

## Limited Access—Women’s Film and Video Art in 1970s in Poland

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The 1970s were an intense and diverse time in Polish art. It was a decade of ferment and excitement, manifest among other things in artists’ interest in the new media. Photography obviously had been previously explored and exploited by Polish artists, but there was a noticeable intensification of activity in the area of film, while video was an entirely new quantity, used in artistic activity in Poland starting in 1973.

Women artists strongly marked their presence in this field, even though in communist Poland access to cameras, in particular video cameras and film cameras, was strictly limited.

The restricted access to equipment of this kind, regardless of sex, resulted from a combination of at least two key factors. The first was tied to the shortage of all goods and universal market difficulties (in Poland and other countries of the Eastern Bloc, not only a television or camera, but even new furniture, could be an inaccessible luxury), but also the policy of the state, where political censorship was in force, there was no free press, and mass media were subject to control by official agents. Although the 1970s were characterized by a sensed political thaw, it was superficial, and censorship continued without a break, a single-party system prevailed, and no opposition could operate officially.

In such a situation, a camera in the hands of a private individual, including an artist, constituted a certain obvious threat to the status quo, because it could be used to generate content potentially evading censorship and potentially reproducible (through copying and the reissuance of media). This was also impacted by the difficult market situation, which effectively rendered the medium of film, including video, elitist. Moreover, film equipment was not available at art academies, which were largely conservative and whose professors were mainly focused on conveying to students’ knowledge and skills in the realm of “traditional” media. In the entire Polish People’s Republic, not a single studio of film, video or performance art functioned at any of the art academies. An exception was the Łódź Film School, but it unfortunately had no impact on the work of Polish women artists, an issue I will return to shortly.

How did the broader historical perspective look? With respect to the tradition of female avant-garde or experimental film in Poland, the women artists of the 1970s had too few points of reference. During the interwar period, avant-garde and experimental film was a medium dominated by male artists. A deviation from this situation was the work of Franciszka Themerson (1907–1988), a painter, illustrator and scenographer, who together with her husband and artistic partner Stefan Themerson (1910–1988), was the co-author of such films as *The Pharmacy* (*Apteka*, 1930), *Musical Moment*, (*Drobiazg melodyjny*, 1933), *The Adventures of a Good Citizen* (*Przygoda człowieka poczciwego*, 1937), *Calling Mr Smith* (1943) and *The Eye and the Ear* (*Oko i ucho*, 1944).

Undoubtedly Teresa Żarnowerówna (1897–1949) also had plans in this area. This sculptor, graphic artist and architect, a member of the Blok group, published a drawing in the journal published by the group (also called Blok) entitled *Film Construction* (*Konstrukcja filmowa*), which may also have been a sketch for a film project.

This is essentially it, in the current state of research. It’s not much, but it would be too simplistic to conclude that Polish women artists were not interested in exploring this medium. They probably were, but undoubtedly film as an artistic material was, as it would also be later, difficult to access for mundane reasons. To make films required at least some minimal organizational backing, which was very difficult to come by. Male artists also struggled with these difficulties, but to a lesser degree. This inequality was

reflected in the 1920s and 1930s by the lesser accessibility of artistic education for women, but first and foremost by their fewer opportunities for subsequent development of their professional career than in the case of men, who dominated the Polish avant-garde scene.

So Polish women artists in the 1970s lacked the support of a native women's avant-garde film tradition, and from the start of that decade formed a new history of their own, struggling de facto with the same problems that female artists in Poland (and not only in Poland) faced in the previous decades. With the difficulties in access to cameras, film and cassettes, film and video capture as in a lens the problems women artist wrestled with. This is not overtly revealed in the works themselves, which address various issues, but often is hidden behind the stories conveyed by the women artists, the means they resorted to in order to be able to work in the form of moving images, video or film.

Once they had the opportunity to make films, they raised problems and issues very close to those handled by women artists at the same time in the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan or Yugoslavia—in other words, on various continents, in various countries, on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The increased interest in film among Polish women artists coincided with the growing popularity of video everywhere portable cameras were available. Polish women had no opportunity to buy them, so they used film cameras, either 8 mm or 16 mm.

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Obviously, access to the medium of film and video was limited not only for women artists, but also for men. In this situation, an exception is Workshop of the Film Form (WFF), which was established in 1970 by students and graduates of the Film School in Łódź. Manifesting their interest in new media, the WFF artists initially worked mainly with photography and film. They most often hailed from the Direction of Photography Department and possessed specialised skills in the field of film and television production. To a certain degree, the WFF members operated independently of the Film School. They emphasised their affiliation with the art field, they questioned official commercial cinematography, opposing that system by means of their subversive actions, but at the same time, they tapped into the Film School's infrastructure as well as knowledge and experience acquired there. In the initial period of their activity, that situation resulted mainly in the production of films on 35 mm film stock by means of professional film cameras. In the course of time, the WFF members began to tap into a new tool that became available to them as students of the Film School – video. In the winter of 1973, they used the school's broadcasting truck in order to create the first video work in Poland: Television Transmission (Transmisja telewizyjna). That project was pursued within the group's collaboration with the Museum of Art (Muzeum Sztuki) in Łódź. For nearly three weeks, the WFF members carried out various interventions in the Museum's space, including the above-mentioned work, which consisted of transmitting images from a private apartment in Łódź, a cobbler's workshop and a street corner near the Museum's building into the Museum's interior.

In 1973 and during the years following, the WFF created artworks with video using the broadcasting truck, the television studio and later CCTV cameras to which the Film School students had access. The WFF members largely monopolised the field of video art in Poland for an obvious reason: they enjoyed the possibility of using the equipment that was indispensable for such productions and unavailable to anyone else. I am making a brief mention of the history of the WFF and its influence on video art in Poland, not only because the group's activity in the field had a pioneering character and marked a breakthrough moment, but also because throughout the entire period of the WFF's work (1970–77/78), its activity engaged forty male artists, and not a single woman artist. When asked about that situation, the WFF members replied that few women studied at the Film School in the 1960s and 1970s (apart from in the acting department), and therefore the lack of female participants of the group came as a natural

consequence. If we accept this explanation, without making detailed enquiries into the Film School's policy with regard to potential female candidates to cinematographic studies, we still need to remark that, as a consequence, women artists in Poland were denied even the same limited technological potential that was available to the narrow circle of male artists. They were deprived of it for reasons that can be described as an institutionally sanctioned exclusion. Often repeated in the source literature, the statement that video art was a democratic medium, developed in opposition to the elitist medium of film and, above all, to the phenomenon of television (which is watched by masses, but shaped by a handful of people) does not find confirmation in the Polish context – in the 1970s, video was an elitist medium in Poland, and the above described circumstances indicate that it was particularly unavailable to women artists. That new field of art did emerge in Poland, but it automatically became a domain of a narrow circle of male artists.

In many countries, film was a medium primarily dominated by men, but the appearance of video equalized the chances of women artists, as compared to male artists, to realize works involving moving images. Summarising her research for the exhibition *The First Generation. Women and Video 1970–75*, JoAnn Hanley wrote however, compared to the small number of women artists traditionally included in exhibitions of sculpture or painting, video program and exhibition catalogues of the 1970s (including special exhibitions such as the 1973 and 1975 Whitney Biennials, the 1976 Paris Biennial, and *documenta 6* in 1977) list a surprising number of women. [...] It offers an early history of the development of video as a medium as well as evidence of the significant role women played in the creation and definition of a new way of making art. It was, perhaps, the first time that men and women artists worked in a new medium on equal footing. Mary Jane Jacobs has suggested that women were especially drawn to video because 'access to video (as to performance, photography and installation art also emerging in the 1970s) allowed women and others – until then marginalized by the mainstream – to have an equal voice. Through these new genres, they could proclaim a place for themselves in the art world that could not be achieved by the Western, male dominated field of painting. Without the burdens of tradition linked with other media, women video artists were free to concentrate on process, often using video to explore the body and the self through the genres of history, autobiography [...]. Women also used the new medium to create social and political analyses of the myths and facts of patriarchal culture, revealing the socioeconomic realities and political ideologies that dominated everyday life.<sup>3</sup>

As we already know, the situation of women artists in Poland looked entirely different and reflected the difficult situation of women in the Polish People's Republic, where the Communist Party authorities – against their initial official declarations and postulates concerning the equality of the sexes – limited women's access to some professions since the end of the 1940s and did away with women's organisations in order to eventually practically back away from the postulates of the 'equality of the sexes'. The social system was founded on the vision, sanctioned top-down and unreal, of alleged equal rights of the sexes, whose consequences can be felt until the present day. In short, in Poland video was not a medium "equalizing" the chances of women artists.

Only in the 1970s did Polish women artists begin to demand their place in art history, partly due to the influence of the international feminist movement, but as we will see, it is also hard to say that they adopted a feminist strategy. It seems that the adoption of such a strategy would have entailed an unavoidable marginalization under the realities of the Polish art world, rejection from its sphere by male artists—which is not to say that works of this type were not created, and indeed we will find them within the oeuvre of each of the women artists discussed in this essay. I would only add that the decided majority of works by women created in the 1970s were films, not videos, which Polish women artists made few of, due to the technical limitations mentioned above, and few of which have survived (these are mainly works

known from photographic documentation by Jolanta Marcolla and Jadwiga Singer, whose works have not yet been given monographic treatment).

What sorts of works were created? They included analytical projects alluding to the peculiarities of the film medium; projects of this type were very popular in Poland in the 1970s among both female and male artists. Some of the film projects are obviously documentation of on-camera performance pieces—I do not discuss these in this text except for the work of Iwona Konart, as in her case this situation takes on a specific hue and warrants deeper reflection. Some of the film projects created in Poland in the 1970s, particularly from a contemporary perspective, may be regarded as feminist works, addressing the social or personal situation of women, their corporeality, agency, and sexuality—most of the works presented in the exhibition may be read in this manner, or also in this manner.

### **Ewa Partum**

Ewa Partum (b. 1945) initially studied at the State Higher School of Visual Arts (PWSSP) in Łódź, and later at the Academy of Fine Arts (ASP) in Łódź, Partum became an artist of key importance for Polish art. She initially carried out performances in public space, which originated from her interest in concrete poetry (scattering cut-out paper letters in various locations), and in the mid-1970s went on to focus above all and nearly exclusively on feminist art and avant-garde film. Ewa Partum's films are primarily records of performances, as in *Poem by Ewa* or *Self-Identification* (Samoidentyfikacja).

In the first instance, we are dealing with an action which the artist repeated in various situations, consisting of scattering white characters cut from paper. The crux of this work was that similar characters were often used for official communiqués by the communist authorities in Poland, arranged to form propaganda slogans marking state holidays, party conventions and the like. Characters of this type were thus recognizable by the society and generated unequivocal associations. In making the gesture of scattering the characters, allowing an element of randomness, Partum opened up the textual message to new meanings, thus generating a certain margin of freedom or at least a margin escaping the control of official agents. The letters formed into random arrangements, creating something spontaneous, requiring an individual reading by each viewer, which constituted a certain breakthrough in the communist system, where every element of citizens' personal and social life was subject to control.

An example of an analytical film work by Ewa Partum is *Tautological Cinema* (Kino tautologiczne) from 1973, a sequence of brief recordings made using an 8 mm camera, maintaining, as Łukasz Ronduda wrote, the convention of structural film. The subject of Partum's analysis in this case was, for example, the flow of film through the camera, and more broadly, the relations between the camera, the reel of film, and the recorded reality. In his analysis of *Tautological Cinema*, Ronduda stated that the distinctive portion of the work is *Film by Ewa*, a film self-portrait of the artist in which we see her, in turn, with eyes covered, ears stopped, lips sealed—intended to serve as a metaphor for the alienation of the conceptual artist. But in my view, it is rather a metaphor for the situation of the female conceptual artist, even more alienated because she is misunderstood not only by viewers but by her own community of artists, who were overwhelmingly men.

In turn, the work *Drawing TV* cited in the exhibition fits within a broader global stream of works made by artists based on work with television content.

The aforementioned work, *Drawing TV*, sits within a broader global current of projects pursued by artists with the use of television transmission. The artist operated on a TV screen which displayed a news broadcast filled with propaganda delivered by the country's Communist Party leaders. Using a felt-tip pen,

Partum drew geometric figures on the screen. Her simple gesture betrayed a strong political edge, which was not a frequent phenomenon in the Polish art of the 1970s, and something almost absent from women's art. Tapping into the limited possibilities existing under the totalitarian reality, Partum used the private space of her apartment and laid bare the propaganda message of the media and their ideologization.

## **Natalia LL**

Two works created by Natalia LL in the 1970s manifest a common characteristic, which is important for our reflection – the use of a film camera in a way in which a video camera could be used instead. Natalia LL (b. 1937) graduated from the State Higher School of Visual Arts (PWSSP) in Wrocław in 1963. In 1970, alongside Andrzej Lachowicz and others, she established the PERMAFO group. Under the same banner, the artists also ran a magazine and a gallery, which soon became a landmark on the map of avant-garde art in Poland. The members of PERMAFO wrote in the group's manifesto: 'The photographic or film camera lens and photosensitive materials may witness phenomena that escape us from one second to the next. [...] we are interested in reality only'. In line with that declaration, in the early period of her practice Natalia LL concentrated primarily on recording the everyday.

The first of the discussed works by Natalia LL is Permanent Record of Every 1 km of the E22 Motorway (Rejestracja permanentna co 1 km autostrady E22, 970), which records the image of a road as seen from a car window. The manner of using the camera (let us remember that a New York City street seen from a car also provides the motif of Nam June Paik's work recognised by many as the first video art project) clearly suggests an interest in the process of recording, which is parallel to action and could easily become a transmission. What mattered for Natalia LL was a record that was simultaneous to action as well as everything that the recorded reality could reveal owing to such a manner of recording. This way of thinking is close to experiments pursued by many artists who worked with video and provides a reason to assume that Natalia LL would have used a video camera in Permanent Record if only, to put it plainly, it had been available to her – such a tool would have been more adequate in that situation than the film camera.

Insofar as Permanent Record is a project that sits comfortably in the main current of Post-Conceptual art in Poland during that period, in the course of time, the artist began to transpose her experiences onto the feminist territory. Natalia LL's presence in the field of feminist art betrayed a non-linear character. After her return from a scholarship in the USA, she attempted to spread feminist ideas in Poland by organising the first exhibition devoted to such issues in the country, among her other initiatives. Yet, given the lack of understanding for her activities, she distanced herself from the problematic of feminism in the later period. Nevertheless, her works, which undermined the language of Conceptual analysis that dominated in Poland, were and still are read as manifestos of feminist views. I evoke here the work Impressions, (Impresje) from 1973, which, although recorded on 16 mm film stock, represents the broad tendency of 'autobiographic' video. Using portable video cameras, women artists portrayed themselves, often in the interiors of their own homes, and made use of their own image to convey meanings. Impressions is Natalia LL's self-portrait probably created in her own apartment. Her face is invisible, but we can see her young vital body, which becomes a source of joy, fun, pleasure – the body can be touched and squeezed. Impressions provides an image of conscious corporeality – an image that was rare in the art of Poland under Communism. The work is a joyful spontaneous story about female subjectivity, a film self-portrait, which, despite its different appeal, can nevertheless be compared with other video self-portraits, such as, for instance, the canonical work by the Canadian artist Lisa Steele, Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects (1974).



## **Jolanta Marcolla**

The first woman in Poland to create four video artworks in 1975 was the aforementioned artist Jolanta Marcolla, who began her studies at the State Higher School of Visual Arts (PWSSP) in Wrocław in 1970. Alongside Zdzisław Sosnowski, she established the artistic group The Actual Art's Gallery (Galeria Sztuki Aktualnej). At the Studio of Visual Activities and Structures, ran at the Wrocław school by Professor Leszek Kaćma, Marcolla wrote her dissertation *Study of the Activity of the Visual Structure of Television Transmission for the Needs of Advertising and Propaganda* (Badania aktywności struktury wizualnej przekazu telewizyjnego dla potrzeb reklamy i propagandy) which is particularly valuable for our present reflection. The text was penned on the basis of the artist's earlier internship at a television studio, which allowed her to discover the principles of the organisation of work and general methods of television production. In the first part of her text, Marcolla addressed the situation at the television centre in a critical way. Broadcasts were created according to a scheme established many years before, directors and scriptwriters did not introduce any new ideas, and set design was characterised by naive literality – '[...] film editing: consists exclusively in cleaning the material [...] the editing table offers an immense potential of manipulating reality. Completely untapped apart from removing "dirt" and "hiss" [...]; the television camera is essentially treated as a static tool of passive reproduction [...] camera operators are paid for keeping the image in focus'.

In the second section of her dissertation, where she analysed television as a mechanical reproduction device, Marcolla addressed the questions that interested her and used that experience to draw conclusions, which were later reflected in her artistic practice. The artist analysed the trust placed by the viewers in television transmission and the consequences of that situation. She related it to the broadly described question of the credibility of mechanically generated images for human perception, from photography, to film, to television:

[...] The invention of film made it possible to further broaden the field of possibilities of reproduction, since it was able to represent reality in time. That fact further enhanced the belief in the real presence of the basis and material of reproduction, which is reality. In turn, television introduced another important characteristic, namely the temporal simultaneity of representation and reality. [...] What is more, television achieved something hitherto impossible: it transmits images of reality to any place at the same time, as if it defeated space.

Since the beginning of her studies, Marcolla was searching for her individual manner of formulating artistic statements; she abandoned painting and turned to photography and film:

I was exploring the arcane details of the painting workshop, studying drawing, the principles of composition and selection of colours, and it slowly began to occur to me that I was stuck in a closed and ossified world of values, because when you stand in front of a canvas with a paintbrush in your hand, you can only copy someone else's achievements and make use of someone else's experiences .

These words bring to mind the statement of another woman artist, who also abandoned painting for film, and later for video. Catherine Elwes (b. 1952) reminisced in one of her interviews about the breakthrough moment of her practice:

I think initially it was an impatience with painting. I needed a more direct and immediate way of communicating the stories that were in my head and that I was trying to get out. For me, the difference between film and video was like the difference between painting and drawing. I also didn't like the

waiting. Video was a bit like having a pencil with a rubber. I could put something down, and if I didn't like it, I could just rub it out. I started working with performance first, and then incorporated video into the performance, then abandoned performance and worked exclusively on tape. The only difficulty was how you convinced your audience that it was a female sensibility that was being expressed.

Marcolla's reflection bore the fruit of four video works created in the studio of TVP Łódź in 1975: Dimension 1, 2, 3 and 4. The videos lasted from 5 to 15 minutes, but unfortunately they are known today only from photographic documentation. Invited to participate in the IV International Open Encounter on Video at the Centro de Arte y Communication in Buenos Aires, the artist sent the only existing copy of the material, which she never received back. What remained is a set of photographs, which has not only a purely documentary value, but also demonstrates something more than the works themselves – it is a record of the activity of a woman artist in the 1970s in Poland. The preserved photographs show her focussed, looking into the camera lens to check if everything works or taking part in her own projects as a participant-performer. The works were created in a television studio, but they were never aired – it wasn't her intention. In her situation it was impossible – a person not affiliated with the television society and environment, had no opportunity to broadcast her own tv-show. Marcolla's Dimensions are video-installations on the basis of which we can analyse the phenomenon of transmission; their function was rather that of 'mock-ups' that illustrated the operating principle of television transmission.

Dimension 1 featured two people: the artist and a studio employee, sitting on two sides of a wall. On each side, there was a camera and a monitor; the camera transmitted the image from behind the wall onto the monitor. The participants could talk to each other, but only in a mediated way. As Marcolla wrote in the script of the work:

The video camera transmits that secondary situation to the monitor. Three elements: video monitor which transmits the situation, TV set which shows a specific programme, and a general view of the studio are recorded on video. A situation is created in which two people contact one another only by means of cameras and monitors. Camera A, which records the face of one person, transmits it to monitor A1 – available only to the other person. In an analogous manner, camera B transmits the image of the other person to monitor B2. Each of the people has one camera/recording and one monitor/transmitting the image of the partner's face/within their field of vision. A partition is installed between the two people, which separates them. The entire setup is recorded with a video camera.

The other three works were also based on the phenomenon of transmission. In Dimension 2, the artist was sitting between two monitors which displayed the transmitted image of her face; in the following work, a monitor displayed the transmitted image of the artist taking photographs of the studio, whereas the last work from the cycle consisted in a transmission to the monitor of the image of the artist and, subsequently, all studio employees in her company.

Several months later, in November 1975, the works were shown at the CAYC. Marcolla was the only Polish woman artist who participated in that presentation. The only existing copies of the tape were never returned to her.

Apart from video works, Marcolla is also the author of numerous photographs, under whose "analytical" post-conceptual surface we can easily find also a feminist message, as in the case of *Kiss* (1975). This short form was intended to be shown in a loop in gallery space. The film is entirely composed of a repeated gesture by the artist, smiling radiantly and unchangingly, consisting of her blowing a kiss—over and over. This looping of film concepts was a characteristic ploy used by Marcolla, bringing to mind the

currently popular graphic form of GIFs: moving pictures falling somewhere between photography and film.

In the case of Marcolla, who used in her works her own image as an attractive young woman with regular facial features, this procedure assumes a particular magnitude. Kiss is a foreshadowing of something that forty years ago, in communist Poland, was not yet present, but for us has become so obvious that it is less and less noticeable. Namely, it portends the public process of exploitation of the image of well-known persons, or persons who become known only briefly, as a result of this very exploitation. This is an exploitation that occurs through the media, and occurs at any price and to such a degree that these images become detached from their owners, stripped of meaning, significance, and the plausibility of reality. This is directly tied to shifting of the boundaries of privacy. A consequence is the creation of the global situation familiar to us and users and viewers of social media in which nearly every gesture, even one that in its original dimension was dramatic or intimate, can be publicized, duplicated, and in the process sooner or later rendered shallow. The action of Marcolla's film, whose only motif is the gesture of blowing a kiss, operates under this principle. Initially intimate and sensual, over time it becomes absurd and unreal. Kiss, a three-minute film comprising numerous repetitions, created over forty years ago, is a clear prophecy of what would follow, and would attract our gaze and participation.

### **Jadwiga Singer**

The materials that document the activity of the Laboratory of Presentation Techniques (Laboratorium Technik Prezentacyjnych, LTP) have been preserved in the private archives of Jadwiga and Jacek Singer and Grzegorz Zgraja. Works created by Jadwiga, films like *The Fight or Destruction* have never been presented until now. In 2018 I contacted Jadwiga's family and then found out that some of her works are available. It took me four years to find her works. This group was founded in 1975 by students of the Academy of Fine Arts (ASP) in Katowice. Film tapes and photographic documentation have probably survived until today only in the archive of one of the founding members of the collective, Grzegorz Zgraja (b. 1952). Since the 1980s, Zgraja has lived in Germany, where he lectures at the Academy of Fine Arts in Braunschweig. The artist was one of the four members of the group who formed its core. Beside him, the Laboratory of Presentation Techniques (as Zgraja recalls, the name of the group posed certain difficulties, and therefore slightly later the members began to use an abbreviated form: Laboratory TP) comprised Jadwiga Singer, Jacek Singer and Marek Kołaczkowski, who were engaged to a varied degree in pursuing activities with video. According to source materials – catalogues of the group's several exhibitions – Jadwiga Singer created a group of video works and penned the majority of texts that described the group's activity. Unfortunately, probably only one of Singer's film works has been preserved, *The End, the End* (Koniec, koniec, 16 mm, 1979), and few photographic works. As Zgraja recalls, the establishment of the group was a spontaneous gesture of several dozen students of the first year of studies at the ASP in Katowice who felt frustrated by the level of education at the Academy and the approach of the teachers to their students' interest in new media.

Neither at that time, nor later, did the group write a manifesto. A gesture that inaugurated its activity came in the form of an extraordinary exhibition held on the staircase of the Academy's building. Everyone willing to take part was welcome to do so, and the make-up of the LTP crystallised from amongst the participants. The leitmotif of the show was portrait, and its premise was very open – everyone was supposed to create their own work devoted to the topic. The students created an environment of sorts, annexing the entire space of the monumental staircase of the school building for their needs.

**Characterising the field of interests of the LTP, Jadwiga Singer wrote:**

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The perennial human need to leave traces of their activity, the signs of their existence, is a stimulator of broadly understood transmission. The diversity and the broad spreading of the means of mass visual transmission in the recent decades of our century – these are the factors that have significantly influenced the extraordinary broadening of the iconosphere. All artistic disciplines currently borrow from that iconosphere, and thus research conducted in the fields of particular domains of artistic practice is becoming more or less the same. As a result, also graphic art, treated as one of the forms of visual transmission, shares many common features with painting, literature, photography, printing, film, television, video, science and technology.

These means of formulating artistic statements become united particularly in the field of art, in which we encounter the use of graphic art, film, tape recorders and other means of conveying information in order to investigate the nature of these means or the essence of art itself. We made observations concerning the mutual influences within different means of visual transmission (both in the sphere of aesthetics and reflection on the language of statements) during the work in the field of graphic art and they compelled us to take an interest in photography, film and video, which we treat not as a source of inspiration in graphic work, but as manners, autonomous and equal to graphic art, of formulating statements, which offer the possibility to pursue equally effective investigations into the problems that we want to share with the viewer .

Published in the catalogue of the 7th International Graphic Art Biennial in Cracow, Singer's text is one of the few that outline the premises of the group's activity , providing a synthetic description of the path that led the LTP members towards new media. Interestingly, it is this catalogue, devoted by principle to a different medium, that today functions as one of literally a handful of sources on the basis of which we may attempt to reconstruct Singer's works created using video technology.

There is an interesting story related to the way the group obtained access to video equipment. As opposed to the Film School in Łódź, the ASP in Katowice did not have broadcasting trucks at its disposal. Nevertheless, the artists found a possibility to work with video technology. At the beginning of the 1970s, the Silesian University of Technology founded a studio equipped with modern devices, such as video cameras with 2-inch tape. The new entity was supposed to modernise the pedagogical methods used at the university, yet it did not fulfil its task in practice – students and lecturers made little use of the available equipment. The discovery of that studio and its resources by the members of the LTP unleashed an immense potential for them. The first video works by the group were created at that very studio – as Grzegorz Zgraja recalls, prior to entering the room it was necessary to put on white antistatic uniforms in order not to disturb the recording process. Such working conditions did not seem to generate a situation marked by the characteristics that we consider as the essence of video (mobility, availability, etc.), yet it was in such a realm that the first (unpreserved) works by Jadwiga Singer came into being – some of them in collaboration with Jacek Singer. Their works, which we know merely from documentation, are rather typical examples of the interest of young artists in the phenomenon of transmission, especially concerning the transmission of the relation between time and space, as well as the relative nature of the media-transmitted image. Serving as an example are two works by Jadwiga and Jacek Singer, both from 1978: Installation Design (Projekt instalacji) and Two Relations (Dwie relacje)

In turn, two known works created exclusively by Jadwiga Singer also indicate a different field of her interest. They address the problem of the influence of the media on human behaviour. As the artist stated, Conversation I and II (Rozmowa I and Rozmowa II, 1978) were a series of experiments with a record of short arranged situations that accompany an ordinary conversation. 'The presence of the medium – Singer wrote – has an essential impact on the way people behave and reveals the pressure exerted by the ideology

of this means of mechanical recording of reality. An analytical perspective on the means of transmission and attempts at revealing the important characteristics of its impact lead to the diminishing and neutralising of its ideological influence. It is an operation which results in a perspective on transmission in a given medium without stereotypical and thoughtless reactions – a fact that therefore liberates imagination’.

Currently, Jadwiga Singer’s archive is being developed by the Arton Foundation (Warsaw). The artist was absent on the Polish art scene for many years, but now the interest in her film and video works is grooving, her works need to be recognized and shared with a wider audience.

### **Izabella Gustowska**

It seems that amongst Polish women artists who began to work with video in the 1970s, it is Izabella Gustowska (b. 1948) who established the strongest relationship with the new medium also in the later period of her practice and continues to explore it until the present day.

Gustowska’s dream was to study at the Film School in Łódź, yet her personal situation compelled her to stay in her hometown of Poznań and accept an assistant position at the Faculty of Graphic Art of the State Higher School of Visual Arts (PWSSP). In order to be able to work with new media, she found employment for a year (1972–73) at a state construction company, where she made use of the company camera (16 mm) to create her first film. As the artist recalls, at that time she was aware of the medium of video and had a theoretical knowledge of its potential, but such equipment remained unavailable to her for the next several years.

Although, as Gustowska emphasises, she has a ‘Conceptual background’ and is no stranger to constructing works also from the point of view of their form on the basis of analytical premises, the artist developed her own separate language both in terms of form and content. From the very beginning, her work has revolved around the woman figure, both in the general and the individual sense. Her art is saturated with autobiographical motifs, interwoven with universal stories and parables, which with hindsight, form an epic narrative, where video plays a very important role as a medium that is capable of portraying the delicate matter of dreams and memories – the crucial content of Gustowska’s work.

The work *Relative Similarities* (*Względne cechy podobieństwa*, 1979), which has a particular relevance for our reflection, is a film record, yet the choice of the motif recorded by the artist turns it into a somewhat prophetic project which anticipates the attention that Gustowska devoted in the following decades to explorations of the nature of video. The protagonists are three female twin siblings whom Gustowska recorded in different situations and in the course of the passing time. The camera registered the changes that gradually occurred in the young women, capturing the differences and similarities between the siblings. Let us add that the record of one of the couple of protagonists came to an end in dramatic circumstances, when one of the sisters developed cancer. In a nearly prophetic gesture, several days before the medical diagnosis, the artist filmed one of the women as absent – her silhouette was merely marked on the floor with an outline, whereas the other sister, lying on the floor next to the outline, was covered with pieces of white plaster resembling bandages.

A twin sister herself, Gustowska incessantly analysed the phenomenon of twins, choosing for that purpose the adequate medium of video. It is noteworthy that due to its specific character, video offers the possibility of simultaneous being and seeing oneself, thus building a situation of a split, which may betray a schizophrenic aspect or, from a different perspective, generate a situation in which we are encountering

our twin image. *Relative Similarities* is a work that marks the starting point of the artist's long-term and profound reflection.

Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, when Gustowska already enjoyed the possibility of using video equipment, her own physicality, doubled and multiplied by means of cameras and monitors which displayed transmitted images, became – as M. Jankowska remarked – the basic aspect of the artist's works, for instance in the complex project *...99 (...7 Days of the Week)* [*...99 (...7 dni tygodnia)*, 1987]. It comprised 99 photographic prints showing fragments of Gustowska's body, which were transmitted in a sequence to two monitors, interwoven with the documentation of the artist's everyday life during the eponymous seven days. Gustowska was simultaneously carrying out a performance in which she used a photographic tray to develop prints that showed her face, presented to the viewers in a darkened room (with the monitors and a fluorescent tube hung above the tray as the source of light).

Apart from confronting her own image, the artist also used the medium of video to confront her memories and dreams. In her installations, she usually gave up using the ready forms of monitors and encased them in various ways, thus creating peculiar kinds of objects in which the screen remained the only trace of their original shape and function.

In the course of time, Gustowska's installations adopted monumental forms, such as the work *Life Is a Story* (2007), built of many primarily round-shaped screens, which filled the entire large gallery space with an intense green light. Gustowska wrote about the motifs visible on the screens:

It is a collection of many signals resulting from many life situations, from everyday behaviour, to passions, to abstract gestures. These states are punctuated by the presence of an object, installation, intervention in space, and above all, by the virtual presence of video-projection. It is them that establish the main link between different threads, both those from the past and the present situations. They are an order and an escaping energy of unexpected behaviour. As it is in life, they take a multi-threaded, but also episodic course with a varied amplitude of clashes and energies.

### **Teresa Tyszkiewicz**

Teresa Tyszkiewicz (born 1953) focused on creating films, particularly in the early period of her work. As a student at the Warsaw University of Technology, she was a co-founder of the Remont Society of Film Artists (the Remont club and gallery were important sites on the map of the Polish avant-garde in the second half of the 1970s). Starting in 1978, she also operated within the circles of *Galeria Współczesna*, which was led then by her later artistic and life partner Zdzisław Sosnowski, who previously, with Jolanta Marcolla, had co-founded *The Actual Art's Gallery*.

The work at that time by Tyszkiewicz, including the film *Breath* (*Oddech*, 1981), exemplifies the transformation underway in Polish art in the 1970s. The artist was not interested in an analytical approach to the medium, as the formal layer also changes. Initially, she created her films together with Sosnowski. As David Crowley wrote, this was a sensual tale of an intimate relationship between a loving couple who in improvisational actions/compositions develop a repertoire of visual equivalents for the experience of love and connection. In my own view, these early projects to some extent objectify Tyszkiewicz, who with time would emancipate herself.

Her individual films are expressive, colourful pictures whose topic and also medium is the female body, its experiences and desires. Tyszkiewicz's projects are sequences which, as Szymon Bojko has written, penetrate the fields of subjective experiences and sufferings. Here reality, everyday objects, become fetishes whose role and significance change along with the flow of the film action. The artist eagerly

employs symbol-objects and archetype-objects known from classic art (pearls), but also items playing an important role in the art of the surrealists, for example—in *Breath* an important role is played by animal fur. First, we see it as an object surrounded by sensual desire, which is then “disarmed” as the artist brutally tears it to shreds.

Tyszkiewicz also made attempts at the demystification of fetish-objects and demystification of the stereotypically perceived role of the woman, her corporeality and sexuality, in other films of hers, such as *Picture and Games*, (*Obraz i gry*, 1981).

In 1982, Tyszkiewicz and Sosnowski emigrated from Poland to France, where they live and work to this day. Since then, Tyszkiewicz has primarily created disturbing painting objects, composed of hundreds and thousands of sewing pins stuck into canvas or paper. In recent years, this artist, nearly absent from the Polish artistic scene, has returned, and her works from the 1970s and 1980s have been recalled and re-examined, along with her later work. Her amazing film “ARTA” was digitized recently and it was presented for the first time in Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, at Tyszkiewicz’s solo show in the summer 2020. This shows how much we still have to discover about women experimental and avant garde film in Poland.

### **Iwona Lemke-Konart**

Iwona Lemke-Konart (born 1958) is an artist who has lived and worked in Canada for over thirty years. Before emigrating from Poland, she worked in many media, but generally it does not appear that these media were the subject of her interest. Like Tyszkiewicz and Kutera, Lemke-Konart represented the next generation of women artists, alluding with some distance to media analysis and primarily exploring the area of her own subjectivity. Film, photography and drawing thus became for her a medium for exhibiting her own psychophysical condition. Lemke-Konart conducted her deliberations in various media. An example is *The Limits of Human Possibilities* (*Granice ludzkich możliwości*, 1984), which functions as a set of photographs combined with drawing, as well as a film and book.

Film and photographs are a type of on-camera performance, a sequence of poses reminiscent of asanas in yoga adopted by the artist, for which a kind of point of reference is the outline of a mountain range that appears in the work as the first in a series of photographs and as the final frame in the film. With her physicality and adopted poses Lemke-Konart alludes to forms from nature, strong and unchanging. The pretext for creating this work was an important moment in the artist’s personal life, as she was then at an early stage of pregnancy. She experienced this time as a period of particular “communication” with her own body, which feeling translated into a nearly metaphysical belief in the limitlessness of her psychophysical capabilities, which obviously was illusory—the limits from the title were set by nothing but the artist’s own physicality. As a record of these poses, combined with the frame presenting a vast mountain panorama, the film may also be read as a reference by the artist to a conception of macrocosm and microcosm, a sense of oneness with the world around her. Like Teresa Tyszkiewicz, absent for many years from Polish art, Iwona Lemke-Konart has also returned recently in the reflections of curators and researchers, and her work is revealed as an original new quantity (*proszę wyjaśnić*), different from what was offered in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the male artists of her generation.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, the history of avant-garde film and video of women artists in Poland in the 1970s does not need to be re-examined; it needs to be written. The works created in these media have not been studied in depth and most of the artists creating them have not yet been the subject of monographs, despite the high standing of their oeuvre.

In the general awareness and source literature, the history of early video art created by women artists in Poland is a forgotten and repressed phenomenon; if it is ever analysed, it happens on the occasion of researching other topics. It is a history of disappearing works and approaches, a history of broken narratives, a history of interrupted thoughts, a history of access to the camera gained with difficulty, and finally, a history of forgetting women makers of video works. It is impossible to place the blame only on technology, although technology did not prove helpful.

Current research on women's film and particularly video art of the 1970s is akin to archaeology, consisting almost exclusively in reconstructing works on the basis of descriptions and drawings preserved in catalogues. It is difficult to state if the list of works gathered in this text is completely exhaustive, since we cannot definitively exclude that other projects were created. Furthermore, we are aware of missing works (Marcolla) or dramatic situations, such as Jadwiga Singer destroying her own archive due to years of lack of researchers interest in her work.

Internationally, video art was the field where, for the first time in art history, female and male artists met on an equal basis (according to JoAnn Hanley, among others) simultaneously creating pioneering works. In turn, in Poland it was a restricted field for women artists and a space which could be only accessed with extraordinary determination. What is more, staying in the field required adopting the 'camouflage' of the universal language of Polish analytical conceptualism, although it is true that some of the women artists who worked with cameras in the 1970s (Natalia LL, Ewa Partum, and Izabella Gustowska) continued to pursue their practice and determined their unique language and approach during that period while tapping into the potential of video and film.

Despite these difficulties and the scarcity of sources, the entirety of works gathered appear as a slowly revealing blank spot. Further analysis of the available material and the hope for finding other works or their traces will perhaps offer the possibility to discern a connection between the generation of women pioneers of the medium of video and the subsequent generation of Polish artists, including the representatives of critical art (Katarzyna Kozyra, Monika Zielińska-Mamzeta, and Alicja Żebrowska from the 1990s). Unfortunately, their examples will likely provide yet another opportunity to analyse the mechanism of the disappearance of works and artists from artistic circulation and awareness.