



EWVA European Women's Video Art Interview with Anna Valeria Borsari

Interview by Dr Laura Leuzzi, February 2016

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LL: When did you start making videos and why?

AVB: My first video dates back to 1977. Paolo Cardazzo asked me to make it at the Galleria del Cavallino in Venice, where I also had a solo show a few months later. To begin with I was mainly curious about trying out a new tool.

LL: How did you view the possibilities it presented as a new medium?

AVB: While I was designing and producing my first video, I realised that I could create a different time dimension, a different relationship with reality than I could do with other media.

LL: Before using video, did you use photography or film in your practice?

AVB: Yes, I did. In fact, ever since the early 1970s, I worked regularly with photography. In 1976, I made a super-8 film, *Il testimone* [The Witness], and later I also used slide sequences.

LL: If yes, in your experience what advantages and disadvantages did video present over film?

AVB: In the 1970s, Super8 was very popular; it was even used for family films.... With video, however, it was completely the opposite. In my view/in my experience it was more complicated to use, required expensive equipment and needed an expert to operate it. So, what I needed to do was to get across to others the things I wanted to create, (which in any case is what directors do with film), and while I could not do the shootings myself, what I could do was to watch the recordings as they were being made, so I could intervene, call for re-takes, and control what was being produced more accurately. There was also a difference between video and film with regard to effects. Transparency was different and the very first videos were b/w.

LL: What kind of video camera and equipment did you use when you began to make videos?

AVB: As I mentioned earlier, the equipment back then was complicated and expensive; at Cardazzo Gallery we used to move the camera on a dolly and we needed an operator.

LL: At that time did you know of the experiments with video by artists in USA and Europe? In particular women artists' video artworks?

AVB: My knowledge about what was going on was rather limited. Back then, video art was in its beginnings, and it was not easy to get information. Galleries didn't usually show videos, and while you could watch them in a few reviews or in centres that specialised in their production, generally what you saw were documentaries on different performances, or the impact that certain technologies were having on the environment.

LL: Did you have any contact or collaborations with the most relevant video centres in those years

(including Bicocchi's art/tapes/22, Centro Video Arte in Ferrara, Videoteca Giaccari or Cavallino)?

AVB: Yes. As I said earlier, I collaborated with the Galleria del Cavallino, and I also had connections with the Ferrara centre.

LL: Could you tell us how you developed *Selfportrait in a Room* (1977)?

AVB: This work is associated with a highly significant moment in my work. Between 1976 and 1977 I went through a radical transition - from relating to things in an 'analytical', and essentially conceptual way, to directly stepping into the work, and into the world itself. The necessarily temporal development of video allowed me to describe the various stages of this transition, one by one: from the study of myself as a subject-artist and simultaneously as object of a possible future representation, and through the pencil traces I left on the walls of the room, I reached a comparison between my body and the room, inside and out, and therefore achieved a reversal of my initial perspective, in order to leave the external world in its accidental nature, intact. Moving beyond the walls of the room, and beyond the earth with which I should have represented myself, we go outside, before the waters of Venice's Great Canal: people passing, then a motorboat, background noises can be heard. To be sure, I had carefully planned the succession of these scenes, the closing in on the topsoil on the floor of the room, the progressive layering of the close-ups of water images, and the ensuing movement of the camera away from it. But it was also essential that the final sequence be a recording of unprogrammed events.

LL: Could you tell us about *Saltar dalla finestra* [Jump out of the Window] (1982)?

AVB: The work was designed and produced in conjunction with a work exhibited at Bologna's GAM Modern Art Gallery, as part of a small group show (only three artists) entitled *Connaturale* [Innate], in 1982. Besides exhibiting some other works, I had asked that one window in the gallery be left open: looking outside this window at the garden below, you could see the silhouette of a woman's body, made with earth and flowers. Through a POV-shot, the video outlined and suggested the dynamics behind the work: the leap itself.

LL: Can you tell us something about the making and production of *Quête* [Quest] (1986)?

AVB: I produced this work without using any particular external support. I started by analysing old photos, which I placed next to one another in different successive sequences, searching for a truth that is both hidden yet inescapable which would allow me to reconstruct some ancient history.

LL: How did you preserve and digitally remaster your video works from the 1970s and 1980s?

AVB: Unfortunately, for many years, and in particular between the 1980s and the mid-1990s, the growing emphasis on Postmodernism and painting went hand-in-hand with the demise of video, which was being used less and less, and for which now there was little demand. It was only relatively recently that I recovered my works from the 1970s. Now I am also trying to have the videos from the 1980s restored.

LL: You collaborated for a long period with universities. Did you teach video art?

AVB: At the University of Bologna, I taught Romance Philology until 1995. In that setting it would

have been really difficult to talk about video art ... On the other hand, more than once my colleagues, who taught contemporary art or aesthetics, invited me to talk about my work as an artist and present some of my videos.

LL: What were the difficulties for women artists in Europe when you started working, in particular using new technologies? Did women artists access equal opportunities? What were the obstacles?

AVB: Women artists certainly did have huge problems, and first of all in the family itself. Unless you came from a very particular family, a young woman who identified herself as an artist was seen as socially unacceptable. It was less so in the case of a woman wanting to write, or play an instrument. But this is why, even if as a child I wanted to become a 'painter', as they used to say. I was forced to follow a different kind of education, generally literary studies, for which I suffered greatly.

As for women in the more restricted *milieu* of art, they have always been harshly judged. This still happens today, even if the number of young women artists is certainly higher, and serious efforts are made to avoid discrimination. Apparently we have to deal with powerful archetypes, such as those in different religions which assign to women secondary and subordinate roles. On the other hand, I do not think that there have ever been similar prejudices against the use of new technologies – if anything, technology was rejected altogether, irrespective of gender differences, but this usually happened in commercial or traditional academic settings.

LL: In the 1970s and 1980s were you part of feminist collectives? To your knowledge were there any feminist collectives in which women artists took part in Italy?

AVB: With regard to my own particular life story, from the time I was a small child, along with my friend Anna Paola, I always dissociated myself from the prevailing model of women. My friend and I both lived in families that had serious problems, so that right from the start, in trying to overcome the stress they caused us, we had to face different issues than those related to gender, and we ended up inventing our own way of being, one that was both transgressive and thoughtful at the same time. So, although I have known well, and sometimes first-hand, the discrimination which women were and still are subjected to, and while I understand the importance of feminist collectives, I personally never felt any psychological need to join any of them. And even in my work, I do not address specific issues concerning gender difference.

LL: How did you show, distribute and promote your videos in the 1970s and 1980s?

AVB: I have always felt a pressing need to create and produce, and to also carry out research and study. As a result, I have always had little time left for displaying, disseminating, and promoting my work. A drastic change, however, took place between the 1970s and the 1980s. In this decade, as is well-known, the art world had very little interest in video, or in any other form of experimentation, so although I continued working during those years, I chose not to invest too much energy in making my work known, and instead I directed my efforts towards achieving other goals.

LL: Which were the most relevant festivals and screenings to which you took part?

AVB: I began exhibiting in 1975, and a couple of years later I began making videos, but already in the early 1980s, as I mentioned, general interest in video drastically dropped. Invitations to specific festivals and review exhibitions only arrived later, when video art was rediscovered in a historical perspective. For example, I found myself, almost unexpectedly, in the historical

section of *La coscienza luccicante* [The Gleaming Conscience], an exhibition held in 1998 in Rome's Palazzo delle Esposizioni. In the 1980s I remember a few female-only review exhibitions curated by Romana Loda, where I also presented videos such as *La sciarpa di Isadora Duncan* [Isadora Duncan's Scarf], at the Modern Art Galerie in Vienna (1980); and I remember taking part in the International Theatre Biennale in 1984.

LL: How were your videos received by the critics and audiences at the time?

AVB: The first answer that comes to my mind is that my work, however complex, has always been received very well, both by critics and by the audience. Actually, thinking again about this question, I realise that I have always strenuously defended my work against the misunderstandings it has been subjected to in a cultural climate that has certainly been far from optimal for me. From a point, I even stopped working with private galleries and only exhibited in non-profit spaces or museums. When I had the opportunity I tried to avoid creating between myself and the audience (so called), a fixed awareness that what they were seeing was art and not merely a spontaneous event. In my opinion, this has to do with the fact that the very notion of art, as it has come to be understood, is detrimental to the direct experience of works.

LL: When did you make your last video?

AVB: Even now I am working on a video, I should be finished by the Summer [2016]. My most recent video was completed in 2012, *Musei del vento* [Wind's Museums], in a geology museum and which I presented there as part of a video-installation.



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