



## EWVA European Women's Video Art Interview with Annegret Soltau

Interview by Dr Laura Leuzzi, October 2015  
Translation from German by Heidi Weitzel

LL: When did you start using video? What was your first video artwork?

AS: I started using video at the beginning of 1976; my first video artwork was *Körper-Zeichnung 9.1.76* [Body-Drawing 9.1.76].

LL: What equipment did you use when you started to use video?

AS: Camera, recorder, magnetic tape.

LL: Why was video as a medium particularly attractive for you?

AS: I wanted to record movement, change and process of 'Körper-Zeichnung' [Body-Drawing]. Later I worked with my own pregnant body. I wanted to be part of the image.

The following statement became my 'Programme':

"My most important aim is the integration of body processes in my work in order to connect body and spirit as equal parts."

LL: Did you use film (16mm or Super8) or photography to document and record your performance before video?

AS: Yes, my performances (at that time called 'actions') were documented by photographs. I didn't use 16mm or Super8. I worked with U-Matic and 1 inch tape.

LL: Can you talk a little bit of *Schwanger sein* [Being Pregnant] (1977-78)? How was the video structured and how it was shot?

AS: This video consists of a performance in four parts during my first pregnancy. The particular phases are without cuts with fades-in and fades-out. The pictures are in black and white. They show my physical and mental state as well as my fears and doubts as a woman and an artist. Simultaneously I created cycles of multi-part photo works of the specific phases, which had the particular position/action as initial motif.

LL: When did you start working with 'Telewissen', Darmstadt? Can you talk to us a little bit about this collaboration?

AS: In Darmstadt, the city I lived in, 'Telewissen' was a collective of 3-4 people, who worked with video. For example they took their video cameras into schools and involved the students in their projects. In 1975 when I planned my first performance ("permanent demonstration") in a local workshop-gallery, I asked the group for support. Thus I developed my first video work with 'Telewissen'.  
The video collective 'Telewissen' (a pun on tele-knowledge and tele-vision) was founded in 1969 in Darmstadt by Herbert Schuhmacher - the members were a.o. Rolf

Schnieders, Rainer Witt, Nik Schuhmacher.

In 1972 they demonstrated the use of mobile video technology which had recently been imported to Germany, in front of the exhibition site of documenta 5. Taking into account that public television, state owned and educational, occupied only two national channels. The demonstration of closed-circuit video with the people's electronic picture in a public space was totally new to most citizens. <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de>

LL: *Schwanger sein II* [Being Pregnant II] was produced by ECG-TV-Studio, Frankfurt. Can you talk to us a little bit about the making of this work?

AS: This studio was based in a former cinema in Frankfurt. The video (1980) resulted from the first work dealing with the subject of pregnancy. Now I wanted to integrate more social aspects as well as my personal environment (e.g. the relation to my life partner, my mother's reminiscences to the time when she got pregnant with me, after World War II). I could use the rooms and equipment in the studio, when they were not used for producing films, thus, often I could work there only at night. In my video 'Mutter-da-Sein' [Being Mother] I involved both of my children. This was very exhausting because I had to bring my baby in a carry cot to Frankfurt during the evening and stayed there until late at night, my other child was only two years old and sometimes very agitated.

LL: Did you collaborate with TV Broadcasters at the time?

AS: In February 1980 *Schwanger-Sein I* was broadcast on TV (Hessischer Rundfunk) – on a Monday, late in the evening, after 11 p.m. Nevertheless it evoked protests. The viewers responded with letters or phone calls, some reactions were approving, mostly, however, I was blamed for the 'negative' presentation. A woman, at that time also pregnant, wrote to me '... I, too, had – like possibly every pregnant woman – fear and doubts. However, it is implausible to express these feelings by getting oneself slapped from one wall to another for nearly two minutes, because every woman knows that this may be dangerous for the unborn child'. She felt indignant because in her opinion I had used the 'presentation of pregnancy' for making 'experiments for art', and she didn't want 'such representation of pregnancy to be portrayed in broadcast without dispute'.

LL: In the 1970s, did you know about the video experiments by artists in the USA and Europe?

AS: I saw videos by Joseph Beuys, Nam Jun Paik, Wolf Vostell, Ulay/Abramović, Rebecca Horn, Yoko Ono and so on.

LL: Examining women artists' video artworks from the 1970s & 80s a number of common themes and approaches emerge. These included issues of maternity, sexuality and the representation of the female body by the media. Some artists were also questioning what it was to be a professional woman artist. Did you personally know, other women artists and feminist artists at the time working with video? Did you know or were you familiar with their video artworks?

AS: I used to live in Darmstadt away from the city and I felt isolated from new trends which arose for example in Köln or Düsseldorf. I looked for and met some women video

artists at exhibitions. In 1982/83 I was involved in the travelling exhibition *Videokunst in Deutschland 1963-1982* [Video Art in Germany 1963-1982], curated by Wulf Herzogenrath, which was shown in museums.

LL: At the time were you part of any feminist collectives?

AS: I was involved in a group of women artists in Frankfurt and the surrounding area. We met on a monthly basis in our studios to discuss our work. Another group was engaged in the exploration of women in art history, we investigated the vita and the social context of those artists and reported them to the group. In Frankfurt and Stuttgart we presented a common exhibition "*Wir bitten zu Tisch*" ["Take your places please" or so]. For us the table symbolised an object women are 'chained' at. For me the table presented "*auf dem Geburtstisch*".

LL: In your knowledge, were there any feminist collectives producing or promoting video in Germany at the time?

AS: In 1989/90 a *Frauen-Video-Katalog* [Women-Video-Catalogue] – videos by women from Germany, Austria and Switzerland was produced, edited by Karin Bruns and Claudia Richarz (Frauen-Anstiftung in Hamburg).

LL: Did you show your videos as single channel work or were they part of larger mixed media installations?

AS: In 1983 I presented a video installation at the Kunstverein in Frankfurt. In that exhibition I incorporated video monitors into 9 life-sized photos. Further photo/video-installations were:  
*LA MAMMA* [The Mother], 1980-84, presented at Goethe Institut in Rome 1986; I integrated a monitor with the video *Mutter-da-Sein* into a reproduction of a Madonna by Raffael (*La Belle Jardinière*, 1507).  
*gebären-Müssen*, 1978-79, a large photo (122x166 cm), that represents the extradition of a parturient in the anonymous atmosphere of a hospital. The face and the upper part of the body are covered by a white sheet. The action is restricted to the parturition. Into the pudenda a monitor is inserted, showing in a stage-managed action involving the creative act of the violence of childbirth, showing the new body bursting out of the body of the woman. The body of the parturient ruptures and becomes an open wound. Hands coming from outside the frame sew up the ruptured parts with a needle and thread with coarse stitches. Thereby the vagina would be completely stitched up so that connotations point to mutilated genitals, like female circumcisions, chastity belts or other kinds of applied force still practiced in the world to oppress women.

LL: How did you show, distribute and promote your videos in the 1970s and 80s?

AS: Usually I presented the videos together with my pictures (photomontages) in exhibitions, galleries, museums and exhibition halls.

LL: Did you take part in any video and film festivals or screenings in Europe and in the USA?

Studentenfilmtage in Darmstadt (1980),

3rd Erlanger Videotage, Erlangen (1981)  
INFERMENTAL, Vancouver; Canada (1986)  
35th Internationale Kurzfilmtage, Oberhausen (1989)  
1st Internationale Videotage, Istanbul, Turkey (1990)

LL: Did you take part in any event specifically dedicated to women artists' video and film?

AS: I don't remember.

LL: The Guerrilla Girls highlighted the marginalisation of women artists' work in 1989: "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 and doing performance?

AS: I come from a painting and graphics background but in 1975 I decided to work with performance (actions), photo and video. Since then I worked by myself and with my changing body, so I became more vulnerable; I exposed myself, and this resulted in fierce criticism of my work and thus I became marginalised. That happened to women artists opposing the norm, women who no longer wanted to work traditionally and looked for other forms of expression and techniques. The slogan "The personal is political" became an important concern of women in arts and literature.

LL: How were your videos *Schwanger sein* and *Schwanger sein II* received by the critics at the time?

AS: In galleries these videos have not been fully appreciated, and they did not find art collectors. The pregnant body in arts was considered too intimate and embarrassing, especially if it was used by a woman artist as an embodiment of herself. Critics of well-known periodicals refused to write reviews or rather they wrote scathing reports.

LL: Due to early video formats becoming obsolete (open reel, U-matic), many video artworks from the 1960s, 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?

AS: All of my videos have been digitised by ZKM - Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe; they can be viewed there in the media center ([www.zkm.de](http://www.zkm.de)). The original masters (U-Matic and 1 inch) have been loaned to the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt ([www.hlmd.de](http://www.hlmd.de)). I donated further original masters to the Archiv Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen 1867 e.V., which is now in the Archiv Bildende Kunst der Akademie der Künste, Berlin ([www.adk.de](http://www.adk.de)). Another collection of original masters has been donated to Feministisches Archiv und Dokumentationszentrum, Köln ([www.frauenmediatum.de](http://www.frauenmediatum.de)). Documents (poster, invitations, text and so on) are in the database of "Archiv Artist Publications", Munich, (<http://www.artistbooks.de/>).

LL: Recently your performance and video work has been included in important exhibitions dealing with feminist and women artists' avant-garde (*Feministische Avantgarde der*

*1970er Jahre Werke aus der Sammlung Verbund, Wien* curated by Gabriele Schor and Merle Radtke, Spring 2015; 'Women Video Work(s)' at ZKM, 2015). How do you look at this re-discovery of your early work and more in general the early video and performance art?

AS: I consider it as a confirmation, as 'discovery' of my early work. I am satisfied to see that it was the 'right' way and that it was 'worthwhile' to fight for it. That doesn't mean that my work is already completed, but it gives me the courage and the power to continue it.

LL: When did you make your last video?

AS: *Mutter/Tochter*, [Mother/Daughter], 2011.