

Wolf Kahlen

Thinking with the Camera – Video is Presence in the Present

Or: How I became the initiator and co-founder of today's Video-Forum

Don't forget that 'video' means 'I see.' In the present tense. So not seeing in the past, not to preserve something, like *I saw*, or *I have seen*. In the present, the videotape – that's how it all began – can run and run and run. Like the car in the Volkswagen advertisement from the late '60s: It runs and runs and runs. This primal experience with the first video technology, which I still have 'in my gut,' was exhilarating. It hasn't faded for me, but it is absent from normal video consumption today. It was literally 'compressed.' Presence in the present is the original capital of video art. The camera is running, and the image on it or the monitor shows something happening simultaneously, or appearing before us, possibly we see ourselves, now or with a time lag. Today, video is merely a term for a medium. The images preserved with it are the norm. Still, every TV viewer can 'feel' how different a 'live' experience is. Even today, it is indicated when images are live. Recorded images are the tools of the know-it-all, they are training material. Of course they can also have good qualities. Video art is something totally different. Optimal use of the medium can be found in closed-circuit installations, which maintain a direct link between the camera and the viewing of the images. CCTV, as Slavko Kacunko called it, is when television is involved.

In India, it was said about a certain yogi: He can turn the inside of a tennis ball outward, and the outside inward. As I mentioned, In 1968 VW had an advertising slogan: "It runs and runs and runs and runs..." Around that time, the cassette tape became the most popular medium, one that runs and runs and runs. The ingenious Möbius strip is more than an invention or mathematical phenomenon. It's a veritable work of art, reflecting our desire for reversibility and infinity. As an image, it's as powerful as the inverted tennis ball.

Video art is also an object, one that 'faces' us and is therefore a matter of fact. Facts are actual results of an act. Videos are results of acts: Of thought processes triggered by the video, while the video is running. Which, of course, are first triggered by processes of perception. And first, by fields of impressions. Videos can be facts of thought. They can.

And should, according to my view of the pioneer years, the late 1960s. Because artworks are tools of thought. For simultaneously possible and impossible thoughts, like those inspired by the Möbius strip and the tennis ball. Interspersed with the counterpart of thinking: feelings. The idea that something simultaneously is and is not deeply corresponds to our experience of the world, but is rejected by rational thought. Yet both/and is a constant reality. Because the Earth is round, landscapes are boundless and endless. Obstacles aside, they have no ending or beginning. They are an experience of infinitude, both spatial and temporal. They are what makes nature feel so gratifying. It grows and grows, but at the same time: It dies and revives, dies and revives. Its times flow and flow and flow. Just like our existence. Always questioning whether we will return, or where we will live on, after the caesura of death. It's ultimately the dream of reversibility. In 1969 when I made my first video plans, 15 concepts, I called them 'Reversible Processes.' Bazon Brock immediately contradicted me: Nothing is reversible. (He probably meant in physics – rightly, but too narrowly). He later changed his mind. In his theory of ruin, which I had him recite at my Berlin Ruins of Art in 1987, the opposite was revealed. The both/and is always there, but it stokes our fear, ultimately, our fear of death. That's why we hoard goods and

cling to people. But both/and is the true freedom. True awareness of reality is needed to perceive it, accept it, even cultivate it. A reality that exists and does not exist, at the same time. It's not dual, and certainly not digital. Buddhists speak of the 'ten thousand things' when they say: All is One. The one is both the ten thousand things and (only) the One. The ten thousand things are both the One and themselves. That is the art of thinking.

Artists of all genres are image-makers, image-givers, image-creators. Lasting art remains in our memory as images through our eyes, ears, thoughts, deeds, taste, balance, energy, heat, and cold, to name a few of our 27 senses. This applies to all creations, in the sciences, philosophy, medicine, architecture, design, fashion, or cooking. The 'inventors' of the safety pin and fried potatoes both had images in mind. A key phrase like 'I think, therefore I am' or 'E=mc²' are, first and foremost, images. In physics and math one speaks of 'elegant solutions' or 'models.' They are nothing but images.

Lasting video means lasting images. At its best it is an image, the image, not the shape of a point but a field. It can run, have a course, but is not linear. Video creators are not data providers, and certainly not image exploiters. A running video happens, becomes an act in time, simply by running. It doesn't have to show action, doesn't have to tell stories. Film has always done that more professionally. A video – in my sense – is the unique opportunity, over time, to attune, initiate, or even lull a viewer into an atmosphere that animates thought, to create FIELDS, not points or linear sequences of impressions. Thinking moves, irritates, disturbs, or confirms. A tape artwork, or rather screen artwork, can bring the mind to a meditative zero point. Or it can be so unsettling that viewers become nervous and reluctant. Preferring or even shutting down their own willful thoughts. Allowing the uncontrollable to drift off. A 'good' video allows drifting off. There's nothing to miss as long as the viewer keeps sitting. The center creates a linear concentration. The open field creates a strong impression. It's like being caught in a spider's web. Example: 'TAU' from 1973. This video is about tension and relaxation that builds up and releases when you turn a rope with both hands. It's a law of nature.

Of course, films can do that too. Generally, that's their aim, together with their content, be it descriptive or associative, even abstract. (Throughout film history, of course, there have been wonderful so-called 'abstract films'. But at heart they are narrative abstractions. Art history rightly praises its authors).

From the beginning, this distinguished the early 'videos from California' from the 'videos from the East Coast.' In American video publications you can see this difference immediately. European videos are still unfairly not seen at all by the Americanized video scene. Not even when they were later noticed in the late 1970s. They are omitted despite their qualities. Although the Museum of Modern Art in New York showed my videos in 'Art from Berlin' in 1977, this corrective step by Barbara London remained inconsequential. 'America First' is deeply embedded in American education. Video art history needs to be rewritten. But that's not the issue here.

What does this have to do with the Video-Forum? I'll get to that in a minute.

On my path to video, I met the Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim in New York in 1965–66. A lifelong bond developed between us. He came to my tiny studio in Weehawken, New Jersey, overlooking Manhattan, where my first UMBILD took up the entire room:

A lampshade-like barrel, three meters in diameter, which you could enter only by stooping low. On the outside it looked like a cylinder. Inside, it was a painted canvas, creating the seductive illusion of a square room or amorphous space. I wanted to confront the 'different

perceptions of outside and inside.’ This requires time, the material of time, as used in film, literature, and music. Hence Rudolf Arnheim’s and my interest. He immediately understood the role of simultaneity in this case. And how hard it was, not to create a ‘sequence’ in the image inside, but an all-round ‘being in space and time.’ He wrote about it in a catalogue for my show in New York in 1966. Even at 103, shortly before his death, he remembered it vividly.

Rudolf Arnheim, the ingenious Gestalt psychologist who focused on perception in the arts – today they would call him a media scientist or media philosopher. In his 1932 book ‘Film as Art’ he identified the fundamental processes of perception and cognition, similar to McLuhan later. He understood what I wanted: to unite the outer form with the inner form, the tennis ball of the Indian yogi, despite it being impossible. Over time, standing before it and entering it, then being inside it, and later again outside it, having both/and experiences. To experience not one reality, but SIMULTANEOUS REALITIES. (There is no reality, there are only realities. W.K. 1982) He rightly drew my attention to the danger of falling into a linear reading of the image through the spatial illusion of painting, instead of experiencing the image around me as a FIELD. As a kind of gravitational field of thought.

At the time I didn’t have any video experience, but I did use an old American TV with a tiny round screen in the studio to mirror what was on TV into my room. Not as a work of art, but as a pleasurable experiment. I was on my way to closed-circuit TV. A few months later I was lucky to hear Marshall McLuhan, which further confirmed our new, absolutely insightful world view. There was no Internet or digital simplifications of the world yet. But he clearly foresaw all those fundamental changes in our consciousness, not as objects, but as psychic and perceptual upheavals, like an earthquake or landslide of the senses. And the placelessness and timelessness we will ‘fall’ into, because we are not prepared for it. Because we have not taken the realities of the world seriously as a given, nor its boundlessness and the flow of all processes. He saw the role of the global world as that of a global village, spoke of virtual money as a medium, the rise of clichés and rumors, etc.

Even an artist like Andy Warhol understood more about media back then than many video artists do today. His 8-hour film of the Empire State Building, which premiered in March 1965, is virtually a meditative ‘running’ video. When he made his 50-minute ‘infinite’ film ‘Kiss’ in 1963, I’m sure he would have loved to have had a medium like video. Video could also be used as a cognitive tool in the arts. Only a few artists have done this; most of today’s video makers have not taken this new path, but just ‘fill their old wine in new bottles’ or ‘new wine in old bottles’ (after all, video is already over 50 years old). They use the medium narratively to describe facts, in ways that are linear or virtual and surreal.

But television and film can already do all that.

Back to 1969–1970. No, one more thing needs to be said first: The history of all media, the ‘extensions of our senses’ (McLuhan speaks of extensions of our body), which we humans are desperately seeking and will also seek to invent in the future, shows, starting with the mirror image, how we are slowly but surely distancing ourselves from factual reality, not approaching THE REALITY, as is repeatedly claimed. Neither smelling screens nor selfies can help. Today’s (2021) television images are so sharp, high contrast, and color tuned that an unspoiled, sensitive viewer has the false impression of getting ever closer to reality, while at the same time being ‘pushed’ into a completely different world, one that ‘stands out from the background,’ that is ever more unreal, even surreal. It’s only logical that people then want to immerse themselves into even more ‘impossible’ (virtual) worlds. In other words, surrealism, the bourgeois dream of imaginary (today we say ‘virtual’) worlds,

has (unfortunately) finally prevailed. This is a dangerous development, as we are increasingly 'falling off the face of the earth.'

'Says the young mother with the baby in the pram to the admiring friend: You should see the photos of him first.' (It's an age-old joke, I think from a McLuhan text.) The caveman who left his handprint on walls was actually the first filmmaker, and printer at the same time, a true realist. Just as Narcissus wanted to be able to distinguish between himself and his image reflected in the water. Gutenberg is praised for his movable type technique, but long before that monastic scribes considered the letters of all alphabetic scripts to be movable type. Ultimately this shows that facts – a letter – and illusions – a word – are different worlds. This unsolvable phenomenon ('oh how beautiful') of the fact and the image of a third reality will occupy us until the end of our days. And inspire us, as the essence of the arts. Then we will be at the point where 'we can't think of anything,' the zero point of thought. Like the lowest point of a pendulum, it holds all contingencies. It swings left or right, at any speed or moment in time, any material property – or it is a pure concept and remains such.

Photography, writing with light – it could be writing with darkness, with shadow (see my essay on skiagraphy, an insert in the catalogue 'Silent Shadows' by the Japanese-German Centre Berlin, 2021) – and film, the modulation of light, ultimately leave traces of reality. Meanwhile halftone prints aim for the illusion of the sterile, single dot or condense many dots. And television and the digital world sterilize reality even more, building on the grid and refining, minimizing the point (now called pixel) so it becomes anonymous. 'Objectifying' is what they call it. Anything to fool our perception. 'Pixels are the pigments of digital worlds. Unfortunately, not as wonderfully impure or complex as paint pigments. The sterility of pixels is embarrassing,' I wrote in 1990.

I repeat: Video – as I have wanted to understand it since my first work in 1969, 'LuftRaum' – is essentially an ongoing happening with or without something happening. That means it provides atmospheres whose essential characteristic is: they run and run and run. Like VW's ad in the '60s: It runs and runs and runs.... Running images that pass before the camera or recorded images is 'the message of the medium of video'. Repetition in loops, a common artist technique, is only one particular form. If this running happens concurrently, i.e. live, the medium of video is used optimally. The early closed-circuit TV installations – including mine – examples of which were collected by Slavko Kacunko in his book on closed circuit video installations – are the ultimate form of video art. Interestingly, the usually named pioneers of the medium – myself included – all started out using running images in more complex multimedia sculptures, what later came to be called 'installations.' Intermedia was what Dick Higgins first called it in 1965. A much better term. Some of those commonly called the medium's 'first parents' never really operated the camera themselves. But they built video sculptures. My first one in 1969 was called 'Junger Felsen.' Or they used what was already running on the TV.

Video in its crystal clear form as a medium has almost only been used as such by us pioneers of the 'first generation' or in the mid-'70s by the 'second generation.' By those who love the box, the screen you sit in front of, preferably alone, in one's own company, being carried away. This is not romance, but being spiritually moved.

In my first pure videotape solo exhibition in 1975 at Haus am Lützowplatz in Berlin, there were three black 'tents,' rectangular cloth rooms, each containing an open-reel recorder where visitors could have their selected tape played, with the technical help of the gallery

staff. The idea was to respect the intimacy of the experience. My 25 pieces from 'Zyklus Angleichungen' were shown. Outside the tents on the gallery walls hung a series of video stills from each tape, like frames from a film. These were intended to help the visitors decide which tape to choose. The exhibition set a precedent; at Mediendocumenta 6 held in 1977 in Kassel, Wulf Herzogenrath used a similar individual selection option – what we call 'on demand' today – in the same way, but in monitor booths.

The later black-box projections in museums and exhibitions are, in most cases, highly insensitive misunderstandings of the medium of video. If the works have a beginning and end and a specific sequence, visitors entering the space will inevitably arrive 'too late' or 'too early' for the beginning. Very quickly, the ease of production, thanks to ever smaller and simpler cameras, has made it possible to add content to running video, making it 'twitter-like'. That may be a new appeal, but not a new insight or innovation. The box was a device to look 'out of one's own window' and 'into the world'. The depth of the box aided this experience. Today's flat screens, tablets, and smart phones feel more like flyers you get in the mailbox: 'handy' but hardly serious. They are simply data carriers. Of course, you can also make art with data carriers, if you have reason to.

I met Gerry Schum at the premiere of his television gallery at SFB with the series 'Land Art.' In this series, as well as the next and final one, called 'Identifications,' artists produced works that developed or decayed over time. They were essentially 'Land Art' or sculptures in space. Many of these works still existed as material works afterwards. This was exciting and all too new for the ratings audience. So much, that the television gallery never became permanent, and the two programs remained one-offs. The camera was always 'guided' by Gerry Schum himself. It was always standing firmly on a tripod. So far so good. None of the artists wielded the camera themselves. Nevertheless, the pieces are listed even today as 'Videos by the Artists.' Schum visited my studio, where I showed him sketches and ideas for about 15 pieces, and asked if we could realize them. He liked the ideas, but he was stuck due to the debts he had from his video van. (It could only have worked with TV station support. Sadly, he took his own life in 1973). But I was driven by the desire to make them happen. By chance, an opportunity came just at the right time, when n.b.k. offered me a solo exhibition. ('Working with a Chance That Doesn't Exist' was the title of a later exhibition and catalogue of many of my quasi-random works from those years.)

Instead of hanging works on the walls, I asked if I could produce videos – of those 15 ideas. I didn't have my own equipment, and neither did NBK, which made it tricky to realize the project. Then Jörn Merkert, an assistant at the National Gallery, enthusiastically suggested starting on 16 mm film.

I had already made exact sketches for the video, timing how many seconds I would need for each shot. Because if we had worked in video, it would have been with a Portapak, with no editing capabilities. Cuts could only be made by switching it on and off. You had to get that right, because the image built up and degraded in ugly breaks. This was because the open spools of the ½" tape device had to speed up to run and halt suddenly to stop.

I knew from my own video camera that it was best to plan precisely. My surveillance camera (for scientific projects), which I had bought second hand from a university, was only a square camera box without a viewfinder. This meant I needed a separate monitor to see what I was recording. To end each section (35–40 sec. each) I had to switch the recorder to standby, reposition the attached monitor, and then switch the camera back on. I did this in my very first piece, 'LuftRaum' (AirSpace), in which I recorded clouds passing overhead. I went to standby, then held a glass plate with an oblong rectangle drawn on it in front of the

lens. It looked like the clouds were moving unhindered through the frame, the boundless sky opening up. Merkert's compromise solution fell on fertile ground, if only because an ephemeral video could not be paid for out of NBK's budget at the time. It didn't disappoint me in the end, either. Because my idea of meditative viewing was also possible with film. Then they said that later, I could take time to look for my own video equipment to buy and use. Lucie Schauer, NBK's agile and open-minded director, and board member Christian Wagner, gave the green light. A young filmmaker from the Film and Television Academy, who had kept his head above water with porn films – Bazon Brock was once involved as a theorist – was ready and willing to follow my script. The series, reduced to seven pieces, was produced in 1970–71. It was premiered as 'Seven Reversible Processes' in the summer at Haus am Waldsee in Berlin. The credits mention 'Videothek des neuen Berliner Kunstvereins'. That makes 1971 the founding year of today's n.b.k. Video-Forum.

In 1972, Vostell, whom I had known since the early 1960s, moved permanently to Berlin. He sought me out immediately, and was surprised that I was no longer working on the Videothek. The reason was that we had founded it to commission artists for productions, 'like the princes in the Renaissance.' But that had not happened, because there was still no equipment. That disillusioned me. Instead, more 16 mm films – by Hödicke, Beuys, Brehmer, and Vostell – were to be acquired. They were wonderful works, but not commissions. Vostell wanted to work with me to get the Videothek going again. Both his 'Desastres' from 1972 and Ulrike Ottinger's 'Autofieber' from 1973 are films, not pure videos. For the first time, an artist's fee was agreed upon. I had never discussed a fee for my own production but was satisfied that it could be produced at all. In 1972, the first inventory catalogue was published with brochures on the individual works, incorrectly citing 1972 as the year of its foundation. The catalogue of my work from 1971 was titled 'Seven Reversible Processes'. That Vostell appeared as the founder or co-founder of the Videothek after that is post-factual, and has still not been explicitly and historically corrected.

That already marked the end of the international video artists who – in my sense and theirs – wanted the broad, meditative character of the 'intimate video' experience in front of the TV box or monitor: Pioneers like David Hall in England, Wojciech Bruszewski in Poland, Antonio Muntadas in Spain, and Bruce Nauman, Richard Serra, and Joan Jonas in the USA, or Richard Kriesche in Austria, to name a few.

But the greater flood of videos that began after that and will never end – I confess to being complicit as a pioneer – are not interested in the slowness of our videos (from a much 'slower time' in retrospect) and the intimacy of a person sitting alone in front of the screen. So as not to be misunderstood: The rhythms of time cannot be maintained or restored. But 'faster times,' like the one we live in, mean faster comprehension, faster decision-making. Yet this also means that contemplation is no longer possible, or only for brief moments. 'Decide or the option will turn off in 15 seconds.'

Contemplation (in German, literally 'thinking after') and the afterimages that result are inevitably reduced to flashes of novelty. These are consumer traits, not innovative artistic practices. We should finally free ourselves from the constraints of the communication cartels. For artists to complain or tease about it does no good. Art is not born as a reaction. Art is not a service. Art is sensual philosophy. Thinking with the camera.

I've always felt uncomfortable being called a 'video artist', even though I've produced over 300 videotapes. And a lot of closed-circuit TV works, video sculptures, and video

performances, but still working in other media too. From the start I've strictly refused to document my performances as stand-alone video pieces. Nor do I YouTube them, for other reasons. The screen I sit in front of is essential, like the canvas and the frame, or the book page and the paper. In general, the term 'video art' is unfortunate. To reduce art to one material (or to men or women) is fatal. After all, we don't speak of canvas art, pencil art, stone art, word art, paper art. And limiting yourself to one medium is even more fatal. For 60 years, it has been clear to anyone who agrees with Marshall McLuhan that all material matter can be used as a medium, but so can all immaterial matter. Since 1985, my Berlin Ruit of Art has stated: The Berlin Ruins of Art is a private place for material and immaterial arts.

Wolf Kahlen
Summer 2021