



## EWVA European Women's Video Art Interview with Lydia Schouten

Interview by Dr Laura Leuzzi, November 2015

- LL: When did you first start using video? What equipment did you use at the time?
- LS: I started using video the first time in 1977 as part of the performance: *Love is every girl's dream*.
- LL: In 1977 you started incorporating video and video installations in your performances. Could you talk to us about how you developed the performance *Love is every girls dream*?
- LS: I wanted to make a performance about dreaming, where I would lie in a circle of flour, broken mirrors and brick stones. On both sides would be a monitor. On one monitor I was putting make-up on my face whilst looking in a broken mirror. On the other monitor I was building the circle with flour, stones and mirrors. For me it had to do with dreaming about a career without being able to brake through the conventions of life at that time. I did the performance at the Stedelijk Museum Gouda during the opening of an exhibition about 'Dreams'. During the whole opening I was asleep in my circle with the two videos playing.
- LL: Why was video as a medium particularly attractive for you at the time?
- LS: I loved using video because it was still so experimental. Not many people had used it at the time and I felt free to do whatever I wanted to do with it.
- LL: In several early videos you addressed relevant feminist themes. For example in *Rome is bleeding* (1982) and *Covered in cold sweat* (1983) you undermine the stereotypes in the relationship and role of men and women and challenge women to rebel again the dominance of men over women imposed by patriarchal culture and society. In *The lone ranger, lost in the jungle of erotic desire* (1982) you question the issue of women's traditional approach to men's desire. You also frequently address the stereotypical roles of women and men as portrayed by mass media and in particular by TV Broadcasters. When and how did you start incorporating explicitly feminist themes in your practices and in particular in video?
- LS: I had already started using feminist themes in my early performances since 1977 and in my videos since 1981 e.g. in *The lone ranger, lost in the jungle of erotic desire*. I wanted to play a female Tarzan who lived an adventurous life in the jungle and playing with fantasy animals. I didn't want to be Jane, waiting for the stories of Tarzan, but making my own adventures. Consider *Romeo is bleeding*: when you switch on television you can go from crime to passion, from the past to the future at different speeds. You're part of a different time and space. In *Romeo is bleeding* I wanted to travel the world flying through the sky, landing one

moment in the city, having my affairs with different men (however they were constructed of foam or cardboard) and the next moment landing in the jungle and having erotic affairs with animals.

For me the big change came after my performance period in 1981 when I stayed for 4 months in New York and read an article by Douglas Davis saying: "I never felt more truly myself after playing Charlie Chaplin in post-performance times". It opened my eyes because I could now invent every character I wanted in my videos in reaction towards the media. The difference in my performance period was that I couldn't play a role or a different character because then I would be an actor.

- LL: The representation of the women's body – including nudity - was a fundamental issue of feminist art from the 1970s and 1980s. British author and artist Catherine Elwes wrote: 'women on this side of the Atlantic looked for ways of problematizing the appearance of the female body whilst negotiating new forms of visibility'. She describes several approaches adopted by women performance and video artists to bypass the 'pitfalls of sexual representation' (C. Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour*, I. B. Tauris, London 2005, p. 48.). What was your approach to this specific issue?
- LS: First of all I want to say that I wasn't problematizing the female body but celebrating it by showing that I could be free in playing with animals and men of cardboard and taking the initiative myself in my adventures.
- LL: In the 1970s and 1980s were you part of any feminist collectives? Were there any feminist collectives producing or promoting video in the Netherlands or in Europe to your knowledge at the time?
- LS: As far as I know there were no feminist collectives in Europe producing video. I was involved in a Foundation called: Women in the Visual Arts. We published a magazine called *Modern Thinking*, in which we showed visual art (performance, video, film, sculpture) by artists of quality, however most of them were women and only a few men, the complete opposite to the standard magazines where only 2% were women artists.
- LL: In the 1970s, did you know of the video experiments by artists in USA and Europe more in general?
- LS: Yes, in the mid 1970s I came across Vito Acconci, Dennis Oppenheim, Joan Jonas. Every week I went to the Appel in Amsterdam, where Wies Smals invited international artists to perform, but where videos were also shown. This is where I met Ulrike Rosenbach.
- LL: Examining women artists' video artworks from the 70s and 80s a number of common themes and approaches emerge. These included issues of maternity, sexuality, the representation of the female body, and the role of women in society by 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 who at the time were working with video? Did you know or were you familiar with their video artworks?
- LS: Yes: Ulrike Rosenbach, Joan Jonas and then later Maria Vedder, Rotraut Pape and Marie-Jo Lafontaine.

- LL: Meatball (later called Het Kijkhuis) and Montevideo were leading video centres in the Netherlands. Did you collaborate with them? If yes, can you talk to us a little bit about these collaborations?
- LS: Meatball was a videoproduction company and I worked with them producing some videos. Het Kijkhuis was an institute which organised the annual World Wide Videofestival and where I showed some of my early videos. Originally there was Time Based Arts in Amsterdam, with whom I collaborated in the 1980s, but after the death of the director I switched to Montevideo. There was always a lot of concurrence between the three video institutes, but they never worked together to promote Dutch video artists abroad. Later in the 1990s René Coelho, director of Montevideo, organised a travelling show of video-installations 'Imago' along Museums worldwide.
- LL: Did you collaborate with any TV broadcaster at the time?
- LS: Yes I was invited by the Humanistisch Verbond in 1986 to make my video *Echoes of Death/Forever Young*, 15 min., which was shown twice on television.
- LL: How did you show, distribute and promote your videos in the 1970s and 1980s?
- LS: I mostly showed my videos at film and video festivals worldwide. It was very difficult to show videos in museums at that time, but in 1984 I was invited to participate in *The luminous Image* in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the first video-installation exhibition in a museum in the world. This was a great opportunity because many well-known artists were involved. However, in all those years the Stedelijk Museum never bought my videos.
- Montevideo had most of my videos in their collection and they also distributed videos. At Montevideo my videos could be accessed by scholars, artists and curators from everywhere. It was a great collection because they also inherited all the videos from The Appel, so it is quite complete.
- I was part of the Board of Editors of *INFERMENTAL*, the first video magazine on cassettes, established by Vera Baksa-Soos and Gabor Body in Cologne, Germany. It was a great international network at that time.
- 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?
- LS: 1982: WorldwideVideofestival, Het Kijkhuis, Den Haag, Film- and Videofestival, Montréal, Canada, Film- and Videofestival, San Sebastian, Spain, Videofestival, Locarno, Italy, 1984: Venice Biennale, Italy, Film- and Videofestival, Berlin, Germany, Kunstmuseum, Bern, Switzerland, Film- and video-festival Montréal, Canada, Danskunstacademie, Kopenhagen, 1985: Release of *INFERMENTAL* -extra-ausgabe, magazine on videocassettes: Berlin, Zürich, Stuttgart, Videofestival, Bologna, Italy, Beursschouwburg, Brussels, Belgium, The Kitchen, New York, U.S.A., Institut Néerlandais, Paris, France, Tate Gallery, London, Great Britain, Videofestival, Montréal, Canada, Videofestival, Zagreb, Yugoslavia, Videofestival, Kopenhagen,

Denmark, Videofestival, Stockholm, Sweden, 1986: Videofestival, Kopenhagen, Denmark, Video Start, Bologna, Italy, Exp. Filmfestival, Oberhausen, Germany (retrospective), Videonale, Bonn, Germany, Film- and Videofestival, Osnabrück, Germany, Videofestival, Sydney, Australia, Worldwide Videofestival, Het Kijkhuis, Den Haag, Holland, II Festival Nacional Video, Madrid, Spain, Beursschouwburg, Brussels, Belgium, Release of *INFERMENTAL V*, The Hague, Cologne, München-Gladbach, Oberhausen, Dortmund, Osnabrück, Melbourne, Sydney, Budapest, Aarhus, Berlin, London, Vancouver, Tokyo, Buffalo, 1987: Toured five cities in Canada, organized by SAW Gallery, Toronto, Tine Side Cinema, New Castle, Great Britain, Exposito, Madrid, Spain, Espacio P, Madrid, Spain, SCAN, Tokyo, Japan, Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv, Israel, Festival of exp. Cinema, Montréal, Canada, 2ème Semaine internationale de Video, Genf, Switzerland, 1988: <sup>audio</sup> Bellevue, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1e Mostra int. derealizadores de video creacio, Valencia, Spain, Copenhagen Film + Videoworkshop Festival '88, Denmark, 17th Festival du Nouveau Cinema, Montréal, Canada, Videonale, Bonn, Germany, Recent Video Art from The Netherlands: The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The University of Texas at Arlington, Dallas, Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, The American Film Institute Video Festival, Los Angeles, New Langton Arts, San Francisco, WPA, Washington, Hallwalls, Buffalo, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y., Webster University Film Society, St. Louis, MO, Kansas City Contemporary Art Centre, MO, Centre Cont. Art, Santa Fe, NM, Arizona Media Arts, Tucson, AZ, Videoband Festival, Frlunda, Kulturhus, Sweden.

There were no festivals especially dedicated to women 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 and doing performance?
- LS: I n Rotterdam, where I lived, my work was never collected by the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, not even in the Rotterdam collection. It was very strange because at that time I was the only Rotterdam artist who was successful abroad. Also the photographs of myself with fantasy animals and men are not in many Museum collections. With my performance *Cage* I received a very negative review in a Dutch newspaper, but at the same time my performance was aired on Dutch television. Saskia Bos interviewed me for the TV-program *Openbaar Kunstbezit* (1978) in which they showed the work of 4 European female artists: Ulrike Rosenbach, Gina Pane, Chantal Akerman (?) and myself. For me it worked out well because after that everyone in the Dutch art world knew me and I was accepted as a visual artist.
- LL: How were your videos, including *Romeo is bleeding* and *Covered in cold sweat* (1983), received by the critics and audiences at the time?
- LS: *Romeo is bleeding* was received in a very positive way by both the critics and the audience.
- LL: Due to the obsolescence of the early video formats (open reel, U-matic), many video artworks from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s 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?

LS: Montevideo were responsible for transferring the different video formats to the latest standards. However, Montevideo doesn't exist anymore due to the lack of state financial support so this is now in the hands of LIMA. They are responsible for the masters and for the preservation of all the different artists' videos, which are retained in a temperature-controlled room. LIMA is struggling to survive because they don't get a State grant anymore.

LL: When did you make your last video?

LS: I have just premiered a new video-installation 'A Song for Mannahata' with three video-projections and 9 LCD-screens at Witteveen Visual Art Centre in Amsterdam.



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