



EWVA European Women's Video Art Interview with Marianne Heske

Interview by Dr Laura Leuzzi, December 2015

- LL: When did you first start using video? What equipment did you use at the time?
- MH: At the Royal College of Art in London, 1975.
Portable open reel ½ inch.
- LL: Why was video as a medium particularly attractive for you at the time?
- MH: To breathe life into my doll heads.
- LL: You had a long and international education in the arts (about 11 years) and you lived in several European cities including Prague, Paris, Maastricht and London¹. Did this influence you to approach video? And if yes, how?
- MH: Of course it did. Video became a natural part of my art expression.
- LL: One of the most renowned videos you made in the 70s is *Phrenological Self-portrait* (1976-77), produced at MUKHA, Antwerp². Could you talk to us about how you developed this performance to camera and the production of the video? How did you become interested in phrenology?
- MH: Phrenology is an artificial way of categorizing the human mind. I have played with this "science".
- LL: *Phrenological Self-portrait* was also the first of your videos purchased by a public institution (Bonnenfanten and Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam). How they became interested into acquiring the video?
- MH: It was shown at the Bonnenfanten Museum and at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht.
- LL: The element of the skull is also present in *Real Unreal* (1977). Can you tell us more about the importance of this feature in your practice and this video in particular?
- MH: What is really real, for whom, where and when. The relative and the absolute.
- LL: Examining women artists' video artworks from the Seventies and Eighties a number of common themes and approaches emerge. These included self-representation, identity, the double and the self-portrait (all these themes emerge for example in *Phrenological Self-portrait*, *A Video Portrait*).

¹ F. Kalantary, L. Lervik (eds.), *Retrospektiv: Film- og videokunst i Norge, 1960-90/Retrospective. Film and Video art in Norway 1960-90*, Atopia Stiftelse, 2011, p. 265.

² See <http://www.videokunstarkivet.org/marianne-heske/>.

How did you develop these specific themes in your practice and why video was a particularly suitable medium to do it?

MH: I am playing by categorizing my own mind with my alter ego in "A Phrenological Self Portrait".

Video is particularly suitable to reflect and correspond to the human senses.

LL: In your video practice landscape has a very relevant role (*Landscape*, 1979; *Voyage Pittoresque*, 1983). In 2014 you stated: "In Norway, one develops a relationship to the natural environment one is surrounded by: the sky, the ocean, and one's own corporal landscape. The challenge is to portray these landscapes and for me video was the ideal. Perhaps because it is a medium that can so clearly express a feeling". Could you tell us more about how did you approach landscape on video?

MH: In the same way I approach landscapes by my sense organs.

Nature in nature

Nature in body and mind

Nature in human in the universe

LL: The doll also is a recurring element in your practice (including for example, *With and about people*, 1975). How did you come to incorporate this feature? What role and value did it assume?

MH: They are playing their role on the world's stage.

"All the World's a Stage, and all the Men and Women merely Players; they have their Exits and their Entrances; and one Man in his Time plays many Parts...." Shakespeare

LL: There were several women artists experimenting video in the 70s and 80s in Norway. These included Inghild Karlsen, Brit Bøhme & Laila Aas Birkeland, Inger Haugen, Grete Lis Bibalo, Kristin Bergaust, Inger Johanne Byhring, Camilla Wærenskjold and Pia Myhrvold. Did you personally know, women artists and feminist artists who at the time were working with video in Norway or more in general in Europe and in the USA? Did you know or were you familiar with their video artworks?

MH: Yes, we all knew each other.

LL: In several early videos you addressed themes linked to feminism (including identity, self-representation).

In the 70s and 80s were you interested to feminism or were you part of any feminist collectives?

Were there any women's collectives or groups producing or promoting video in the Norway or in Europe to your knowledge in the 70s and 80s?

MH: No. For me feminism = humanism = human rights

No.

No.

LL: You were invited by video pioneer Nan Hoover to teach in Düsseldorf as visiting professor, and later you taught in Hamburg, as substitute for Joseph Kosuth. Was your teaching experience relevant to the development of your video practice?

- MH: It contributed to my development as an artist in general.
- LL: Were there some video centres with which you collaborated? How did you produce your video artworks?
- MH: Royal College of Art, London. Film of School and Television.
MUKHA, Antwerp.
Bonniefanten Museum and Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht.
- LL: Did you collaborate with any TV broadcaster at the time?
- MH: Yes, NRK [Norsk rikskringkasting, the Norwegian State Broadcaster], Norway.
- LL: You showed your videos for the first time at Aarhus Kunstmuseum in 1976 for the video festival "Video International". What do you recall from that experience?
- MH: A new way of thinking, and a new dimension for creating art.
- LL: How did you show, distribute and promote your videos in the 70s and 80s?
- MH: By exhibitions.
- LL: What are the most relevant video and film festivals or screenings in Europe and in the USA you took part in? Did you take part in any event specifically dedicated to women artists' video and film?
- LL: The Guerrilla Girls pointed out the marginalisation of women artists' work in 1989, quote: 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female'. Can you recall if and how this inequality of treatment affected your career when you started using video?
- MH: I can't recall any inequality in the field of video.
- LL: How were your videos received by the critics and audiences at the time?
- MH: My videos have always been very well received.
- LL: Due to the obsolescence of the early video formats (open reels, U-matic), many video artworks from the 60s, 70s and 80s are lost today. How and when did you recover your tapes? Have you lost any of your videos from that period? Do you still preserve the original masters and where are they kept today?
- MH: I still preserve the original masters.
- LL: When did you make your last video?
- MH: Mostly documentary about my installations.