mediaverksted in the middle of Oslo. True, it had a certain status being situated at Henie Onstad, but there were also disadvantages, especially in relation to immediate access. We would have had a nondescript space in the center, but likewise we would have drawn many more people. So in a way it was Henie Onstad that came out the winner in the deal. Mediaverksted was meant to function as an introduction to electronic media for all art forms in the country. That was why Norges Kunstnerråd was the owner. It was an exceptionally good idea, but the underlying concept for Mediaverksted was worked out nearly ten years before it was realized. As a result, among other things, the computer revolution that was in full swing wasn't addressed. On the whole, the framework for the project was entirely too narrow and rigid.

During his tenure as head of Mediaverkstedet, Munthe also was involved in the feasibility study for the establishment of the Intermedia Avdeling (Intermedia Department) at Kunstademiet i Trondheim, which would be the first of its kind at an art academy in Norway. Jeremy Welsh was later employed there.

MP: I wonder if we could go back to Nam June Paik. Obviously you knew him on a certain level. Can you say any more about what kind of relationship you had?

TM: Sure. Considering how little time we actually spent together, we got to know each other relatively well. Paik liked me from the start because I was Norwegian. He had a favorable impression of Norway from when he was here in 1961. Finn Mortensen, the pioneering composer, invited him to have a concert in Oslo. [Paik cut off Mortensen's necktie during the concert.]⁹ Paik was already a well-known name within artistic and cultural circles by then. There'd been rumors about this firebrand who crushed concert grands. Even my father, who wasn't all that informed about the art world, went pale when I told him I was going to Düsseldorf to study under Paik. "That lunatic?" he burst out. "You're going to study with him?"

The concert in Norway in the sixties was also scandal-ridden, as expected. A feature writer for *nyMusikk* wrote the following:

On 27 September 1961, a scandal occurred. An audience at Oslo's Art Academy came face to face with the full free expression of Korean pianist Nam June Paik. First he performed an autopsy on an old piano, then bombarded the public with peas, lathered them up and cut up their clothes, ending up by drowning his sorrows in a full bathtub. In one fell swoop, Paik introduced the concept of the Happening to a Norwegian audience. The event was organized in association with *nyMusikk*, which over the following days had to face the enraged criticisms which dominated the newspapers. However, there was a serious purpose behind Paik's appearance, which remained ignored. As well as generating puzzlement and uncertainty, he also had a burning desire to educate the audience. This event was to characterize much of *nyMusikk*'s image in the early 1960s. Even as late as 1963, former president Pauline Hall was having to defend the incident in television interviews.¹⁰

TM: Paik had hidden a cough drop under one of the piano pedals, and then he licked the pedals, ha, ha! He was such a great guy, extremely well-educated in classical music as well, both as a performer and a composer. And Paik felt at home in Oslo. The people here were simple and unassuming. Norwegians reminded him of Koreans; they were poor and not snobby like the French. And Paik was also short, and when he looked at me [Terje Munthe is quite a tall man], he just tilted his head and said, "Oh, you Norwegians."

Munthe gets up and goes over to the photograph of Paik that hangs on the cellar door.

TM: When he was there for us students, he often sat and slept, just like this. "Freedom's finest hour," as another student described the situation.

By pure coincidence, at the same time that *Mediaverkstedet* was going to be launched, Nam June Paik and his wife Shigeko Kubota were also going to be at Henie Onstad Kunstsenter. They were both coming as guests of the art center and were to hold lectures.

TM: Paik opened his lecture by saying, "I want to start this by showing you a work by one of my students," and he showed my *Video - Audio - Ago*. God, I squirmed in my seat, but it was amusing in retrospect.

When I heard that Paik was going to be at Henie Onstad, I told a friend, Trond Sigvaldsen, who worked in commercial video in Stavanger. He came to Oslo on his own ticket, and we did a long interview with Nam June Paik and his wife, Shigeko Kubota, where they related their views about art and what they did in the fifties and sixties. Trond edited the recording in his studio in Stavanger,

which was “state of the art” for that time. But we never got to show it. NRK (the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation) wasn’t interested, so it just lay there. Now I’m not sure whether it still exists or not, but Trond has a standing assignment from me to find it!

Terje Munthe likes a wide-ranging spectrum of intellectual challenges, and especially those that stretch beyond the ordinary horizon.

TM: You could say that visionaries fascinate me. While I was in New Brunswick I discovered that a lot of other people were thinking along the same lines as me: we saw what the consequences of a digital revolution would bring, that we were in the process of developing new ways of living.

Munthe gets up again and pulls a book from what he calls his “USA shelf.”

TM: This is *Turing’s Cathedral*, the best book ever written about the history of the computer.

The British mathematician Alan Turing (1912–1954) utilized Baye’s theorem in order to crack the so-called unbreakable Enigma code during the Second World War. Many believe that this was decisive in ensuring that the Allies did not lose the war to the Nazis. Later on Turing used his discovery to develop the Turing machine, a calculating machine used in theoretical mathematics. It was a major contribution to such fields as artificial intelligence and digital data programming.¹¹ One of the theses in George Dyson’s book, *Turing’s Cathedral: The Origin of the Digital Universe* (2012), is both new and old at the same time. Dyson asks: What if the continually ongoing copying of codes at some point leads to the development of an autonomous, artificial intelligence?

Because Dyson’s father had worked at Princeton’s Institute for Advanced Studies and nurtured a number of the people responsible for the first computer, known by its acronym MANIAC, the author recognized early on that this machine would come to conquer the world.¹² Consequently he dropped out of high school in the nineteen-sixties and moved to an island in British Columbia, Canada—not because he opposed technology, but simply for a little distance. While he lived there, in a high and breezy house up a tree, his attention was drawn to everything living. Everywhere he turned he witnessed evidence of life. The point is that when he again turned his attention to the digital universe, he noticed similar evidence. He moved from his tree house and began to study what he calls “digital organisms.”¹³

For Dyson, digital organisms are strands of code that copy and replicate themselves over time. Microsoft Windows is the sum of a vast number of digital codes that are continually being reproduced by hundreds of millions of computers in uninterrupted use. Google, which Boris Groys calls our era’s “philosophic machine,” consists of an unprecedented, nearly incomprehensibly large number of binary codes that are reproduced and distributed by hosts at various points around the globe.¹⁴ In the digital universe there are also digital viruses and millions of speedy app’s that function somewhat like microbes. Reproduction is *not* life, Dyson emphasizes, but points out that we know that it sometimes *leads* to life.

TM: The work of developing today's computer began as long ago as the 1600s when philosophers of that era, such as Leibniz and Hobbs, began to postulate such a machine. They understood that if we were capable of creating such a machine, we would thrust something of our existence into another realm. The environment I was involved in during the eighties shared a sense that this was on the verge of happening. We realized that we were involved in creating a new lifestyle. We actually shifted our intelligence into another realm and worked on making it autonomous. Apropos visionary artists: there was a radio play broadcast on NRK in the early sixties that was a nightmare scenario of computers coming together and deciding to take over the world.

AMD: Haven't they more or less done so now?

TM: Yes, you could say so. But thankfully there are plenty of folks working against this as well. The seventies were perhaps a rather anti-technology age. This was possibly just a Norwegian phenomenon, but the word *video* was for many years synonymous with *porn*. The optimism that accompanies innovation was kept in check by a strong moral indignation. It's strange to look back at that today.

VANTAGE POINT

MP: You mentioned that you came after the first generation of people who worked with video. Can you say who you think belongs to that first generation?

TM: It might actually be wrong to call it the first generation, but you had, well, folks like Rolf Aamot who worked in television. He didn't have access to the kind of video equipment we had; he had NRK's equipment, which also included videotape. As I see it, Aamot was primarily interested in a kind of analogue fiddling more than the purely conceptual, but that could be a misinterpretation. And then there was what's-his-name, who worked with film when he was young, did some fantastic things, but then kind of went nowhere. Kristo, Arild Kristo was his name! He made experimental films that would knock you out of your chair if they were shown on TV today.¹⁵

So, in relation to these folks from the film world, I felt like a little boy, but once I had access to the new video technology, it was like starting with a fresh sheet of blank white paper. With this technology there was no midway point; there was an immediate access to a *reflection* that came parallel with an *observation*. This is precisely the phenomenon I was trying to express when I made the video *Video – Audio – Ago*. In Norwegian the title became *jeg ser, jeg hører, jeg handler* (I see, I hear, I act), but there isn't any subject, an *I* that sees, as Irene Ekdahl described it in the text she wrote for the exhibition catalogues *Blodig Alvor* (Bloody serious, 2010) and *Retrospektiv* (Retrospective, 2011); rather, it's *video technology* that sees.¹⁶ It is exactly that distinction between an ordinary subject and the technological device that is crucial.

MP: You mentioned earlier that Marianne Heske was important. Are there others you would like to single out?

TM: Yes, Kjell Bjørgeengen for one, of course. He made a career for himself and attained a position, but artistically I've never really experienced his work as particularly intriguing. Bjørgeengen carved out a little niche that he's worked with and made a career out of. I also carved out a little niche and made a few works—but then I moved on. If I'd had access to an advanced studio then, or the kind of hardware available today, well ... I don't mean it as criticism, rather, more a kind of characterization. We've had different directions, or destinies, you could say.

AMD: I think it's also about the fact that you put a lot of effort into developing a milieu?

TM: I realized quite early on that I had ambitions as a teacher and administrator. I also realized that those ambitions would curtail my ability to have exhibitions and produce my own works, but nevertheless I haven't regretted for a second that that's what I've prioritized. Because I am convinced that, among other things, the work with Mediaverkstedet was important.

When Mediaverkstedet's three allotted years were over and the coffers were empty, Terje Munthe headed to Vega on the northern coast of Norway. There he ran Vega kunst og kulturskole (Vega School of Art and Culture) for children, a new three-year test project under the auspices of Norsk kulturråd, during the period 1989–1992.¹⁷ The municipality of Vega proved to be ambitious, and they were generous with funding. Munthe was able to bring in Oddvar I. N. Daren, Edgar Ballo, Åse Liv Hauan, and Kari Gautnebb—all artists. The group had its base in Vega but toured the neighboring municipalities. They also worked with video in Vega. Terje Munthe convinced Vega's local authorities to purchase all of Mediaverkstedet's equipment from Høvikodden. A group associated with an employment initiative under the direction of NAV¹⁸ in Brønnøysund later "inherited" the equipment. They used it in courses and educational programs for young job-seekers. In other words, technical equipment had a longer shelf life in those days. One of the projects Munthe recalls with particular relish was a feature film they made about the Middle Ages. Kari Gautnebb directed, and the children were involved in working out the staging and the manuscript, as well as playing various roles.

TM: For me those years in Vega were extremely rewarding and fun. I did things that I found interesting from a purely aesthetic and formal perspective and at the same time was able to involve children in the work. It was truly collaborative and challenging. Just as Marianne Heske purchased commercial services when it came to technological work, I "borrowed" services from the kids.

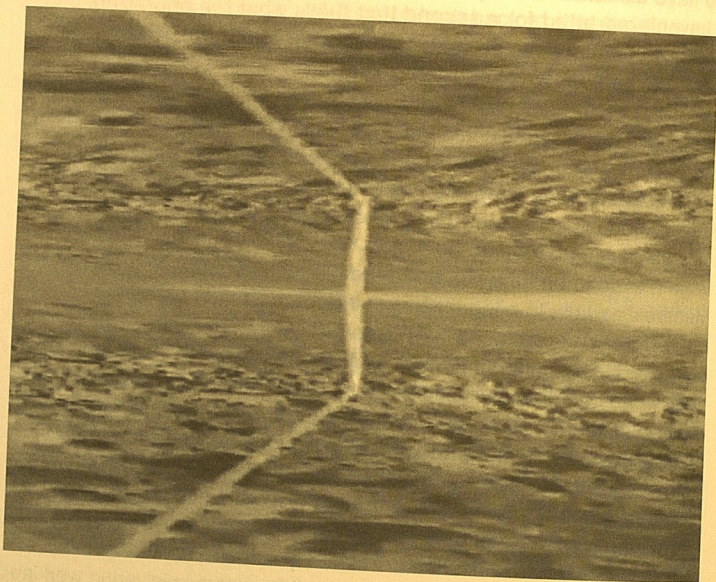
AMD: This makes me want to ask the question: What is a work of art? I happen to think that our era's view of art is quite narrow. There is a tendency to ascribe value to just the work or object.

It's as if the works themselves are something, but the people involved in generating a movement, the conditions of production, or other factors quickly fade out of art history.

TM: Yes, you're probably right about that. It's surely a general phenomenon, but I think it's especially obvious within electronic media. One wonders, for example, what the Beatles would have accomplished without Brian Epstein and George Martin?

Munthe's work with both Mediaverkstedet and Vega kunst og kulturskole attests to an effort to establish a discipline. During this period Terje Munthe was also responsible for several exhibitions of Norwegian video art abroad. In 1986 he put together a video program with Norwegian artists for a major presentation of Norwegian art at daadgalerie in Berlin. The show program consisted of: Kjell Bjørgeengen's *DRIFT* (1984), Marianne Heske's video installation *1 und 2 Januar* (1986), Munthe's own *Tournesol* (1986), Oddvar I. N. Daren's *A Piece of Landscape* (1983), Camilla Wærenskjold's *Sigel, metamorfose* (1986) and Holy Toy's *Hoax* (1986).¹⁹

Terje Munthe, still from
Tournesol, video, 1986



MP: You singled out the multidisciplinary as an important area to succeed with for Mediaverkstedet in 1986. Norsk Kulturråd started the three-year effort of focusing on art and new technology in 1998, and it received three million crowns per annum. The support was primarily meant to stimulate growth of an art form based on new technology, but could also go to ways of publicizing art that utilized new technology. Kulturrådet has described its own role as that of a "helping hand." But this support initiative came rather late, especially when one considers the story you've told us here. Why do you think the phrase "art and new technology" still clings to art with any kind of electronic or digital underpinning?

TM: I am not all that familiar with what was going on in Oslo at the end of the nineties, I'm afraid. My focus then was on my own projects. But generally speaking I think it has to do with how easy it can be to "get stuck in a rut." The litany of established categories often overshadows the fact that there is always ongoing experimentation with connecting every imaginable technology and approach. Those working theoretically with "connecting the dots" don't always get the whole picture. That's maybe not so surprising. These are complex and elastic phenomena we are dealing with.

AMD: Is there much written about the video art you and others made in Norway in the eighties?

TM: Hmm, Jorunn Veiteberg knows a lot. She's a repository of information, guaranteed. She was active both in Bergen and at Galleri F15 at Jeløya in Moss. Otherwise Arild Boman is of course a key figure. I don't know what he has published, but he is still very active and ought to be contacted in connection to this.

When it comes to texts, I think video art has been overlooked in many respects. There weren't many writers back then who actually understood what it was about; they treated video art more like a curiosity really. One example is the book we made for the group exhibition *Nye alle fem* at Trondhjems Kunstforening (Trondheim's art association).²⁰ The picture on the cover was of a bizarre object, some kind of mechanical doodad we found on the grounds where a blacksmith worked next door to our studio. We had no idea what that thing was, but we got the smith to weld a disc to it and we called it an "art indicator." Starting with the French word for light, *lumière*, we put *lym* (= art) on one side and *ulym* (= non-art) on the other. A journalist from *Arbeideravisa* actually fell for it. He actually believed we could go around and point it at things and determine whether they were art or not, *lym* or *ulym*.

When Oddvar and Lars were in Maastricht and Camilla and I were in Düsseldorf, we had many conversations and complicated ideas about this and that. We had great expectations, and a running joke was that we would "build skyscrapers." All nonsense of course but, that said, we have, each from our own front, been part of things that have a larger perspective than our individual careers. I am enormously grateful for the contact with these folks, both as friends and colleagues.

One of the things I've experienced is the difference between the art critic's lack of a fixed vantage point and an artist's dependence on one. Because when you make something, you have to take responsibility for what you are doing. You have to lay a foundation and produce something on the basis of criteria you have set for yourself. Then along comes the critic, moving around and looking at the thing from various angles and analyzing it from an entirely different set of conditions. Some are of course intelligent enough to identify your outlook and relate their analysis to it, but essentially we have two entirely different approaches: one creative and one analytical.

MP: You are talking about vantage points. In the beginning of your career, you obviously had technology as a frame of reference, but now you have moved away from that and over to a more classical form of drawing. What is the reason for this shift?

TM: It must have something to do with age and maturity. You know, maturity leads at one point or another to decay ... [*laughter*]. I don't have the capacity to keep up, purely practically, any longer. But I try nevertheless to stay up to date with technological developments through literature. I read a tremendous amount of philosophy and science, and particularly those trying to see the big picture, the ones who embrace several disciplines, such as Dyson.

And when it comes to a frame of reference, yes, today I consider myself first and foremost a draftsman, someone who draws digitally. That form of working is the conclusion of all my time with electronic media. I've spent forty years teaching myself to draw classically with pen, ink, and brush. It's a well-known fact that one uses new media according to the old media's terms. The very first automobiles looked like the horse-drawn carriages ... It takes a while before one realizes that new media actually offer entirely different possibilities. In my case it wasn't entirely so; I didn't think of video as something that could be used in relation to drawing. And take film, for instance; filmmakers now have an insane amount of tools at their disposal, but what do they do? They are perpetually repeating themselves. It's as if they are scared to death; they don't use even half the possibilities they have.

MP: Can it be compared to what happened when film was first evolving as a medium? First one had to investigate how film differed from theater, which was the leading medium at the time. Then, once it was understood what was unique to film, such as the possibility of close-ups and editing, then came its golden age.

TM: You're certainly right that something similar is transpiring now. It's as if we're about to leap into something brand new. If I were sixteen years old now, I'd throw myself into it in a heartbeat.

AMD: What do you think about your earlier works now?

TM: I am very thankful for the recent wave of interest around the "pioneer era." In a way I've also expected it, because deep down I've known that if there was anything I'd be remembered for, it would be these early video works. Not necessarily because I am most proud of them, but because they represent a period where I was in the right place at the right time.

MP: One last question about the multidisciplinary: looking back today, it can seem that seeking out the multidisciplinary was a natural impulse in the eighties. Now the notion is more or less institutionalized at the various art academies and schools around the country. Can you say something about working multidisciplinary at that time?

TM: My impetus was my own cross-disciplinary appetite. I was equally interested in everything, in the whole spectrum of possibilities. I was somewhat predisposed to drawing and painting, yes, but the urge to explore everything was tremendous. I arrived at an art school (Kunstakademiet i Trondheim) that was notable for its lack of theory, so in retrospect I appreciate how important and good today's theory instruction is, even though the pendulum has perhaps swung a bit too far in the other direction. In those days it felt important that we as students positioned ourselves in relation to the administration and teachers through both the way we acted and the way we thought. Especially when it concerned the prevailing, compartmentalized thinking around the disciplines. There was an urgency in arguing, for example, that drawing wasn't simply about paper and pencil, it was about clay, sandboxes, electronics—whatever. I wasn't alone in thinking this way. The majority of my fellow students had the same take on things, and that surely has something to do with our generation's energy. We were a postwar generation, big groups and lots of momentum. We were basically naive and uneducated; we had very little schooling in comparison to students today. But likewise it's important to point out that *naïveté* is not necessarily a negative thing. It is of course usually associated with *innocence*, which is a distinction!

From the time I finished at the academy until today a totally insane amount of democratizing of access to means of production has occurred. We have of course all dreamt of access to means and technical expertise. Today you can buy a complete sound studio for less than 5,000 crowns. The same thing would have cost ten million in the eighties. In short: anything and everything in terms of artistic tools is available to everyone. Nevertheless the standard sinks like a stone, because what should one do with all these production resources? The younger generations—you see them standing around and scratching their heads, and everywhere we see bad pastiches of things that have been done before. It's disappointing but maybe belongs to a basic human predisposition: we think better and come up with more ideas when we are impeded or meet resistance.

MP: Do you go around and look at much art nowadays?

TM: No, and I suppose I never really did. I have a certain aversion to the scene and the way it works. It's because I tend to be shy. I'm neither comfortable being the one on display nor the one doing the watching. But I keep abreast and engage myself in things via circuitous routes.

The fact that I've spent nearly my entire life teaching myself to draw in the classical sense has been essential for me and my sense of self-respect. I know that I've become an "accomplished draftsman" but there are very few others who know that. And that doesn't mean a thing.

- 1 Düsseldorf art academy
- 2 Malagasy is an Austronesian language spoken by the people of Madagascar. Malagasy is one of the two official languages of Madagascar (the other is French) and is spoken by 17 million people. Malagasy was once written with the Arabic alphabet, but by the nineteenth century the Latin alphabet was widely used for the written form of the language. Source: *Wikipedia* (Norwegian), s. v. "Gassisk," last modified May 28, 2013, <http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gassisk>.
- 3 The original lineup was, in addition to Munthe: Anders Bru (guitar), Reidar Larsen (piano), and Knut Königsberg (drums). Frode Gjerstad (saxophone) was an occasional member, and the cellist Åge Jan Jensen was also a member for a while.
- 4 Oddvar I. N. Daren maintains that this equipment was purchased as early as 1979.
- 5 NTH stands for Norges Tekniske Høgskole (Norwegian Institute of Technology). It later changed its name to NTNU, Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet (The Norwegian University of Science and Technology).
- 6 Terje Munthe, *Prisma nytt* 18 (Oslo, 1986).
- 7 Oslo Academy of Arts and Crafts
- 8 For more information on Pahlsson, see Sven Pahlsson (website), <http://www.svenpahlsson.com>.
- 9 According to Geir Johnson, Paik said himself that the Oslo performance had been the best in his career as a performance artist. Paik made the statement during a visit to Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in June 1986. See Johnsen, "Nam June Paik til Høvikodden," *Prisma nytt* 18 (Oslo, 1986).
- 10 Translation from nyMusikk (organization website), accessed January 3, 2013, <http://nymusikk.no/en/historikk>. See also Tone Tafford, "Ny Musikk i historie og endring" (master's thesis, NTNU, 2011), <http://ntnu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:436932/FULLTEXT01>.
- 11 *Wikipedia*, s. v. "Alan Turing," last modified May 13, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alan_Turing.
- 12 One of them was the Norwegian-Italian mathematician Nils Aall Barricelli (1912–1993). He was one of the first to test mathematical models on the computer. Several of his early computer-aided experiments in symbiogenesis and evolution are today considered pioneering work in the area of artificial intelligence. *Wikipedia*, s. v. "Nis Aall Barricelli," last modified May 15, 2014, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nils_Aall_Barricelli.
- 13 See also: George Dyson, interview by Kevin Kelly, in *Wired*, February 17, 2012. This interview can be found online at *Wired.com* (website), accessed on January 5, 2013, http://www.wired.com/magazine/2012/02/ff_dysonqa/all/.
- 14 Boris Groys, Google: *Words beyond Grammar* (Ostfildern, 2012).
- 15 Arild Kristo (1939–2010) produced two short films, *Undergrunnen* (The Underground, 1966) and *Kristoball* (1967), and one feature-length film *Eddie og Suzanne* (*Eddie and Suzanne*, 1975).
- 16 Here is an elaboration in Munthe's own words: "Irene Ekdahl wrote a text that was published in the catalogues for the exhibitions *Blodig alvor* in Bergen and *Retrospektiv* at The Stenersen Museum in Oslo in which she has misinterpreted not only what I said, but also what the video is about." Munthe says he tried to make Farhrad Kalantary aware of the matter so that he could correct it prior to publication of the catalogue for *Retrospektiv*, but he made no changes.
- 17 The three-year project was documented by Terje Munthe in an unpublished report called "Vega kunst og kulturskole 1989–1992."
- 18 Ny arbeids- og velferdsforvaltning (Norwegian labor and welfare service)
- 19 A catalogue was produced for this exhibition entitled *N/BOREALIS*. The exhibition included a number of other Norwegian artists as well: Per Inge Bjørlo, Bård Breivik, Anne Katrine Dolven, Hilmar Fredriksen, Olav Christopher Jenssen, Inghild Karlsen, Sissel Tolaas, Bjørn Sigurd Tufta, Sverre Wyller, and Yngve Zakarias. The video screenings were an adjunct program. The exhibition period was from October 26–December 10, 1986.
- 20 The exhibition was later shown at Bergens Kunstforening (Bergen's art association) and Stavanger Faste Galleri.