

## Self-Organisation, Institutions, Works, and Networks.

### Video Art in Poland, 1973–1985

In socialist Poland,<sup>1</sup> the period of emergence and development of early artistic practices with video stretched from the early 1970s to the mid-1980s.<sup>2</sup> Factors determining the timeframe included the availability of and access to the necessary technical equipment, as well as generational shifts, the evolution of art tendencies, and broader cultural trends. In the early 1970s, when members of the local neo-avant-garde began to engage with issues of transmission and broadcasting, they sought to get hold of professional television equipment as amateur video cameras and recorders were just beginning to appear in the country. By the mid-1980s, home video equipment had become more accessible to private owners and users in Poland, and a younger generation of artists who strongly contested the ideas and goals of the conceptually oriented neo-avant-garde took the stage, introducing new postmodern modes of visibility, narrative and performativity, existential transgression, and socio-political critique.

#### **Conditions of production and distribution**

As part of the Eastern Bloc, Poland was initially denied access to international transfers of video technologies that had been developed in the USA, Western Europe, and Japan since the late 1950s. The Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Exports Control (COCOM), set up by Western countries in 1949 with to limit the flow of technology to socialist countries, imposed a particularly strict embargo on transistors and integrated circuits because of their potential use in the military industry. It was not until 1972 that the ban was lifted for Poland. This was due to the political changes in the country and the statements of Edward Gierek, the new Prime Secretary of the ruling Polish United Workers' Party, who promised more liberal economic, social, and cultural policies and stressed the need for technological modernisation and the improvement in domestic consumption.<sup>3</sup> After that, it was finally possible to import foreign video equipment and technology

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1 Between 1952 and 1989, the official name of the country was the People's Republic of Poland.

2 The same timeframe is assumed in Tomasz Samosionek, *Videoart. Sztuka wideo w Polsce 1973–1985*, Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Filmowa, Telewizyjna i Teatralna w Łodzi, Łódź 2021. The book is based on the author's MA thesis written in 1989, which covered a longer period, from 1973 to 1988.

3 Aleksandra Komornicka, "Socialist Poland's opening towards the West, 1970–1980," PhD thesis, European University Institute, Florence 2021, p. 133–136, 214–221, [https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71778/Kormornicka\\_2021\\_HEC.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71778/Kormornicka_2021_HEC.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) (accessed: 12.09.2023).

production licences.<sup>4</sup> In 1973–1974, two Polish home video recorders began to be produced under licence from Philips: MTV-10 black and white open reel and MTV-20 colour VCR. At the same time, TP-K16 CCTV black and white cameras were introduced, which could be connected to these video recorders. However, these were not available to private users and could only be purchased by state institutions such as factories, production companies, schools, universities, research institutes, hospitals, the army, the secret service, sports clubs, and cultural institutions. As these locally produced devices were often unreliable and almost as expensive as foreign ones, video recorders, including Sony Portapack, were also imported from Western Europe and Japan.

In the 1980s, new models of Polish amateur VCR LPs and, after 1986, VHS recorders appeared, but they could not compete with the growing flow of equipment from abroad. Private imports of the latter, mainly from West Berlin and the Federal Republic of Germany, began in the late 1970s. In the following decade, with the exception of the period between December 1981 and July 1983, when martial law was imposed in Poland and private travel and the import of consumer goods were restricted, the number of such devices began to grow rapidly, and video became a popular social phenomenon. It is estimated that in 1980 there were only a few thousand video recorders, but by 1987 the number had risen to around half a million, and by 1989 it had doubled. Part of the reason for this dynamic growth was that foreign video recorders had been legally available to private consumers since 1985 and were relatively easy to buy in shops throughout the country. However, they remained quite expensive: whereas in the late 1970s the black market price of a VCR made in West Berlin was higher than the price of a car, and in the early 1980s it was equivalent to five-year average earnings, by 1985 it had fallen to no less than the annual average earnings.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, access to video equipment was rather difficult for Polish artists until the mid- to late 1980s. Some were able to use it abroad, producing their video performances or works on tape in the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, and West Berlin. At home, it was necessary to “mobilise resources”<sup>6</sup> and use, often on an informal basis, video recorders, cameras, and mixers from state schools, universities, sports clubs, social and cultural institutions, and production companies across the country. This was also the case for art galleries,

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4 It should be noted, however, that Polish television engineers had been working independently on the development not only of professional cameras or broadcasting trucks, but also of audiovisual recording equipment for the purposes of state television, which began broadcasting programmes in 1952. In 1963, a prototype of the MW 623 black-and-white, vacuum-tube, open-reel videotape recorder was ready, and the Polish generic name for the videotape recorder was officially approved, namely “magnetowid”, which could be translated as “magneto-video”. Over the next decade, the more advanced transistor versions of the machine, with Ampex heads, were widely used in television studios in Poland and several other countries of the socialist block – see Wanda Trzebunia-Siwicka, “Jak to się zaczęło? Pierwsze ośrodki telewizyjne w Polsce,” p. 77, 87–92, <http://polkart.com.pl/old/PLIKI/Pierwsze%20O%9Crodki%20TV%20z%20foto%20pa%BFdiernik%202012.doc.pdf> (accessed: 15.07.2023).

5 See Mirosław Filiciak, Patryk Wasiak, *Weź Pan Rambo! Społeczna historia magnetowidów w Polsce*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, Gdańsk 2022, p. 69–73.

6 Howard S. Becker, *Art Worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1982, p. 68–92.

museums, and festivals, as these spaces did not own such equipment at the time and had to rent or borrow it from outside sources. As a result, for some artists, opportunities to use video remained occasional, if not one-off, experiences. In addition, the equipment available, particularly the Polish MTV-10 and MTV-20 video recorders, often presented serious technical difficulties. A tape recorded on one of these machines would not play properly on another. There were also problems with tapes themselves. As foreign tapes were expensive and hard to come by, artists would have their work recorded on borrowed carriers that were intended for other purposes and were soon be erased. When they did manage to buy local tapes (produced by the Stilon company in Gorzów), the quality of the material was so poor that the recordings could not be played or recovered after a short time. All these unfavourable circumstances meant that relatively few artistic works were recorded on tape in Poland between 1973 and 1985, and seven fewer have survived to the present day. At the same time, the fact that CCTV cameras and monitors were easier to access and use was one of the conditions for the dominance of video performances and installations in this early period. Polish artists perceived video mainly in terms of the signal, transmission, cognition or observation process, rather than recording, moving image, or narrative. Nevertheless, many works were recorded on 16mm or 8mm film tape that would certainly have been made on video if their authors had been given access to the necessary equipment. In terms of their concepts and aesthetics, these films can be considered as quasi-video works produced in an alternative medium. For gender reasons, this was particularly true for women artists, who had even more difficulty accessing video cameras and recording devices, and produced far fewer works in this genre than their male colleagues. To compensate for this inequality, the feminist history of video art in Poland has already included certain film experiments by women artists as video works made with substitute technical means.<sup>7</sup>

The technical conditions were intertwined with artistic factors. Video activities emerged here in a field already marked by conceptual art and analytical tendencies in photography and film. As a result, video art, which initially did not even bear this name here, adopted many ideas, tendencies, and creative habits that had been developed by the other “mechanical means of recording and transmission”.<sup>8</sup> A space of continuity and transmedial exchange was created between conceptual practices that focused on these technical media; it was best expressed in the concept of “photomedialism”, which was coined and developed in the second half of the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Photography also functioned as an extended, albeit substitute, form of existence and distribution of video art. It

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7 Marika Kuźmicz, “Highly Limited Access: Women and Early Video in Poland,” Laura Leuzzi, Elaine Shemilt, Stephen Patridge (ed.), *EWVA European Women's Video Art in the 70s and 80s*, John Libbey Publishing, Herts 2019, p. 157–175.

8 *Mechanical Means of Recording and Transmission. Film, Television, Photography, Sound* was the title of the Workshop of the Film Form’s two-day event at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw in April 1975.

9 See Jerzy Olek, “Foto-Medium,” and Jan Stanisław Wojciechowski, “Konceptualizm stylistyki fotomedialnej,” Jerzy Olek (ed.), *Foto-Medium-Art*, Ośrodek Kultury i Sztuki we Wrocławiu, Wrocław 1979, p. 17–44; both texts were originally published in 1977.

was used to document and present not only ephemeral video performances and installations but also video stills of works on tape. Photographic images were combined with textual descriptions and conceptual schemes to create “video panels” that could be displayed at exhibitions or potentially reproduced in print, sent by post, etc. They were sanctioned by conceptualism with its notion of art as an idea, information, and communication, but they could also fulfil pragmatic functions, replacing tape screenings when, for example, the video recorder available in an art space could not play the tape or the institution had not managed to borrow any such equipment. For these technical and organisational reasons, documentation boards dominated many video art presentations; in some cases, they were even the only items on display.

In the 1970s, Poland enjoyed a relatively liberal cultural policy in the field of the visual arts. There was an official state censorship institution called the Main Office for the Control of the Press, Publications and Spectacles, which was responsible for controlling art events and removing content deemed unacceptable by the Party, mainly on political or moral grounds. However, artistic experimentation in the visual arts was not banned as such. It was not only tolerated but, to some extent, encouraged and supported. Among the factors that influenced the institutional interest and visibility of video art practices, internal divisions within the artistic milieu and antagonisms between the dominant traditionalist or moderate modernist factions and the experimental neo-avant-garde played a decisive role. In effect, video art was unevenly represented in three distinct but partially overlapping institutional circuits. While it rarely entered the mainstream of representative art museums, galleries, and festivals or biennials, such as the International Print Biennial in Cracow, and it sometimes managed to find its way to more provincial ones located outside the capital, such as the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Łódź and Poznań or the Golden Grapes biennial in Zielona-Góra, it most often appeared within the country-wide network of so-called “authored” galleries. These were small alternative art spaces often operating within non-art social, cultural, and student institutions and were generally focused on new conceptual, media, and performance art. Among the most important and active ones in terms of presenting video art from Poland and abroad were the Remont Gallery, the Contemporary Gallery, the Dziekanka Studio, and the Small Gallery in Warsaw; the House of Artistic Milieus, the Trace Gallery, the Art Forum Gallery, and the Exchange Gallery in Łódź; the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin; the Photo-Medium-Art Gallery in Wrocław; and the Desa Photography Video Gallery in Cracow. A special case of a mainstream representative institution was the Museum of Art in Łódź, which was the only museum in the country specialising in modern and contemporary art. It not only organised a few events with video art performances or screenings, but also, and more importantly, it presented local artists’ video installations and works on tape abroad, in Cologne, Sydney, and Paris. At the same time, using their own informal networks of contacts and exchanges, Polish artists managed to produce and show their works in art galleries

and schools abroad, mainly in the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. They also entered transnational video art circuits.

### **Approaching television infrastructures**

In the 1970s and early 1980s, the most active artists in the emerging field of practices with television and video equipment were the core members of the Workshop of the Film Form (WFF): Wojciech Bruszewski, Paweł Kwiek, Antoni Mikołajczyk, Józef Robakowski, Andrzej Różycki, and Ryszard Waśko. Not only did they produce the largest number of works that count among the most original, radical, and rigorous ones of the period, but they were also involved in self-organisation and the building of a new artistic culture around video.<sup>10</sup> They organised and curated many of the exhibitions of the new genre in Poland and participated in numerous video art events abroad. The group was founded in 1970 as a section of the Student Scientific Circle at the State High School of Film, Television, and Theatre in Łódź. The institutional context gave the artists access to certain technical and economic means of media production, which was quite unusual in the local field of visual arts, and provided them with valuable professional contacts. Artistically, the group sought to carry out conceptual analyses of technical media and to experiment with unlocking their hidden potential so that they could become new cognitive instruments for experiencing the world.

WFF's very first works that, in retrospect, can be considered as video practices appeared in February 1973 at the Museum of Art in Łódź. During a month-long *Action Workshop*, which was a series of daily exhibitions, concerts, performances, transmissions, and installations, the artists used television equipment to fill the fine arts museum with "brute" everyday realities. While Paweł Kwiek showed *Empty TV Screen*, an antenna-disconnected TV set that produced audiovisual noise, Andrzej Różycki used another monitor to bring the state Polish Television broadcast into the exhibition space. During this *Television Seance*, the artist periodically drew on the screen, following the shapes of the objects visible on it. Finally, as part of the group's collective action *Television Transmission*, images of everyday life from three locations outside the museum building were continuously transmitted into the museum space. The action was carried out with professional TV cameras, a broadcast truck, hundreds of metres of cable, and operating staff, all of which were provided by one of the group's supporters at the Film School.

The very same truck was used a few months later by Wojciech Bruszewski<sup>11</sup> to produce

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10 On WFF's experimental practices, including video art, see Ryszard W. Kluszczyński, *Workshop of the Film Form 1970–1977*, exhibition catalogue, Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2000.

11 For a detailed chronological account of Bruszewski's art activities, including works with video, see Janusz Zagrodzki, "Wojciech Bruszewski (8 March 1947–6 September 2009). Artistic Biography," Elżbieta Fuchs, Janusz Zagrodzki (ed.), *Wojciech Bruszewski. Fenomeny percepcji / Phenomena of Perception*, Miejska Galeria Sztuki, Łódź 2010, p. 33–253.

*Pictures Language*, the first “tv-tape,” in Poland, as the artist called it.<sup>12</sup> Co-authored with the poet Piotr Bernacki, the work experimented with the idea of language as a factor in human perception of the world. After establishing a pictorial code by assigning letters of the alphabet to various objects in a rural landscape, a series of images were recorded that corresponded to the sequence of letters in a banal language sentence. The tape was shown only twice before, in 1973: at the Film School in Łódź and at the EL Gallery in Elbląg, during the 5<sup>th</sup> Biennial of Spatial Forms “Cinelaboratory”, organised by WFF.<sup>13</sup> Afterwards, the recording was erased, and since then, the work has been shown in the form of a documentation panel with photos and an explanatory text.

In November 1974, when another WFF supporter at the Film School gave the group with access to a Polish Television studio in Warsaw, Bruszewski and Kwiek seized the opportunity to record their performances with TV cameras and mixers. The material was broadcast country-wide on Channel 2 in May 1975, along with a selection of experimental films by WFF. In *Space Transmission*, Bruszewski used a multi-broadcast transmission with three cameras and two monitors placed in the studio space to create a continuity between material reality and its media image and to introduce a non-linear, multi-perspective narrative structure. Kwiek, for his part, followed the cybernetic idea of the feedback loop in his three performances, *Video A, C, and P*, to create a complex tele-experience of himself, his spaced-out and tele-moving body, and his image-mediated consciousness. Alternating between the roles of the performer, observer, and broadcast director, he used TV cameras, monitors, and mixers to interact with and alter the transmitted image in real time. Among other things, he was able to create the effect of “touching” graphic elements visible on the screen with his hand or drawing in the immediate area of the video image.

### **Translocal and transnational networks**

1975–1976 saw a significant increase in video activity. New ways of accessing not only professional television equipment but also amateur portable video cameras and recorders were created and used. More artists took up the medium, and a translocal network of collaboration and exchange began to develop. Polish artists also entered transnational and transregional video art institutional networks, within which they could show their works and produce new ones abroad. Moreover, the concept of “video art” itself was transferred to Poland and adapted here, as the first collective exhibitions of foreign and domestic artists were organised under this title.

Tomek Kawiak, a Polish émigré who moved to Paris in the early 1970s, was instrumental in

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12 Wojciech Bruszewski, “Eastern West and Western East,” quoted in Janusz Zagrodzki, “Wojciech Bruszewski (8 March 1947–6 September 2009). Artistic Biography,” p. 226.

13 Tomasz Samosionek, “Rozmowa z Wojciechem Bruszewskim”, idem, *Videoart. Sztuka wideo w Polsce 1973–1985*, p. 249.

organising a two-week show by a cosmopolitan group of Paris-based artists entitled *Video Art and Sociological Art*, which took place in July 1975 at the Contemporary Gallery in Warsaw.<sup>14</sup> In 1974–1975, while developing his sociologically oriented concept and practice of the art of barter exchange called “trocart”, Kawiak made three video recordings: *Troc Art*, *A Notice to the People – Let’s Exchange!*, and *The Escutcheon of Neuenkirchen*. They were presented as part of transnational video art events in which Kawiak participated as part of a milieu that had gathered around the Sociological Art Collective (Hervé Fischer, Fred Forest, and Jean-Paul Thenot). These events included the comprehensive show *Artists’ Videotapes* in Brussels in February–March 1975, *Video International* in Aarhus in February 1976, and several editions of the nomadic International Open Encounter on Video between 1975 and 1977.

Back in Poland, in the summer of 1975, Jolanta Marcolla became the first female artist to make a series of video recordings. After receiving her conceptual sketches of the works to be produced, Jorge Glusberg, the director of the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAyC) in Buenos Aires, invited her to participate in the 4<sup>th</sup> International Open Encounter on Video, which was to be held in October–November of that year at the CAyC in Buenos Aires. Marcolla used the formal invitation as a “pass” to a Polish Television studio in Warsaw, where she recorded *Dimension 1–4*, a series of actions involving closed-circuit performative installations. From an implicitly gendered perspective, they addressed the issues of transmission and reproduced reality, offered media self-analysis through the use of the recursive image, and explored the impact of mediated telepresence on human interaction and self-awareness. After the tape with the recordings was presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Open Encounter on Video, it was transferred to the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the event in Antwerp in February 1976, and later on to the 7<sup>th</sup> edition in Barcelona in February 1977. It was then lost and has never reappeared. In Poland, the artist showed *Dimension 1–4* only as a photographic documentation at several exhibitions in the 1970s.<sup>15</sup>

Between mid-1975 and early 1976, WFF had access to the television studio at the Film School to produce a series of works recorded on tape. In *Video M, N, S, and T*, Kwiek constructed closed-circuit performative installations in which he used a mixer to pretend to touch and interact with his transmitted image, creating an effect of continuity and feedback between material reality and its media representation. Bruszewski manipulated the viewer’s sensory perception by introducing discrepancies between the image and sound of an object striking a surface in *Teaspoon* and *Matchbox*. Robakowski used video as a tool for self-examination, transforming banal everyday activities into signs that convey ideas, as in *Functions* and *Dramaturgical Exercise*. He also began

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14 See Tomasz Załuski, “Transnational Collaboration and Cultural Transfers. Two Exhibitions in Poland: *Video Art and Sociological Art* (1975) and *Video Art* (1976),” in this volume.

15 Tomasz Załuski, “Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk. Wczesne realizacje z użyciem wideo w lubelskich galeriach Labirynt i BWA w latach 1976–1984,” *Sztuka i Dokumentacja*, no. 27 (2022), p. 187–189.

to explore the relationship between the performative power of words, sometimes in the form of instructions or commands, and material things or bodily actions, as in *Mine* and *Instruction*.<sup>16</sup> The growing collection of WFF recordings was shown, along with documentation panels, at the Golden Grape biennial in Zielona Góra in September 1975, and at the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Łódź in January 1976. The following month, the works went on tour abroad: they were presented at *Video International* in Aarhus, at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Open Encounter on Video in Antwerp, and during the group's show at de Appel in Amsterdam. Although WFF's first encounter with foreign video art had taken place already in 1972 in Edinburgh, where they had seen Charlotte Moorman perform *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* by Nam June Paik,<sup>17</sup> it was their visit to de Appel that provided the group, particularly Robakowski and Bruszewski, with an apt opportunity to become acquainted with the Western video art scene. At this time, the gallery had already amassed a collection of some 80 tapes with works from the USA, Western Europe, and Japan.<sup>18</sup> Robakowski and Bruszewski were able to view the collection during their stay, documenting it by making notes on individual works and photographing their stills on monitors.

Some other members of WFF also found their visits abroad fruitful in 1976. Kazimierz Bendkowski, who worked outside of the group's core, went to the International Cultural Centrum (ICC) in Antwerp in January, where he had been awarded a scholarship. During his stay, he recorded three works on tape, including *Relative Image – Drink Image*, which experimented with transforming the sound of an activity into its alternative image. The following month, the artist presented the recordings at the 5<sup>th</sup> International Open Encounters on Video, which was held at the ICC. Waśko, who was also present at the event, seized the opportunity and used the video equipment available there to record closed-circuit performances that he had already designed the year before, including *Space Out of* and *Weariness of My Legt*. A few months later, he began collaborating with Gallery m in Bohum, and in July he was able to use the gallery's space and video equipment to re-perform and record the pieces again, as well as to produce several new ones, including *Measurement* and *A Corner*.<sup>19</sup> His main concern was with material space in its internal relations as confronted with its video transmission, especially when the latter was affected by the body movements of the performing cameraman. In the late 1970s, the gallery helped the artist to disseminate these works by sending them to a number of video shows and festivals in Western

16 Other members of the WFF, such as Różycki and Mikołajczyk, as well as Zbigniew Rybczyński, a filmmaker loosely associated with the group (who later, in 1983, won an Oscar for his short animated video-like film *Tango*), also managed to record some pieces on videotape. However, these were soon erased.

17 In August–September 1972, the WFF was in Edinburgh for *Atelier 72. An Exhibition of Contemporary Polish Artists* organised by the Richard Demarco Gallery as part of the Edinburgh International Festival. Moorman's performance, in turn, was part of the visit to Edinburgh by the International Carnival of Experimental Sound (ICES–72) held at the Roundhouse Chalk Farm in London in August 1972.

18 Marga van Mechelen, *De Appel. Performances, Installations, Video, Projects, 1975–1983*, de Appel, Amsterdam 2006, p. 276–279.

19 See *Elementary Works by Ryszard Wasko*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Folkwang Essen, Galerie m, Bochum 1981, p. 27–39.

Europe.

Another group that actively engaged with video both in Poland and abroad was the Gallery of Recent Art (GRA) from Wrocław, whose members included the duo Antosz & Andzia (Stanisław Antosz and Katarzyna Chierowska), Anna Kutera, Romuald Kutera, Piotr Olszański, and Lech Mrożek. The group closely worked with WFF in various locations around the country, and the two collectives created a translocal network of contacts and exchanges. In September 1975, during the F-ART student festival in Gdańsk, Olszański and Mrożek organised and participated in a video workshop, together with Romuald Kutera, Goran Trbuljak from Yugoslavia, and Niels Lomholt from Denmark. This was the first time a Sony Portapak had been used for artistic purposes in Poland. The entire set, consisting of a camera, a video recorder, and a monitor, was borrowed from the Vladimir Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk.<sup>20</sup> Olszański seized the opportunity to record several video performances, including *Us*, *Synergy*, *Mental Television*, and *Meaningful Noise*, which were short elementary analyses of the relationships between the performer's physical experience, video devices, and media representations of reality. Additionally, he recorded a longer piece entitled *Social Games*, documenting dialogic activities undertaken as part of RSA's interest in human relationships. The Portapak also served to document Anna Kutera's participatory and implicitly gendered action *Presentation*, in which she engaged in conversations with several male artists present at the festival. During the next edition of F-ART in September 1976, the same equipment played the starring role in Antosz & Andzia's performative installation *Environmental Open-Circuit Video*, in which the duo mimicked conventions of media structural analysis and mixed them with popular culture clichés.<sup>21</sup>

In terms of presenting their work abroad, the members of RSA, together with WFF and Kawiak, took part in *Video International* in Aarhus in February 1976. Olszański's tape with the above-mentioned pieces was included in the main programme of the show, while Mrożek, Kutera, and Henryk Gajewski, an artist who also ran the Remont Gallery in Warsaw, made video performances on the spot. All three of them, Mrożek's *This Time Describes Another Situation*, Kutera's *Here*, and Gajewski's *I am Standing Here*, dealt with the relativity of space-time and media context.

In mid- and late 1976, members of WFF and RSA collaborated on several occasions. In June, during the 5<sup>th</sup> Festival of Art School Students in Cieszyn, Olszański organised a video workshop that included closed-circuit performative installations by Andrzej Paruzel, Janusz Kołodrubiec, and Januszczyk Szczerek; at the time, all three young artists were part of a wider milieu gathering around WFF. While Paruzel's *Video-Photographic Situations* involved multiple

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20 Author's electronic correspondence with Lech Mrożek, July 2019.

21 Tomasz Załuski, "Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk. Wczesne realizacje z użyciem wideo w lubelskich galeriach Labirynt i BWA w latach 1976–1984," p. 194–196.

transmissions and the artist's interaction with his own image on the screen, the other artists went a step further, creating their works in the open space of the city and actively involving the public. In *Mirror II*, Kołodrubiec allowed the viewer to see his transmitted image on the screen while the hidden artist could manipulate this image electronically, triggering feedback and further interaction from the viewer. Szczerek's *VII Situations* also challenged the one-way broadcast of conventional television by constructing variable arrangements of cameras, monitors, and spatial screens that allowed viewers to observe and interact with themselves and each other through video transmissions. A few months later, in September, during an outdoor workshop in Osetnica, Bruszewski, while working on his installation *From X to X*, which evoked looped continuity between material reality and its transmitted image, assisted Kutera and Mrozek in the production of *Correction* and *Relations*, respectively. In these performative pieces, the artists further developed their interest in contextual relativity. Finally, the event that marked the culmination of the networked collaboration between the two groups was the *Video Art* exhibition organised in October at the Labyrinth Gallery in Lublin on Robakowski's initiative. The show was an attempt to bring together the results of the scattered practices of both groups over the previous years.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly afterwards, in December 1976, during the *the Labyrinth Gallery Offer* festival, video practices by Polish artists were included in a broad international survey of contemporary art and shown alongside foreign works. In the experimental film and video section, curated by Robakowski, Bruszewski and Kołodrubiec showed their closed-circuit installations *Proposal for the Labyrinth Gallery* and *Time*, respectively, both of which used simple means to create striking perceptual paradoxes. The Photo-Art section, curated by Zdzisław Sosnowski, featured photographic documentation of video works by Antonio Muntadas from Spain, including *The Last 10 Minutes*, and *Three Silent & Secret Acts* by Douglas Davis from the USA. The piece that captured the audience's attention, however, was *Noli me videre* by Wolf Kahlen from West Berlin, a video performance that targeted the universal culture of surveillance. Enclosed in a room with no ceiling, he looked at a monitor with his transmitted image and tried to escape the camera's gaze, while the audience watched his unsuccessful attempts from above.<sup>23</sup>

### **New tendencies, new actors, new configurations**

By the beginning of 1977, WFF had already ceased to exist as a group, and its former core

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22 See Tomasz Załuski, "Transnational Collaboration and Cultural Transfers. Two Exhibitions in Poland: *Video Art and Sociological Art* (1975) and *Video Art* (1976)."

23 Tomasz Załuski, "Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk. Wczesne realizacje z użyciem wideo w lubelskich galeriach Labirynt i BWA w latach 1976–1984," p. 197–198. The performance was videotaped. In 2010, the artist used the recording to create a video sculpture of the same title, which is currently part of collection of the WRO Art Center in Wrocław.

members, while still occasionally collaborating with each other, intensified their mutual competition and preferred to act individually. During one of their last collective initiatives, *The Theory-Praxis Workshop* in November 1976 at the House of Creative Milieus in Łódź, WFF presented a number of video installations and performances that explored the relativity of the media image. The theme was present, above all, in Mikołajczyk's installations *Reality – Image of Reality*, *Object in Motion*, *Relative Image*, and *Apparent Image*, in which he exposed the constructedness of media representations and attempted to expand the perception of space through the movement and transmission of the camera.<sup>24</sup> A different approach was proposed in Kołodrubiec's *Analysis*, a multi-element closed-circuit installation that produced multiple screen-to-screen transmissions and zoom-ins of *The Gallery of 34 Million*, a then-popular programme on current events in the visual arts broadcast by Polish Television. The potential of technical media to provide access to phenomena beyond human cognitive structures was evoked by Bruszewski's *Outside*, in which the artist, performing what he called "a practice of traps,"<sup>25</sup> modified the camera to enable the transmission of both "regular" and mirror-reversed images of reality.

In early 1977, Bruszewski sold his car on the black market in Poland and went to West Berlin, where he spent the money on a Sony AV 3620CE video recorder. He was the first artist in Poland to own a video recording device. In the months that followed, he produced a series of analytical and witty works on tape that created uncanny perceptual paradoxes and questioned habitual expectations of sensory experience. Under the general title of *Video Studies*, and divided into four sets: *The Video Touch*, *Sound Pieces*, *Time Structures*, and *Between March and June*, the works were included in the video section of documenta 6 in Kassel as the only ones from East-Central Europe.<sup>26</sup> Works from this collection were also shown in a number of art spaces in Poland. In the same period, Bruszewski's equipment was used by the artist and his then partner Irena Flis, who recorded a set of works, such as *The Variable Position*, *The TV Depth*, and *The Video Directions*, presenting her own take on the structural analysis of media. In 1979, after leaving Poland for Sweden, she gained access to VHS video equipment at the Swedish Film Institute in Stockholm, and produced another group of works, including *Around My Head* and *Light and Dark and Me*, in which she turned to existential self-examination.<sup>27</sup>

In 1977–1978, Robakowski continued to produce video performances, such as *Test I, II, III*, and *The TV-Face*, which, among other things, dealt with the question of language instructions or commands that shape the ways of behaviour and bodily performance of other people. At the same

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24 See Anna Maria Leśniewska (ed.), *Antoni Mikołajczyk. Przestrzeń światła / Space of Light*, exhibition catalogue, The Xawery Dunikowski Museum – a branch of the National Museum in Warsaw, Warsaw 1998, p. 84–88.

25 Wojciech Bruszewski, "Outside," idem, *Practice of Traps*, self-published, Łódź 1976, p. 28.

26 See Manfred Scheckenberger (ed.), *Documenta 6. Fotografie, Film, Video*, Paul Dierichs KG & Co., Kassel 1977, p. 326.

27 Irena Flis, "Video Realisations Lodz – Stockholm 1976–1979," flyer; author's conversation with the artist, November 2023.

time, he began to develop in the field of video the practice of “mechanical-biological recordings”, which had emerged from his earlier film experiments. The idea was to free the movements of a film or video camera as much as possible from the conscious control of the human mind so that the device could, as a technical prosthesis of the human body, could develop its own autonomous gaze and present its own way of seeing the world. In 1977, the artist produced *On the Line* with the help of a sports club employee who was in charge of a Sony Portapak and used it to informally record commissioned footage for money. It was a video performance in which he induced various camera movements by walking, running, and jumping with it along a long fabric strap on the ground. He also began making *An Exercise for Two Hands*, an open-air video performance in which he held two video cameras and swung them freely around his body and over his head, transmitting the images they produced to monitors in a gallery space. In 1978–1979, he presented the work in several art spaces in Poland and abroad, including Zagreb, Vienna, and Amsterdam, where it was performed at the video section of the exhibition *Works and Words*.<sup>28</sup>

A different coupling of the human body and television technology was offered by Kwiek in his performative closed-circuit installation *Breath – An Information Channel*, which he presented in 1978 in Poznań. After attaching his naked chest to the brightness knob of a monitor with a wire, the artist was able to make his recursive image on the screen rhythmically disappear and reappear by inhaling and exhaling. He also turned to participatory actions. In *The Line*, performed at the House of Creative Milieus in Łódź in 1977, he had members of the audience draw scores for the movement of the camera that was to portrait them. In a two-part performance made during the collective event *Unidentified Activity* at Labirynt Gallery in Lublin and at the House of Creative Milieus in Łódź in 1978, he asked the audience to direct his camera movements around a board, the recording of which he would later present on a monitor carried on his back. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to get an audience to organise themselves, come up with a concept for a video work, and then record it together, as in *Three Portraits* at the Labirynt Gallery in 1977.<sup>29</sup>

This social and participatory direction pursued by Kwiek became also increasingly important for Paruzel. After performing several versions of his *Video-Photographic Situations* in 1976 and presenting their recordings and photo documentation, including at Galerie Lara Vinci in Paris in February–March 1977, Paruzel made *Triangle* and *Rectangle*, a pair of closed-circuit installations that used the camera’s point of view and an anamorphic perspective to create the illusion of continuity between geometric shapes visible in material space and on the screen of the monitor. His later closed-circuit installations, *Supplement*, *45° Angle*, *90° Angle*, and *Diagonal of*

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28 Wojciech Bruszewski, Janusz Kołodrubiec, Tadeusz Porada, *Sztuka wideo w Polsce do 1980 roku / Video Art in Poland until 1980*, tapewritten documents in Tadeusz Porada’s archive.

29 Tomasz Załuski, “Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk. Wczesne realizacje z użyciem wideo w lubelskich galeriach Labirynt i BWA w latach 1976–1984,” p. 202.

*the Square*, went further in this direction, inviting viewers to manipulate long sticks suspended in space until these, anamorphically transmitted to the monitor, formed specific shapes on the screen. While the video camera was shown here to be an active part of reality and an element to be interacted with, the transmission circuit became a means of shaping human self-relation and self-analysis. Finally, in his participatory *Experiment with a Group of People and Video Recording*, performed twice in 1978 at the Dziekanka Studio and the State Higher School of Music in Warsaw, the artist used video equipment (Sony U-Matic) to test the audiovisual perception and memory of an audience required to recreate links between particular images and sounds.<sup>30</sup>

As far as the members of GRA were concerned, video proved to be an episode in their artistic development, and after 1976, they used the medium only sporadically. Another group, however, was becoming active and visible in the field of video art in Poland, namely, the Laboratory of Presentational Techniques. It was founded in Katowice in 1975 as a student scientific circle at the local Graphics Department of the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts. Its core members were Jacek Singer, Jadwiga Singer, and Grzegorz Zgraja. In November 1976, during a photographic symposium in Uniejów near Łódź, they presented *Confrontation*, a multimedia spectacle that involved video cameras, TV monitors, photography, and electronic music to confront reality with its media representations and create an immersive sensory experience. Over the next two years, owing to Zgraja's efforts, the group was able to use Polish amateur video equipment available at the Technological Progress Centre in Katowice, and later professional Ampex video recorders and television cameras at the television studio of the Silesian University of Technology in Gliwice. Jacek Singer's *Relation Me–Video, Movement, Scale, 1000–1*, and *Flash* of 1977 sought to reveal the immanent reality of the medium by manipulating technical aspects of the equipment, producing distortions of the transmitted images, and combining video with photography, while Jadwiga Singer's *Conversation I–III* explored the impact of video cameras and monitors on human interactions. Zgraja's *12 Sounds of Coca-Cola, Etude for Cymbals*, and *Audiovisual Experiment I–II* from the same year manipulated the relationship between image and sound to disrupt the viewer's expectations and distort their perception of movement and space. The task of altering the experience of space was also undertaken the following year by Jacek Singer in his multi-camera works *Outwards* and *Inwards*, as well as in the Singers' multi-camera and multi-monitor project *Installation*, which unfortunately remained unrealised. What the Singers did manage to perform together was *Tele-Graphic Action*, which combined video transmission with painting raster-like elements on cardboard and the TV screen, thus expanding the field of graphic art. Zgraja, for his

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30 See Andrzej Paruzel. *Video Installations 1976–1978*, exhibition catalogue, Dom Środowisk Twórczych, Łódź 1978; Dorota Grubba-Thiede, "Three minutes in a given place. Andrzej Paruzel's *Revealing Space*," Romuald K. Bochyński (ed.), *Andrzej Paruzel. Szczekał na mnie wnuk pasa, który szczekał na Strzemińskiego / I Was Barked at by the Grandson of the Dog that Barked at Strzemiński*, exhibition catalogue, Mazovian Centre of Contemporary Art Elektrownia in Radom, Radom 2019, p. 25–69.

part, continued to work with sound. In *Audiovisual Dissonance* he introduced glitches into a popular song, and in *Distance* he manipulated the sounds of a ping-pong ball to make a table tennis player compete with himself on two spaced monitors. In his *Head and Transformation*, he proposed a complex integration of video, music, photography, and graphics. The latter work was particularly significant for its inclusion of what the artists called a “musical graphic print”. This was a photograph transformed into a halftone polygraphic image that, after the introduction of linear divisions, served as a score to be freely interpreted musically. During the ceremony for the defence of his diploma in June 1978, Zgraja not only showed the four video recordings made that year, but also invited a group of experimental music instrumentalists to perform his graphic prints live. According to all available information, the diploma was the first to include video-based works to be presented at an academy of fine arts or a higher school of visual arts in Poland.<sup>31</sup>

The members of LTP presented their video works, both in the form of tape recordings and documentation panels, at the intersection of two institutional circuits. They participated in events organised by alternative “authored” galleries, such as the Wrocław Photography Gallery, later renamed as the Photo-Medium-Art Gallery, and the Studio Gallery in Warsaw. The most important initiative they were part of was *I am. International Artists’ Meeting*, a performance and video art event organised by Gajewski at the Remont Gallery in Warsaw in April 1978. Works by LTP and Kwiek were shown alongside tapes produced by artists, collectives, and art spaces that were part of Gajewski’s Dutch network: video works and documentation of performances by Ulisses Carrion, Martin Hendriks, Gerrit Dekker, Buky Grinberg, Marina Abramović and Ulay; Raul Marroquin’s tapes from Agora Studio in Maastricht; a collection of video art pieces by the Amsterdam-based Videoheads; and finally, de Appel’s *Dutch Week*, which included performances by Rob Malasch, Harrie de Kroon, Wally Stevens, Nikolaus Urban, and André Swagers, among others.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, LTP participated in graphic art exhibitions, as the institutional field of this fine art discipline proved to be relatively open to video. The most representative event that featured their video works was the 7<sup>th</sup> International Print Biennial in Cracow. One of the aims of this edition of the biennial was to legitimise to photography, film, and video as media that seemed to be expanding the field of graphic arts.<sup>33</sup>

### **Transmissions, narrations, relations**

In late 1977, Bruszewski began making video performances and installations most of which

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31 Tomasz Załuski, “Experiment and Legitimization. Video in the Expanded Field of Graphic Art,” Marika Kuźmich (ed.), *Laboratory of Presentation Techniques*, Arton Foundation, Warsaw 2020, p. 111–119.

32 *I am. International Artists’ Meetings*, flyers, the Remont Gallery file in the archive of the Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle.

33 Tomasz Załuski, “Experiment and Legitimization. Video in the Expanded Field of Graphic Art,” p. 116.

were focused on intercepting and altering television broadcasts. In *Transmission*, performed at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin, the artist received the current TV audio broadcast through headphones connected to the television set and recounted it to the audience in his own words. In *TV Music* and *Television Chicken* from 1979–1980, the visual broadcast was “translated” into automatically generated asemantic sounds reminiscent of white noise or a clucking hen, which seemed to jam or mock television talking heads, including Communist Party propaganda. Both installations relied on appendages attached to the television set that used light sensors to read the brightness of the image at several points on the screen and transformed the visual signals into sounds of appropriate pitch. Another such installation, *Sternmusic* from 1980, used a modified “sonic camera” to convert textual information from a press release, specifically, from the German magazine “Stern,” into sharp and noisy audio signals. A different problem was addressed in *Installation for Mr. Muybridge* of 1978, which continued Bruszewski’s interest in perceptual paradoxes and the relativity of cognition. The complex closed-circuit structure used two cameras rotating on their axes and two monitors to show how an apparently still image of an immobile object is produced by a double movement of the “observer”.

For Robakowski, who had challenged the state system of film production in Poland, video as a tool for individual and private production seemed to be a perfect extension and replacement for the film camera. In 1978, the artist created his concept of an “own cinema,”<sup>34</sup> which was also to include his video practice. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, he was still unable to use video on a regular basis and, more importantly, to buy quality tapes, so he produced footage with his 16mm film camera and only transferred it to video a few years later. He coined the concept of “video-film” to describe this transmedial practice, which was necessitated by technical and economic difficulties.<sup>35</sup> It refers primarily to *From My Window*, one of his best-known works, which he began shooting on film in 1978 and continued on video from the late 1980s until 1999. The work, which has become a singular testimony to the political and personal upheavals of the time as seen from his apartment, marked Robakowski’s developing interest in self-examination and fictional autobiographical narrative through which he commented on his life circumstances and experiences. Another good example of this new approach was his video performance *I Am Television*, made during the 19<sup>th</sup> International Meetings of Artists, Scientists and Art Theoreticians in Osieki near Koszalin in 1981. While the camera transmitted the image of his hand, Robakowski narrated the life adventures of each of his fingers in a storytelling manner, full of nerve and humour. The performance was repeated and filmed in 1982 as *About My Fingers*, and it was not until 1985

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34 See Bożena Czubak (ed.), *Józef Robakowski. My Own Cinema*, Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 2012.

35 See the artist’s webpage: [http://www.robakowski.eu/filmografia\\_video.html](http://www.robakowski.eu/filmografia_video.html) (accessed: 15.10.2023), and Piotr Krajewski, “The Hidden Decade,” Piotr Krajewski, Violetta Kutlabasis-Krajewska (ed.), *The Hidden Decade. Polish Video Art 1985–1995*, WRO Media Art Center, Wrocław 2010, p. 176–177.

that the final version appeared on VHS tape.

In the late 1970s, Mikołajczyk continued to expand the experience of space through video transmission. In the exhibition *Works and Words*, he used a car ride and various hand-drawn patterns as alternative scores for camera's trajectory and the structuring of video images. In 1980–1981, he incorporated video into multimedia installations in which the question of a new “non-existent” reality emerging within and immanent to media operations came to the fore. In two versions of *Transmission of Reality*, presented in 1981 at the 19<sup>th</sup> International Meetings of Artists, Scientists and Art Theoreticians in Osieki, and during the international exhibition *Construction in Process* in Łódź, he recorded, transmitted, and transformed a trace of a material object with and across various fine arts and technical media.<sup>36</sup>

After 1978, LTP effectively ceased to exist, although its former members continued to show their previous works in collective exhibitions under the group's aegis until 1985. As for new video productions, the Singers stopped making works in the medium after 1979, while Zgraja developed his own concept of “Audio-Video-Art”, in which he continued to integrate video with “musical graphic prints” and live musical performance. In *Combatibilium II*, “a quartet for two performers and a video camera” presented at the 23<sup>rd</sup> International “Warsaw Autumn” Festival of Contemporary Music, pre-recorded musical parts played from video tape accompanied the musicians' live performance, and were also used to manipulate the temporal and spatial perception of the audience. In the early 1980s, the artist tested a few variations of this concept, and during *Audio-Video-Art* at Gallery 6 in Gliwice in 1984, he used several VHS cameras, recorders, and TV monitors to present “a quartet for one performer”. He also had one of his musical graphic print concerts recorded on video.<sup>37</sup>

Following his growing interest in participatory and sociologically oriented art practices, Paruzel, together with Kołodrubiec, Szczerek, Tomasz Konart, and Piort Weychert, formed in 1979 a collective called Group T.<sup>38</sup> Video was used to document exercises in existential self-confrontation as well as communication and interaction between the group members. In 1980–1981, the artist collaborated with the artist and his then partner Małgorzata Paruzel and his Group T colleague Weychert on an artistic-sociological research initiative in Koluszki near Łódź. They traced the lives and conducted interviews with women who were students of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, a pair of Constructivist artists who lived in the town and taught at the local School of Industry and Commerce between 1926 and 1931. The video documentation of these community-based activities, which came to be known as *The Koluszki Project*, was presented in the early 1980s

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36 Anna Maria Leśniewska (ed.), *Antoni Mikołajczyk. Przestrzeń światła / Space of Light*, p. 89–105.

37 Tomasz Załuski, “Experiment and Legitimization. Video in the Expanded Field of Graphic Art,” p. 118.

38 The “T” letter stood for three Polish words: *twórczość* [creativity], *teoria* [theory], and *terapia* [therapy].

at the 12<sup>th</sup> Paris Biennial in 1982,<sup>39</sup> and at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1983 as part of the exhibition *Présences Polonaises*.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, few video works were made by women artists. For some of them, such as Barbara Kozłowska, the first opportunity to work with video turned out to be the only one. In 1978, at the Gallery X of the Union of Polish Visual Artists in Wrocław, she presented the video performance and participatory installation *Point of View* which played with the image of Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* and the aesthetic tradition of perfect body proportions. The performance involved her painting on a reproduction of da Vinci's work and attempting to fit her body into various geometric shapes while the audience gathered in other gallery spaces were able to look at her from different angles via two video feeds. During the second part of the show, the audience not only watched the recording of the performance on monitors, but could also create and observe their own body performances against a screen with a geometric shape thanks to another closed-circuit installation. After the event, as much as the artist wanted to continue her video practice and even drew conceptual schemes for new works, she could not get access to the necessary equipment, and they remained unfulfilled projects.<sup>40</sup> On a few occasions, Małgorzata Potocka used a video camera and a video recorder. In *2 x 15*, made in 1978, a group of 15 people were transformed into a Dadaist cacophonous choir by shouting their numbers in a row, their voices accumulating and overlapping. The work had two versions, an indoor and an outdoor one, the latter adding sounds of the natural environment to the human voices. In *Elevator*, made two years later, the artist took on a more sociological, survey-like approach. She rode up and down in a lift in the morning hours with a video camera, she was asking each person who entered the cabin what important things they were going to do that day and recording their answers.<sup>41</sup> Finally, in 1981, at the 19<sup>th</sup> International Meetings of Artists, Scientists and Art Theoreticians in Osieki, Anna Kutera made the video performance *Talking to Oneself*, in which she used pre-recorded footage to enter into a dialogue with the image of herself visible on the monitor. The performance was repeated twice in 1985, first as a solo presentation at the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Lublin and later as part of the collective exhibition *Contemporary Art from Poland* at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Canada.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Andrzej Paruzel, "Commentaire," Françoise Menage, Vittoria Paganini (ed.), *XIIème Biennale de Paris*, exhibition catalogue, Biennale de Paris, Paris 1982, p. 320, reprinted in Romuald K. Bochyński (ed.), *Andrzej Paruzel*.

*Szczekał na mnie wnuk pasa, który szczekał na Strzemińskiego / I Was Barked at by the Grandson of the Dog that Barked at Strzemiński*, p. 73–75.

40 "Chronology," and Marika Kuźmicz, "Barbara Kozłowska – My Multiplied «I»," Marika Kuźmicz (ed.), *Barbara Kozłowska*, Arton Foundation and Wrocław Contemporary Museum, Warsaw and Wrocław 2020, p. 174–175, 217.

41 Małgorzata Potocka, "Film, Photo, Video 78–82," typescript in the artist's archive, and Marika Kuźmicz (ed.), *Małgorzata Potocka*, Arton Foundation, Warsaw 2023, p. 86–87, 116.

42 Tomasz Załuski, "Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk. Wczesne realizacje z użyciem wideo w lubelskich galeriach Labirynt i BWA w latach 1976–1984," p. 209.

## Documentation and distribution

The turn of the decade also saw an increase in the distribution of video works and a growing tendency to document performance art events on tape. In 1977, the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin hosted Uta Brandes-Erlhoff and Michael Erhloff from West Germany, who presented their tape recordings on CCTV surveillance and social activism, while in 1978, video performances by the Munich-based Austrian artist Flatz, and Albert van der Weide from the Netherlands were presented there.<sup>43</sup> In July–August 1979, at Gajewski’s initiative and in collaboration with Jack Moore of the Videoheads, the Remont Gallery in Warsaw organised *Pop Video*. It was a daily evening dance party during which tapes were shown on several monitors. The selection included British and American popular music concerts by, among others, the Sex Pistols, Santana, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Jimmi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, and Elvis Presley; Western video art pieces by, among others, Charlotte Moorman, Nam June Paik, John Cage, Douglas Davis, and Vito Acconci; silent film classics; and finally, International TV Broadcast, a selection of television programmes from around the world.<sup>44</sup> In addition, new alternative “authored” galleries were opened that organised video art presentations, such as the Trace Gallery in Łódź, founded by Janusz Zagrodzki, which showed works by Mikołajczyk, Robakowski, Waśko, Group T, Kahlen, and Takahiko Iimura from Japan, or the Photo-Video Gallery of the Desa State Enterprise in Cracow, which showed, among others, tapes, installations, and documentation by Bruszewski and Peter Weibel from Austria. The Art Forum Gallery in Łódź, run by Tadeusz Porada, showcased Bruszewski’s installations in 1980 and tapes by Douglas Davis in 1981, but as early as 1979 it also began documenting on video performances presented at its venue by Polish, West Europe, and East-Central European artists. These included Jerzy Beres, Edward Łazikowski, Ewa Partum, Zbigniew Warpechowski, Roland Miller, Reindeer Werk (Tom Puckey and Dirk Larson), Missing Associates (Peter Dudar and Lily Eng), and Petr Štembera.<sup>45</sup> Documentation of performance art events brought a variety of new elements into local video production: focus on bodily presence and movement, nakedness, feminist ideas, spiritual themes, and even socio-economic critique. During their visit to Stuttgart in 1981, where they took part in the exhibition *New Art from Poland*, the KwieKulik duo (Przemysław Kwiek and Zofia Kulik) made *Supermarket*, a performance for the video camera, in which they commented, with wit and grim irony, on the contrast between the Western “consumer paradise” of the free market and the socialist shortage economy.<sup>46</sup>

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43 Ibid., p. 204–205.

44 Jacek Drabik, “Pop Video,” *Nowy Wyrzaz*, no. 9 (1979), p. 43; and author’s conversation with Henryk Gajewski, September 2023.

45 Wojciech Bruszewski, Janusz Kołodrubiec, Tadeusz Porada, *Sztuka video w Polsce do 1980 roku / Video Art in Poland until 1980*.

46 Łukasz Ronduda, Georg Schöllhammer (ed.), *KwieKulik. Zofia Kulik & Przemysław Kwiek*, trans. Marcin Wawrzyńczak et al, Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, BWA Wrocław – Galleries of Contemporary Art, Kontakt.

The Exchange Gallery in Łódź, co-founded by Robakowski and Potocka in their private apartment in 1978, also had a number of performances by various Polish artists recorded on tape. Between 1978 and 1980, Robakowski and Potocka made several trips to Western Europe, including Fulda, Kassel, Bad Hersfeld, Düsseldorf, Essen, Amsterdam, Brussels, and Eindhoven, where they displayed their photographic, film, and video works in art spaces, schools and universities. In 1981, they travelled to Budapest with Kwiek and Waśko, where they all signed the founding deed of *Infermental*, “the first international magazine on video cassettes”, conceived and launched by the Hungarian filmmaker and video artist Gábor Bódy.<sup>47</sup> Throughout the 1980s, the Exchange Gallery functioned as a nod to the *Infermental* network. Thanks to it, Robakowski began collecting tapes of video art and, within a few years had created the first such collection in Poland. Mainstream art museums and galleries in the country did not collect the new genre in the 1970s and 1980s. The first tapes were most probably acquired by the Museum of Art in Łódź in 1982, on the occasion of Douglas Davis’ exhibition *Video, Objects, Prints*. To screen the artist’s works, the museum rented video equipment, including a telebeam, from a foreign trade enterprise. After the show, Davis donated a selection of works on tape, including *Video Against Video*, *How to Make Love*, *Silver Screen*, and *The Last Videotape in the World*, and sold two others, *Post Video* and *Double Entendre*, to the museum.<sup>48</sup> The tapes did not mark the beginning of a collection of video art, though, and for the next few years, they remained the only items of this kind in the institution.

Distribution also became important to Bruszewski. He decided to compile an overview of his experiments with moving images and, in early 1978, created the tape *10 works*, a selection of four of his films transferred to video and six video works. The tape was presented, among others, at *Video Art 78* organised by the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry, and at the 4<sup>th</sup> Sydney Biennial in 1982. It also helped the artist win a DAAD art scholarship in West Berlin in 1980. Another tape that Bruszewski produced in 1978 on a Sony U-Matic, partly in colour, was *Analyses of Media, 1971–1978*, a collection of conceptual, photographic, film, and video works by nine Polish artists, including Kołodrubiec and himself. With the aim of wide distribution, he had it screened in a number of art spaces in Poland, including the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Łódź in 1978 and the Photo-Video Gallery in Cracow in 1980. The tape was also shown abroad, at the AVZ in Graz in 1978, as part of the exhibition *Art, Artist and The Media*, and at the International Centre of Photography in New York in 1979 as part of the collective exhibition *Polish Photography from 1840 to the Present*. A similar initiative of using video to document works of art, this time

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The Art Collection of Erste Group and ERSTE Foundation, KwieKulik Archive, Warsaw, Wrocław and Vienna 2012, p. 374.

47 See Tomasz Załuski, “*Infermental*. The First International Magazine on Videocassettes (1981–1991),” in this volume.

48 Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, “*Douglas Davis – Video, obiekty obrazu*. 31.03–9.05 1982, 1979–1983,” exhibition dossier, State Archive in Łódź.

made in media other than video, took place at the Photo-Medium-Art Gallery in 1980, where the tape *Cognition–Reality–Media* was produced, presenting works, statements, and discussions by a group of Wrocław-based artists.<sup>49</sup>

The need for a retrospective show of video art works made by Polish artists and their self-historicisation of these early developments was also felt. In 1980, Bruszewski, Kołodrubiec, and Porada began editing *Video Art in Poland until 1980*,<sup>50</sup> an artists' collective book that aimed to compile primary sources: lists of works, conceptual schemes and photo documentation, individual timelines of events, theoretical texts, and statements. The assembled materials were also given the form of exhibition panels and, together with the screening of tapes, were presented at the Small Gallery in Warsaw in 1980 as part of the collective exhibition *New Tools – New Artistic Ideas*, and at the Photo-Medium-Art Gallery in Wrocław the following year. Unfortunately, the book itself was never published, but it remained an important testimony and served as a rich source of information for the art-critical and historical research on Polish video art that began in the late 1980s.

### **Twilight of the long 1970s**

In December 1981, the communist authorities imposed martial law in an attempt to crush a grassroots social revolution initiated by the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union “Solidarity”. The event became a major rupture and a turning point in many fields, including the visual arts and the neo-avant-garde. All the alternative “authored” galleries were closed down, and many of them never reopened. Many artists emigrated and abandoned art practice altogether. Among the exceptions were Rybczyński and Mirosław Rogala, who both emigrated to the USA and, in the new context, managed to make some short experimental works on tape and to develop complex, multi-channel, and increasingly narrative installations respectively. As for those who stayed in Poland, many were revising their earlier conceptual and analytical art practices and trying to follow new inspirations. Of those who had worked most intensively with video in the previous decade, Kwiek and Mikołajczyk stopped using the medium for many years, while Paruzel picked up a video camera occasionally to document his performative actions. Bruszewski, who continued to divide his time between Poland and West Berlin after his DAAD scholarship in 1980–1981, made several video installations that remained rooted in his earlier ideas. In 1982, he made *Behaviour Music*, in which another “sonic camera” read his body movements and changed accordingly the pitch of a sharp, loud sound reminiscent of an alarm siren – a possible allusion to the oppressive atmosphere

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<sup>49</sup> Wojciech Bruszewski, Janusz Kołodrubiec, Tadeusz Porada, *Sztuka video w Polsce do 1980 roku / Video Art in Poland until 1980*. The *Cognition–Reality–Media* tape was produced by Andrzej Adamczak and Piotr Kukla, who were at the time students at the Film School in Łódź.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

during martial law.<sup>51</sup> The following year, at the Bureau of Artistic Exhibitions in Lublin, Bruszewski showed *Reality*, an installation that used a video camera rotating on rollers, two monitors, and two mirrors to create a perceptual paradox of the gallery space revolving around the immobile eponymous word; a version of this work, entitled *Principe – Réalité*, was also included in the *Présences Polonaises* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. By this time, however, the artist had already turned to computer art, in particular generative literature, and he soon abandoned video. Zgraja, for his part, worked on developing his integrative practice of Audio-Video-Art until the mid-1980s. In 1987, he emigrated to Braunschweig in West Germany, where he studied at the local University of Art in Gerhard Büttendörfer's experimental film and video class. Due to the quality of his video works made in Poland, he was admitted to the final year of his studies and began teaching there soon after graduation.<sup>52</sup>

Against this background, Robakowski's development in the 1980s seems quite exceptional. In the first half of the decade, when the access to video equipment was still difficult for him, he documented social realities and television broadcasts on film tape. From 1985, when he was finally able to work with video on a more regular basis, he transferred the footage to VHS, creating "video-films" such as *Appeal!*, *Art is Power!*, and *Homage to Brezhnev*. Access to a video camera, first a borrowed one and later his own, helped Robakowski's activities to flourish, resulting in over twenty new video works and documentations recorded in just two years, 1985–1986. In the late 1980s, the artist developed his interest in self-performance, narrative, and fictional autobiography; continued to experiment with altering sensory perception and cognition; and intensified his observation of social realities, including rock and punk music cultures. Before this new period in his practice began, he attempted to recapitulate earlier developments in video art in Poland. In December 1984–January 1985, he organised the *Photography, Film, Video* section of the exhibition *Intellectual Trend in Polish Art after World War II* at the Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Lublin. Intended as a comprehensive show of the most important video artists of the 1970s and early 1980s in Poland, it ended up including only documentation panels by Paruzel, Mikołajczyk, Robakowski, and Zgraja, who also showed his tapes. Nevertheless, it can be seen as a symbolic conclusion to the period of the emergence of the video art in Poland.<sup>53</sup>

### **A new chapter: institutionalisation and immersion**

In the mid-1980s, a new generation of artists began to work with video, and their approach

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51 David Crowley, "A Little Music," Marika Kuźmicz, Łukasz Mojska, Jakub Zgierski (ed.), *Wojciech Bruszewski. Across Realities*, Arton Foundation, Warsaw 2014, p. 57.

52 Author's conversation with Grzegorz Zgraja, January 2023.

53 Tomasz Załuski, "Najbardziej efemeryczna ze sztuk. Wczesne realizacje z użyciem wideo w lubelskich galeriach Labirynt i BWA w latach 1976–1984," p. 210–214.

diverged in many ways from the conceptual, analytical, participatory, or sociologically-oriented practices of their older colleagues.<sup>54</sup> This change was manifested, in an abrupt and extreme way, in Jerzy Truskowski's *Masochistic Metaphysical Masturbation* of 1984, recorded on tape by Kołodrubiec, and Zbigniew Libera's *Intimate Rites* and *Mystical Perseverance* of 1984–1986. In his performance, Truskowski exposed his penis and masturbated, treating autoeroticism and self-mutilation as anarchistic and nihilistic acts of resistance against all kinds of oppressive political, social, and religious systems. Libera, for his part, used an NTSC camera and a video recorder given to him by his family in the USA to document his daily nursing care of his elderly grandmother, revealing intrusive, existential, and transgressive images of her naked body and the psychosomatic changes of the senile age. Other young artists, such as the members of the Łódź Kaliska group, used a video camera in the second half of the 1980s to record their performances of “embarrassing art” and art historical pastiche. Still others, such as Krzysztof Skarbek, employed video as an accessory to neo-expressionist painting practices and neo-tribal performative actions.

The mid-1980s was also the time when the growing availability of VHS equipment in Poland finally allowed a number of older artists who had already begun their careers in the 1970s, including Zygmunt Rytka, Izabela Gustowska and Artur Tajber, to work with the medium. Their art held a distinct position as it seemed to develop more conceptual, performative, intermedia, and multimedia approaches from the previous decade. In the 1980s, Rytka made a number of “video-films”, transferring his earlier film footage to video and then went on to make meditative video works on tape, dealing with the issues of time, permanence, and transience. Gustowska focused on multi-channel, immersive, and dreamlike performative installations in which she multiplied her self-image. Tajber's first brief contact with video was in the second half of the 1970s, at the Museum of Grenoble, where he was able to use a camera for his performance art practice. At the turn of the decade, he began modifying television sets with magnetic and electronic devices, and in the 1980s, he dismantled video recorders and “played” on their heads to create abstract images. In the mid-1980s, he also began to use a video camera, introducing the screening of pre-recorded footage into his performances during which he would hold the monitor in his hands or on his shoulder.<sup>55</sup>

The political breakthrough and a systemic transformation from state socialism to parliamentary democracy and capitalist free market economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s brought with it a growing availability of computer image and sound processing tools, which were quickly adopted by video artists and used to introduce animation into their work. This period also saw the progressive institutionalisation of video art. In the years 1987–1989, Robakowski's International Festival Video-Art-Clip in Łódź, as a self-organised artistic initiative, was still the

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54 On new tendencies in Polish video art of the period, see Piotr Krajewski, “The Hidden Decade,” p. 173–186.

55 Author's conversation with Artur Tajber, January 2024.

main instrument for presenting current Polish and foreign video production. In December 1989, however, Piotr Krajewski, Violetta Kutlubasis-Krajewska, and Zbigniew Kupisz organised the first edition of the WRO festival in Wrocław, an exhibition dedicated to audiovisual media, including video and computer art.<sup>56</sup> The following year, Ryszard Kluszczyński was appointed the curator in charge of experimental film, video, and computer art department at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw, where he launched LAB, a long-term programme of screenings, exhibitions, and collecting focused on new media art, including video works.<sup>57</sup> By the mid-1990s, major public art galleries and museums in Poland had developed curatorial and educational approaches to works representing the genre and included them in their collections. Video art was also regularly featured in local and national Polish Television programmes. Finally, video was being introduced to art schools and academies as part of the regular curriculum. Video art studios were opened at the Academy of Fine Arts in Cracow and the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Poznań. At the schools in Wrocław and Gdańsk, video equipment was used in outdoor workshops, while at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, it became a widely used tool in the teaching of sculpture. As video became more present and visible in the institutional art world in Poland in the 1990s, it gradually ceased to be a separate artistic genre and became immersed in the multimedia landscape of contemporary art.<sup>58</sup>

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56 Between 1989 and 1992, the festival was an annual event. In 1993, it became a biennial, and since 1995 it has been organised as the WRO International Media Art Biennial.

57 Ryszard Kluszczyński was also one of the first researchers to attempt a historicisation of early video art in Poland – see his “Avant-garde Film and Video in Poland. An Historical Outline,” Ryszard Kluszczyński (ed.), *The Middle Of Europe. The festival of avant-garde films and video from Austria, Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary and Poland*, Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw 1991, p. 52–73 and idem, *An Outline History of Polish Video Art*, <https://culture.pl/en/article/an-outline-history-of-polish-video-art> (accessed: 20.11.2023).

58 Ibid., p. 208–215.