

Infermental. The First International Magazine on Videocassettes (1981–1991)

By Tomasz Załuski

Infermental was a network of contacts and cooperation in the field of documentation, distribution and presentation of video images.¹ Its name was formed as a combination of the words “international”, “fermentum” and “experimental”. The project was conceived and started by Gábor Bódy (1946–1985), a Hungarian artist active in the fields of experimental film and video.² At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, after several unsuccessful attempts at reforming the local field of film production in Hungary, he turned to the new video technology as an alternative mode of action which could facilitate a further development of the art of the moving image and the creation of a new global audiovisual language.

On 19th March 1981, in Budapest, together with Hungarian artist Dóra Maurer, and a group of Polish experimental film and video makers: Józef Robakowski, Małgorzata Potocka, Pawel Kwiek and Ryszard Waśko, Bódy signed a joint founding deed of *Infermental* as a video magazine. The Hungarian-Polish manifesto was meant to generate the appropriate symbolic capital for the enterprise as a project growing out of international cooperation between artists who represented “Eastern Europe” or the “socialist bloc”. In October 1981, Bódy’s idea was presented at the 30th International Film Festival in Mannheim, West Germany. This time, the goal was to demonstrate that the project transcended the geopolitical divide between East and West, building a network of collaboration between artists from both blocs. It was also supposed to cross boundaries between the arts in pursuit of the integrative idea of a “non-located Bauhaus.”³ To this end, the Sony U-matic video system was selected as a distribution method. It was a widespread, international standard which allowed for various film, video and photographic imagery to be transferred onto a single tape. A common platform for incompatible recording formats, U-matic acted as a sort of transmedium and metamedium.

Soon after the Mannheim festival, the call for submission to the first edition of the magazine

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- 1 For more detailed accounts of the history of *Infermental*, see Vera Bódy [ed.], *Infermental. The First International Magazine on Videocassettes 1980–1986*, Infermental, Cologne 1986; George Clark, Dan Kidner, James Richards, *A Detour Around Infermental*, Focal Point Gallery, Southen-on-Sea 2012; Tomasz Załuski, *Infermental. Pierwszy międzynarodowy magazyn na kasetach wideo (1981–1991)*, Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, Tomasz Załuski (ed.), *Wideo w sztukach wizualnych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Galeria Labirynt, Łódź – Lublin 2018, p. 205–246.
 - 2 On the work of Gábor Bódy, see Laszlo Beke, Miklós Peternák, *Gábor Bódy 1946–1985: A Presentation of His Work*, Palace of Exhibitions, Central Board of the Hungarian Cinematography, Ministry of Culture, Budapest 1987; Laszlo Beke, “Bódy Gábor, Networker,” Siegfried Zielinski, Peter Weibel (ed.), *State of Images. The Media Pioneers Zbigniew Rybczynski and Gábor Bódy*, Verlag für Moderne Kunst, Berlin 2011, p. 56–64.
 - 3 Gabor Bódy, “Creative Thinking Device. 'Experimental Film' in Hungary,” Beke/Peternák, *Gábor Bódy 1946–1985: A Presentation of His Work*, p. 268.

was announced. In line with Bódy's universalist portrayal of *Infermental* as an "encyclopaedic video periodical"⁴, the submitted materials were to be organized according to thematic headings. It was also decided that each edition of *Infermental* would be organized by a new team, working in a different center around the world and independently applying for financial support to produce the magazine. The intention was to give the project's universalism a pluralistic, flexible, and evolving character and allow it to map the multiplicity of artistic milieus with the diverse perspectives, competencies and contacts of each of the editing teams. The continuity and transfer of experience between subsequent issues of the magazine was guaranteed by the fact that the team responsible for a new edition included as a supervising editor a person who had worked on the previous edition. From the beginning, Vera Bódy, art historian and Gábor Bódy's wife, played a crucial role in the organization and international coordination of *Infermental*, as well as producing its accompanying discourse.

Between 1982 and 1991, ten editions of *Infermental*, and one special issue, outside the series, were produced in the following locations: West Berlin (1982); Hamburg, West Germany (1982–1983); Budapest, Hungary (1984); the special issue in Wuppertal, North Rhine-Westphalia, West Germany (1984); Lyon, France (1985); Rotterdam and Amsterdam, the Netherlands (1986); Vancouver, Canada (1987); Buffalo, USA (1988); Tokyo, Japan (1988); Vienna, Austria (1989); Osnabrück, (West) Germany, and Skopje, Macedonia (Yugoslavia) (1990–1991). While these were mainly located in the West, the initiative did manage to cross, at least symbolically, the bridge between the Cold War geopolitical blocs, and it was the first time that a large group of artists from Eastern Europe participated in an international video network. The tenth edition returned to the theme of building bridges between East and West after the collapse of the "Iron Curtain", and in this way marked the completion and closure of the project. In 1992, Vera Bódy donated the *Infermental* video archive and related publications to the ZKM Karlsruhe.⁵

Over the course of its ten-year history, *Infermental* showcased the pivotal transformation that was taking place, above all in Western cultural centers, in the field of experimental art practices involving video. In the 1960s and 1970s, video art was dominated by trends that emphasized its conceptual and non-aesthetic nature and its separateness from commercial television and popular culture. They would often experiment with the recording and transmission functions of video in closed circuit installations and performances, modifying its technological apparatus and dispositifs. The 1980s saw a departure from that trend – i.e. the search for new expressive and narrative forms, appropriation practices and aesthetic eclecticism, frequent references to memory, the unconscious, myths and cultural symbols, the use of technological possibilities, forms of editing, narrative and

4 "Mannheimer Manifesto: Gründung von Infermental (Oktober 1981)," *Kolekcja Multimedialna Galerii Wymiany Józefa Robakowskiego*, exhibition catalog, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 1998, p. 47.

5 For the ZKM online archive of *Infermental*. see the webpage: www.infermental.de (accessed: 10.06.2023).

stylistic forms associated with popular culture and commercial television, inspirations with music culture and the format of the video clip, as well as attempts at the electronic creation of images as simulacra of reality.

Due to technological limitations, *Infermental* could not become an audiovisual “encyclopaedia” in the full sense of the word because the U-matic tapes did not allow for quick and precise access to information stored in various places on the medium. The materials published in *Infermental* were recorded on tapes in a fixed order, and the tapes themselves were to be played back on the monitor one by one so that viewers would get to know the entirety of a given edition of the magazine during a single show lasting many hours. The screenings were held at various film and video festivals, and took place in museums and art galleries. Becoming a sort of “travelling exhibition”, *Infermental* did not manage to transcend the existing institutional system of distribution, but successfully operated at the intersection of its several circuits – film, video and visual arts. In this sense, it did indeed generate an integrated yet internally diverse network of international relationships.

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