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New Poland - New Video
(Some reflections on
Polish video art since 1989)

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This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

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Introduction

First video works in Poland, both tapes and installations, were made in 1973. Due to various reasons the main interest was aimed at qualities of a new medium, at the possibilities of its artistic expression. Television was also in focus, in spite of the fact that video was recognised as a separate medium. Polish video artists claimed their detachment from TV. This stance, maintained until the end of the eighties, was more of ideological than artistic character. As Jozef Robakowski - the major figure in media art in Poland - wrote in 1976: "Video art is entirely incompatible with the utilitarian character of that institution (television), it is the artistic movement, which through its independence, denounces the mechanism of the manipulation of other people." This is also why numerous Polish video artists dealt with relationship between the reality, its audiovisual representation and the spectator. They aimed to reveal the relative character of perception, and the resulting possibilities of manipulating the reception.

Analytic character of Polish video art in the seventies was extended into the eighties. In that decade, however, the other tendency was becoming more and more important. Artists, like Izabella Gustowska, Zbigniew Libera and Jerzy Truszkowski stressed the significance of emotions and their irrational sources, emphasised the intuitive and spontaneous character of art activities. Polish video became thus very personal and subjective, and video performance took the dominant position among different types of video expression.

Beginnings of the new video - prehistory of new Poland (1987-89)

The symptoms of the new wave in Polish video art appeared for the first time in the works made by Yach Paszkiewicz together with a group of four

other artists - all together known as "Yach-Film" group - and in tapes by Krzysztof Skarbek. All those videos were made in the end of the eighties (1987-89). The artists graduated academies of fine arts (Torun and Wroclaw), and this background provided their works with the special interest in visual, pictorial qualities of a video tape. Dominance of expression upon reflection, spontaneous game-like creation upon work with concentration, loosing the interest in theoretical considerations on the nature of medium, these are fundamentals for the new video in Poland. Artists composing this new wave did not treat the medium of video in a very purist way. Yach Paszkiewicz and his group worked on the border of film and video. He was shooting on Super 8 film and transferring onto magnetic tape. In his case relationship between video and music was evident. His later career as a musical videoclip maker seems to be a consequence of the previously made artistic decisions. Krzysztof Skarbek brought into video art his previous film experiences, and connected video with musical performance and concert. The space of Skarbek's activities is the world of ritual, para-magical behaviours. Vital expression of his works is a vehicle for his previous reflection on reality in its different aspects. The artist's commentary to his tape *Nasz prOmeGadki beton-Aront* (Our Quick Concrete-Aront) from 1989 - a very important work for the development of the new video art in Poland - shows his position very clearly: "The action is laid in a 'New industrial Village'. People practising their rituals in masks and holy colours accept the severe unapproachable reality they live in. They try to accustom themselves to it by means of magic activities. The film reveals that what effects our senses in extremities i.e. Promethean Struggle, Rebellion, Heroism, Good Humour. CONCRETE structures-modules are like holy statues - ALTARS or the primitive Bush. Secular powers crash together love and prevalence here." Works of Krzysztof Skarbek and of those artists who are under his strong influence (like Magorzata Kazimierczak) show how important role in the development of the new wave of Polish video played Zbigniew Libera and Jerzy Truszkowski with their video from mid-eighties.

New Institutions

The political changes, which began in Poland in 1989, brought with them new perspectives but also new limitations and dangers. The sphere of culture lost its financial security guaranteed by the state in previous decades. As usually, increase of freedom was counterpointed with decrease of security. The position of artists became financially more and more difficult. In such a situation a very important thing was to establish some institutions both independent and financed by the state, which would guarantee further development of video art. One year before the beginning

of a new political situation in Poland (in 1988) I founded, in Lodz, the Polish Video Art Data Bank, a non-profit organisation for media culture. Since then several programs presenting video art were organised in Poland and abroad. In 1989 the first edition of WRO - International Sound Basis Visual Art Festival was organised in Wroclaw (Piotr Krajewski, Violetta Krajewska, Zbigniew Kupisz). After three annual appearances the festival is working as biennial now. In 1990 I founded Film & Video Department in The Centre for Contemporary Art - Ujazdowski Castle in Warsaw. In the CCA, besides regular video presentations, an annual international festival of experimental cinema and video art is held, as well as various media art exhibitions. In 1994 the first video festival in Lublin took place. When we add presentations of video art traditionally organised in galleries since the seventies, we can see that the Polish video art productions has many opportunities to be presented. The audience of video increased rapidly also because of the television programs on media art. I have already written in other place that a change of attitude towards television had great importance for the development in the field of video. Television, which was for many years considered to be a tool of propaganda and therefore treated as the enemy, has lately gained a certain quality of neutrality. As a result, independent artists stopped rejecting television. On the contrary, there have appeared independent art initiatives trying to make use of public television, trying to treat it as a medium of artistic creation, or as a mean of distribution. Not only artists, like Jozef Robakowski or Lodz-Kaliska Group, have an opportunity to present their programs on TV. There are also special programs on media art (late in the night) where the viewers can meet the newest Polish works as well as international media art productions. Taking all this into account we can say that Polish video makers have quite many possibilities to have their works presented in Poland. As for international context the efforts of mine as well as those of Piotr Krajewski from WRO also made Polish video art quite well known in the world.