

Transnational Collaboration and Cultural Transfers.

Two Exhibitions in Poland: *Video Art and Sociological Art* (1975) and *Video Art* (1976)

By Tomasz Załuski

Even though the earliest instances of using television or video equipment as an artistic tool in the Polish People's Republic date back to 1973, it was not until the mid-1970s that the first two collective and more comprehensive presentations of foreign and domestic artists under the aegis of "video art" were organized. Beforehand, experimental practices with the new medium had been mostly described in technical terms like "television" or "mechanical means of recording and transmission."¹ *Video Art and Sociological Art* (1975) and *Video Art* (1976) can thus be interpreted, albeit to a different degree, in terms of cultural transfer, the content of which was the very concept of video art together with the normative rules of an emergent artistic genre behind it. Both events were also instances of artistic self-organization and could not have been assembled without the support of transnational collaboration networks.

Tomek Kawiak, an artist who left Poland for Paris in the early 1970s, was instrumental in organizing a two-week show of a cosmopolitan group of artists entitled *Video Art and Sociological Art*. The exhibition opened on June 3, 1975, at the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw, which was run at that time by art historian Jacek Drabik and artists Zdzisław Sosnowski and Janusz Haka. The idea of presenting pieces by foreign artists who were working with video came from Sosnowski.² When he consulted Kawiak on the list of potential participants, they both decided the latter's network of contacts in France and beyond could be used to expand the concept of the exhibition and include the issue of sociological art. By that time, Kawiak, engaged in developing his own practice of "trocart", or the art of barter exchange, had already become acquainted with the artistic milieu gathering around the newly established (October 10, 1974) Sociological Art Collective in Paris. Together with the members of the group: Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thenot, and his friend Sacha Sosno, he took part in a few video events.³ With Sosno's assistance, he collected documentation of

¹ *Mechanical means of recording and transmission. Film, television, photography, sound* was the title of Workshop of the Film Form's two-day event in April 1975 at Remont Gallery, Warsaw.

² In many respects, the reconstruction I am offering here is based on my electronic correspondence with Tomek Kawiak (April 2020), Zdzisław Sosnowski (March 2020 – August 2023), and Jacek Drabik (August 2023).

³ The events included the comprehensive show *Artists' Videotapes* (February – March 1975, Brussels) and the 2nd and 3rd International Open Encounter on Video (February 1975, Paris, and May 1975, Ferrara). See, respectively: Michel Baudson (ed.), *Artist's Videotapes*, exhibition catalogue, Multivideo and Palais des Beaux-Arts, Bruxelles 1975; Jorge Glusberg (ed.), *Rencontre internationale de vidéo*, exhibition catalogue, Center of Art and Communication, Buenos Aires 1975; Jorge Glusberg (ed.), *Third International Encounter on Video*, Center of Art and Communication, Buenos Aires 1975. Kawiak's work was also included in *Opus International*, "L'Art sociologique," Paris, no. 55 (1975).

video works by over twenty artists and sent it to Warsaw, where it was published in the Contemporary Gallery's bulletin as a prelude to the coming exhibition.⁴ The publication also featured a text by Villém Flusser in which he reflected on the new potentials of technical media, including video, revealed by art practices.⁵ Most of the artists represented in the bulletin participated in the show, and a small group, comprising Fischer, Forest, Thenot, Sosno, Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Antonio Muntadas, and Joan Rabascall, came to Warsaw.⁶

As part of the exhibition, display boards with documentation of video works, mostly textual descriptions and stills from monitors, were hung on the walls; a separate section was devoted to the Sociological Art Collective. Daily in the evening, screenings of video tapes were available for the public for three hours. During the opening, in front of a large audience, Fischer gave an introductory talk on the idea of sociological art, and Forest did a sort of spoken performance. On his arrival in Warsaw, he attempted to induce and record, with his own Sony Portapack, a participatory "sociological walk" in the streets of the city but did not succeed in engaging the local community, most probably due to language barrier. When presenting the footage in the gallery, he covered the screen of the TV monitor with a piece of white fabric and narrated the images that he had not been able to see and record.⁷ There were also two installations located in the gallery room. Sosno showed two TV monitors with their image and sound electronically "obliterated" with the use of his self-constructed device called "Sosnoblit", whereas Muntadas had a Polish version of his 1974 *Arte e vida* prepared, which consisted of a TV monitor broadcasting the Polish Television program with the caption "sztuka e życie" on the screen. Muntadas also took the occasion to get footage for his then-ongoing videoinstallation project, *The Last Ten Minutes*, which confronted end parts of TV programming from different cities around the world. Late at night, with Sosnowski's assistance and Forest's Portapack, he recorded the endpiece of the Polish Television broadcast.⁸

⁴ *Galeria Współczesna*, "Video," Warsaw, no. 5 (May 3, 1975).

⁵ Villém Flusser, "Reflection on an Exhibition *Video* to Be Held at Galeria Współczesna RSW, Warsaw," *Galeria Współczesna*, "Video," Warsaw, no. 5 (May 3, 1975), unnumbered pages.

⁶ The artists who participated in *Video Art and Sociological Art* include Roland Baladi, CAYC, Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, Jochen Gerz, Tomek Kawiak, Lea Lublin, Gérald Minkoff, Antonio Muntadas, Muriel Olesen, Luca Patella, Joan Rabascall, Jean Roulades, Sacha Sosno, Jean-Paul Thenot, and Nil Yalter. Apart from them, the Contemporary Gallery bulletin presented works by Jean-Pierre Bertrand, Jonier Marin, Marc Masse, and Bernard Teyssède. Even though Bertrand was not listed among the participants, it is highly probable that he eventually took part in the exhibition, as he was with the small group of artists who came to Warsaw.

⁷ See the artist's account of the performance and its circumstances: Fred Forest, *Fred Forest. Pionnier expérimentateur. De l'art vidéo au net art. Art sociologique, esthétique de la communication et art de la commutation*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2004, p. 109. Forest claims here that during his walk in the streets of Warsaw he was accompanied by a "political commissar" who prevented him from interacting with local people and, therefore, made their participation impossible. However, this story has not been corroborated by Sosnowski and Drabik, the directors of the gallery. The presence of such a "commissar" is indeed highly unlikely, and this figure may be just a fictive and mythologizing substitute for the simple fact of a language barrier that could have prevented Forest from inducing the participation of locals. What makes this interpretation plausible is the fact that the artist, as he admits, started his talk by "explaining the ambivalent relations that may occur in art between fiction and reality."

⁸ Photographic documentation of the exhibition and Muntadas' recording of the endpiece of the local television broadcast was made by Polish artist Zygmunt Rytka. It is available on the website with the artist's archive:

Even though the Warsaw exhibition attempted to introduce the concept of video art to the field of art in Poland, it was another event that effectively transferred it and enabled its circulation in the local neoavantgarde art milieu. On October 5–6, 1976, Labyrinth Gallery (Galeria Labirynt), a small experimental art space in Lublin run by Andrzej Mroczek under the auspices of the Municipal House of Culture, hosted a “symposium”. *Video Art* was organized on the initiative of Józef Robakowski, an experimental film, video, and performance artist and a member of the Łódź-based group Workshop of the Film Form (WFF). It was his translocal and transnational network that made it possible to bring together the results of dispersed prior practices by Polish artists and showcase them under the aegis of “video art” in Lublin. He also acted as the commissioner of the show.

The event presented two milieus that were the most active in the field of video: artists gathered around WFF in Łódź and members of the Recent Art Gallery from Wrocław.⁹ In the years 1974–1976, all the participants of the Lublin show, along with a (very) few other Polish artists, were given access to the technical equipment and could make their first video works in television studios and at art festivals located in different places around Poland, or abroad, at art galleries, museums, and centers in West Germany, Denmark, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Although *Video Art* is neither well-documented nor memorized by the artists¹⁰, it is certain that these works, mostly elementary conceptual and analytical pieces, were displayed there mainly in the form of photographic documentation of video performances, stills from TV monitor screens, textual descriptions, and conceptual diagrams that were hung on the gallery’s walls. A video recorder had also been borrowed for the occasion from another local state institution, but it is not certain if any tapes were effectively played. As the participants had TV monitors and CCTV viewfinderless cameras at their disposal, some closed-circuit video performances were made on the spot. The event enjoyed relatively huge popularity, as “two hundred people”¹¹ came to the small spaces of the gallery to watch the presentation and listen to an accompanying discussion among the artists.

The transfer of the concept of video art into the field of neo-avant-garde artistic culture in Poland was aimed not only at securing a distinct artistic status for domestic practices with the medium but also establishing their connection to a wider transnational video art scene. The resource for the transfer was de Appel Gallery in Amsterdam, where Robakowski and his WFF colleague

“Zygmunt Rytka. Archiwum,” In Situ Contemporary Art Foundation in Sokołowsko, <https://zygmuntrytka.pl/archiwum/dokumentacja-zycia-artystycznego/galeria-wspolczesna-video-1975> (accessed August 23, 2023).

⁹ The participants of *Video Art* included Kazimierz Bendkowski, Wojciech Bruszewski, Janusz Kołodrubiec, Paweł Kwiek, Andrzej Paruzel, Józef Robakowski, and Ryszard Waśko from Łódź; Stanisław Antosz and Katarzyna Chierowska (the Antosz & Andzia duo), Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera, and Lech Mrożek from Wrocław.

¹⁰ Author’s interviews and electronic correspondence with Józef Robakowski (September 2018), Anna Kutera (July 2019 and July 2020), Romuald Kutera (July 2019), Lech Mrożek (July 2019), Katarzyna Chierowska (June – August 2019), and Andrzej Paruzel (April 2020).

¹¹ Ireneusz Jan Kamiński, “Vostell, video, malarstwo,” *Kamena*, Lublin, no. 22 (1976), p. 16.

Wojciech Bruszewski had a chance to get acquainted with video works by artists from Western Europe, the USA, and Japan. By early 1976, de Appel had acquired a selection of tapes from two leading video art production and distribution centers: Studio Oppenheim in Cologne and art/tapes/22 in Florence, and had also started to produce its own tapes with video documentation of performance art.¹² In February 1976, when Robakowski and Bruszewski came to the gallery for a presentation of WFF's video works, they grabbed the opportunity to study this growing collection and photocopy texts on the new artistic genre. As they watched the tapes for hours, they made notes with descriptions of individual works and documented them by photographing their stills on TV monitors.¹³

These materials were later used in the catalogue of the Lublin show. It was designed in the form of several separate cards that were printed on both sides and enclosed in an envelope.¹⁴ The cards, which were also displayed on the walls of the gallery during the exhibition, presented documentation of video works made by the show participants prior to the event. Additionally, one of the cards included photodocumentations and descriptions of works from de Appel's collection along with Robakowski's manifesto *Video Art: A Chance to Investigate Reality*, which was published in Polish and English. While the text featured a four-part typology of video art practices and coupled WFF with Valie Export, Alan Kaprow, and Reiner Ruthenbeck as engaged in the "analysis of the structure of television", stills from their selected video works as well as ones by Urs Lüthi, Vito Acconci, and Arnulf Rainer were interspersed by photoimages of two pieces by Robakowski and Bruszewski. In its textual and visual performatives, the card attempted to situate WFF in close connection to Western artists. Together with the rest of the cards placed in the envelope, it was supposed to act as a sort of mail-art and conceptual exhibition of video art from Poland. In fact, attempts were made to send the catalogue to foreign galleries and art centers as an East-Central European addendum to growing transnational video art circuits.¹⁵

Bibliography:

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¹² Marga van Mechelen, *De Appel. Performances, Installations, Video, Projects, 1975–1983*, De Appel, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 276–279.

¹³ Interview with Robakowski.

¹⁴ *Video Art*, exhibition catalogue, Galeria Labirynt, Lublin 1976, separate unnumbered cards. Labyrinth Gallery archive.

¹⁵ A copy of the catalogue's envelope addressed to Ileana Sonnabend, a New York and Paris-based art dealer who collected and distributed video art in the early 1970s, has been preserved in the Labyrinth Gallery archive.

Buenos Aires 1975.

Kamiński Ireneusz Jan, "Vostell, video, malarstwo," *Kamena*, Lublin, no. 22 (1976), p. 16.

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