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# She became my teacher and mentor: uncovering the legacy of women video pioneers in art schools and academies in Europe.

LEUZZI, L.

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# "She became my teacher and mentor."

## Uncovering the Legacy of Women Video Pioneers in Art Schools and Academies in Europe<sup>1</sup>

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The introduction of the portable video recorder enabled women artists of the 1970s to experiment with a medium that was considered easier and cheaper to operate than film as well as free from the heavily male-dominated imprint of traditional artistic practices. Video allowed for immediacy and intimacy, facilitating performances that featured nudity and the body.<sup>2</sup> This benefited the work of many women artists, whether those involved in feminist movements and collectives or those who were independently exploring themes and issues that had arisen from second-wave feminism.

Over the years, the contribution of women artists to the development of video as an art form has been deeply marginalized and under-researched. Particularly little, if any, investigation has been conducted on those women artists who started teaching video in the 1970s and 1980s, their impact on students, and their legacy as it survives today.<sup>3</sup> Other overlooked aspects of the

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2 I conducted an initial reflection upon this theme in my research on the AHRC-funded research project "EWVA European Women's Video Art in the 70s and 80s." See Laura Leuzzi, Elaine Shemilt, and Stephen Partridge (eds.), *EWVA European Women's Video Art*, New Barnet, 2019. The author wishes to build upon this preliminary investigation in the coming months.

3 No specific study has been dedicated to the subject to date. Nonetheless, brief comments on the role of women artists who teach or direct video programs can be found in histories of video art as well as in biographies dedicated to specific artists. An example of this can be found in Jennifer Steetskamp, "Looking Back: The Roots of Video Production at the Jan van Eyck Academie," in *Jan van Eyck Video Weekend* [online], Maastricht, 2017, pp. 1-7, here pp. 4 and 5, [https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/4166820/75975\\_Looking\\_back\\_The\\_roots\\_of\\_video\\_production\\_at\\_the\\_Jan\\_van\\_Eyck\\_Academie.pdf](https://pure.uva.nl/ws/files/4166820/75975_Looking_back_The_roots_of_video_production_at_the_Jan_van_Eyck_Academie.pdf) [accessed 30.11.2021].

history of the period include the challenges and obstacles that young and early career women artists encountered when they approached the medium within the remit of the art school, with very limited support and models.

This chapter will focus on these issues through an analysis of case studies from the United Kingdom and the Netherlands – two countries in which video was particularly advanced as an art form – providing an initial survey on the topic in the service of larger studies in the future. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the methodology utilized in this study has incorporated networking data from social media and mailing lists. This bottom-up approach has allowed for further knowledge to be gleaned on the topic based on empirical evidence concerning the relevance and legacy of women artists-teachers.

In several countries in the 1970s, the U.K. among them, numerous women video pioneers were enrolled as students in fine art and sculpture departments that were marked by a strong male culture and where most of the teachers and students were men.<sup>4</sup> At the time, many art schools would offer access to the video apparatus, but no training was available. Therefore, artists tended to adopt a hands-on approach, teaching themselves how to use video. They considered peer-to-peer feedback and knowledge-sharing essential, but there were few opportunities in which to receive such feedback, especially from women artists who worked with video.

Interviewed on the issue, renowned British feminist video artist and author Catherine Elwes reported a similar situation at Farnham<sup>5</sup> and, later, at the Slade School of Fine Art where, she states, “all the studios were run by men.”<sup>6</sup> Though there were very few women among the part-time tutors at the Slade, some were able to offer valuable feedback during Elwes’ first year, in which she was still making objects, before her transition to performance and then video. However, none of the women specialized in video or performance during this period when Elwes was exploring new art forms.

In our conversations, Elwes remarked in particular upon the importance of being able to show autobiographical materials to those tutors and share details of her personal experiences. Indeed, her personal life was having a major impact on her feminist practice, in adherence to the contemporary motto “the personal is political.”<sup>7</sup> In Elwes’ own recollections, the support and mentorship of the women tutors at the Slade, although limited, offered significant guidance

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4 This can be observed, for example, in several interviews collected during the EWVA project available at [www.ewva.ac.uk](http://www.ewva.ac.uk) [accessed 30.11.2021], including those with Catherine Elwes and Elaine Shemilt.

5 Later, Farnham School of Art and Guildford School of Art merged to form West Surrey College of Art and Design.

6 Elwes discussed her views and experience on the topic in the paper “The Feminist in Art School – A Re-View,” presented at *From Art School to Public Programme. A Symposium on Art Education*, DRAF, London, 6 May 2014. For the quote, cf. Laura Leuzzi, email interview with Catherine Elwes, 16 November 2020.

7 Ibid.

and reinforcement to the young artist and her female colleagues alike.<sup>8</sup>

Elwes' experience as a student at the Slade demonstrates the importance, for many feminist artists of the 1970s and 1980s, of mentorship relationships allowing for intimacy, respect, and in some capacity a sentiment of 'sisterhood.' For Elwes' practice, it was key that her tutors be aware of current feminist discourse and recognize the position of privilege that the patriarchy retained – something she believed unlikely to be acknowledged by her male tutors.<sup>9</sup>

In 1979 Elwes complained about the male-dominated culture and lack of women tutors at the Slade. In response, and in an altogether unprecedented way, British performance artist Stuart Brisley gave Elwes – still a student at the time – access to the entire budget for the visiting-lecture programme for the rest of the year. This allowed Elwes to invite as guest lecturers feminist artists such as Rose Garrard and Tina Keane, who were working with video, as well as Rose Finn-Kelcey, who was using the moving image in her practice. In a 1979 article entitled "The Feminist in Art School – A Recent View," which appeared in the first issue of *Feminist Art News*, Elwes reports that, unfortunately, the programme did not "radically alter the balance of power in the school."<sup>10</sup>

Internationally renowned British artist Elaine Shemilt recalls a similar situation at the Winchester School of Art: between 1973 and 1976, while she was a student in the Sculpture Department, there were no female instructors and just three fellow women students. In 1974 Shemilt began incorporating video into her installations and performances, and in 1975 she was selected to present at the famous *Video Show* at the Serpentine in London. In that period of her early experimentation with video, she considered the medium to be an ephemeral part of a more complex process, such that the lasting legacy of the videos would be seen as lithographic prints, etchings, and screen prints.

Like many of her generation, Shemilt points out that the department provided no training but did allow students to independently use its Sony Rover Portapak. She notes that, later on, when she became a student at the Royal College of Art (RCA), Susan Hiller came as an invited lecturer. Hiller made a profound impression on the students, and Shemilt remembers receiving some encouraging, positive feedback from her.<sup>11</sup>

While at the RCA (1976–1979), Shemilt began teaching printmaking herself. Analysing the nature of her practice – which consisted in incorporating different media, such as video and film – we can infer how it influenced deeply her teaching. On this issue, Shemilt has commented: "My approach was for students to abandon the idea that they were sculptors or painters or video artists/

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> This aspect was discussed by Elwes at *From Art School to Public Programme. A Symposium on Art Education*, DRAF, 2014 and previously in Elwes, "The Feminist in Art School – A Recent View," in *Feminist Art News* (FAN) 1, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Elwes, 1979.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Leuzzi, email interview with Elaine Shemilt, November 2020.

whatever [*sic*]. The important issue was to think of themselves as artists first and foremost. Technique is just technique at the end of the day.”<sup>12</sup> This approach, namely considering video as part of a more complex and integrated artistic practice that could encompass film, photography, performance, printmaking, painting, and sculpture, was shared by several early video pioneers in the 1970s. Maria Gloria Biccocchi – founder of the famous video production centre art/tapes/22 in Florence (1973–1976) – notes, for example, that many Italian conceptual artists came to occasionally experiment with video, not defining themselves as video artists but taking video as another medium or technique with which to develop their artistic research.<sup>13</sup>

It was only in the early 1980s that courses and programmes incorporating video art gradually developed in Europe, and on a few – but very significant – occasions, women artists took the lead in such programmes, and many were invited to teach. One of the most significant examples of this change can be found in the Netherlands, where, in 1980, the Scottish video pioneer Elsa Stansfield was invited to create the Audio/Video Department for Time Based Media – soon renamed the Time Based Arts Studio – at the Jan Van Eyck Academie in Maastricht. The Academie was structured as an ‘open workshop’ for artists who had already received professional training, granting them access to workshops in which to develop a project for a period of one to two years.

In establishing the Audio/Video Department, the Academie relied heavily on Stansfield’s international reputation and authority in the fields of video and media. Stansfield was a video artist who had pioneered the medium in the 1970s as part of the duo Hooykaas/Stansfield and had showed in international exhibitions. In 1978 she had received the first video award from the Arts Council of Great Britain at the Maidstone College of Art, in Kent, England, a prize established by British video art’s ‘godfather,’ David Hall.

Stansfield built a postgraduate programme into the department, offering a framework in which students – or “participants” as they were called – were invited to develop independent projects. As outlined in a leaflet from 1987, time-based media included: “film/performances, video tapes and installations, audio works and installations using any of these media individually or combined with any other media.”<sup>14</sup> In this brief description, it is interesting to note that the department adopted an expanded notion of time-based media, one that encompassed a range of moving-image art forms as well as performance and installation in order to pursue “their integration with Fine Arts.”<sup>15</sup>

The Audio/Video Department was intended to welcome artists who wanted to “work with these media, equally in the areas of research and production.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Biccocchi discusses these perspectives and approaches at length in Cosetta G. Saba and Mirco Infanti, “art/tapes/22. Conversation with Maria Gloria Biccocchi,” in Laura Leuzzi and Stephen Partridge (eds.), *REWINDItaly Early Video Art in Italy*, New Barnet, 2015, pp. 96–97.

<sup>14</sup> *Time-Based Media*, leaflet, March 1987, Madelon Hooykaas Archive, Amsterdam.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

In Stansfield's view, these media would in the future offer a breadth of opportunities for professionals and artists alike to reach new publics: "via cable, local radio/television stations and also through presentations of interdisciplinary work to not exclusively art-oriented audiences."<sup>16</sup> The department fostered production and distribution of these media, and starting in 1980 it collected participants' works in a dedicated video/audio archive.

At the Academie, one key improvement – in comparison with what had existed previously at other institutions – was in the availability of technological knowledge, namely the range of skills taught to the students. Technicians likewise offered participants high levels of assistance, enabling them to develop original solutions and to explore their intuitions in individually booked studios.

The Video/Sound Department offered a rich programme of screenings and seminars, providing participants with precious opportunities to view, discuss, and analyse pioneering work in the field – at a time when access to such work was still rare and limited. The selection of artists presented on those occasions shows a good gender balance and a great variety in the approach to the medium. As part of the programme, trips to relevant exhibitions and museums in Germany, the Netherlands (the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, for example), and Belgium were also organized.

Among these offerings were recurring guest lecturers. Thanks to her international network of artists and institutions, Stansfield was able to invite some of the most prominent video and media artists of the time from Europe and America. Renowned names include Julius, Dutch video pioneer Madelon Hooykaas, Ulrike Rosenbach, Joan Jonas, John Latham, Marina Abramović, Nan Hoover, and many others.

Moreover, Stansfield co-ordinated international gatherings at the Academie, which became occasions to invite *la crème de la crème* of the European and American video community. For example, in 1981, she organized *Maart 1981* (March 1981; fig. 1), an occasion that included video installations, single-channel videos, performances, discussions, and lectures. In a brief introduction to the event published in an accompanying leaflet, Stansfield underlined that video was still in an early phase in the Netherlands and had not yet had the chance to develop fully. This stood in contrast with nearby countries, such as the U.K. and Germany, where artists had begun experimenting with the medium in the previous decade. Stansfield explained that the situation was partly due to the complete lack of specialized departments and programmes within the country as well as to the scarcity of equipment. Video, she recalled, was usually seen "as an extension of some other department and rarely as a fine art option."<sup>17</sup> She praised the "foresight" of the Academie, which had invited her to establish a video department in 1980, the video studio opening in September of that year.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> *Maart 1981*, leaflet, March 1981, Madelon Hooykaas Archive, Amsterdam.





1 Maart 1981, 1981, poster, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht

Only six months after the inception of the department, the exhibition *Video Maart* was organized partially by its participants, who had the opportunity to show their works – the fruit of those early months in the Audio/Video Department – alongside some of the most pioneering practitioners from the U.K., Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. The invited video artists included Lydia Schouten, Lili Dujourie, Mick Hartney, Ursula Wevers, and David Hall (fig. 2).

Those invited also gave lectures and led discussions with the aim of sharing their approaches and views on video art for the benefit of the participants. In the abovementioned context of the Netherlands, where the chance to view video art, and in particular video installations, was rare, *Video Maart* acted as a catalyst for the contemporary debate around the medium and as a key resource for the students' practice. Other renowned events organized by Stansfield – which saw the participation of several international pioneers of the medium –

"She became my teacher and mentor."



2 Photo of the participants of Maart 1981, 1981, Jan Van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, 24-28 March 1981

include a symposium at the Academie to accompany the germinal exhibition *Het Lumineuze Beeld* (The Luminous Image, 1984) at the Stedelijk.

From interviews and statements available in the Academie's promotional material, it is interesting to note that Elsa Stansfield saw her role as department head and educator as an integral part of her practice. In 1988, in her text for the exhibition *Het magnetische beeld* (The Magnetic Image), she commented: "Over the past seven years, beside the production and presentation of my own art,



which I have done in collaboration with Madelon Hooykaas; I have tried to give navigational directions to those artists at the Jan Van Eyck who have undertaken an uncharted journey across the magnetic field of the time-based media.”<sup>18</sup> Two powerful metaphors are employed in this passage: the navigational directions for her teaching style, and the journey into uncharted territories for the careers embarked upon by her students. In my view, these metaphors represent vividly Stansfield’s approach to teaching, her way of cultivating her students’ independence – very much in the spirit of the Jan Van Eyck Academie itself.

In an interview, Hooykaas touched on this matter: “Elsa Stansfield had an unusual way of tutoring the participants. She let them feel equal and often did not comment on the work but asked questions.”<sup>19</sup> Hooykaas’ words echo Stansfield’s own: her method was to guide the students to arrive at solutions on their own through a sort of Socratic process. It seems therefore that Stansfield treated students with a profound respect and consideration as professionals-in-training and promoted a non-hierarchical approach by regarding them as peers. In 1991 Stansfield left the Academie, and in 1992 it was reorganized into three departments – Fine Art, Design, and Theory.<sup>20</sup>

The work of Elsa Stansfield seems to have left a significant impression and legacy on the video artists who attended the Academie in the 1980s. For example, the Swedish video artist Antonie Frank Grahamsdaughter recalled the favourable gender balance and the attention paid to women video artists in that context. In particular, she commented that “Elsa Stansfield was aware in a way I had not encountered before, of lifting and supporting female students.” Moreover, she noted, “I felt that it was important as inspiration and identification to have a female teacher,”<sup>21</sup> elaborating on this as follows:

It was absolutely crucial that I was assigned a place and was admitted to the Time-Based Art Program at Jan Van Eyck Academie [...]. Elsa Stansfield had deliberately created a generous significant platform with a strong female influence. I think the new medium meant a lot to me and to be able to shape my stories but also the female identification and inspiration based on the fact that my teachers were women and worked with video art, the female language, the female narrative and the gaze. I felt that we started from the same experiences as women in our stories, in our portrayals.<sup>22</sup>

From these quotes, we observe the central role played by Stansfield in the young Grahamsdaughter’s artistic development and training and can infer her

<sup>18</sup> *Het magnetische beeld*, leaflet, 1988, Madelon Hooykaas Archive, Amsterdam.

<sup>19</sup> Madelon Hooykaas, personal communication, email, 23 November 2020.

<sup>20</sup> See Steetskamp, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Laura Leuzzi, email interview with Antonie Frank Grahamsdaughter, 24 November 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

wider impact upon the generation of women video artists who attended the Academie in the 1980s. Stansfield not only stood as a significant role model herself – as an accomplished, internationally renowned artist – but also promoted and encouraged young women artists by creating a programme that inspired and supported them with a feminist perspective and that was open to contemporary approaches.

Stansfield's work was particularly influential for Grahamsdaughter: referring to Hooykaas/Stansfield's famous installation *Compass* (1984), she spoke of this inspiration in terms of how video could be used in relation to space. This aspect can be observed, for example, in Grahamsdaughter's installation *Transit* (1986). Moreover, she recalls the positive impact upon her practice of the established female artists and role models to whom Stansfield gave her access through the guest lectures at the Academie: "I still carry with me many of these experiences such as the workshop with Elsa Stansfield & Madelon Hooykaas's workshop, and with Marina Abramović."<sup>23</sup>

Later, Grahamsdaughter became a teacher at the University of Arts, Crafts, and Design in Stockholm, where she organized the first International Video Art screening. As part of her teaching approach, she found it important to introduce her students to video artworks by women pioneers, following the path outlined by her mentor Stansfield. Some years after being a student at the Academie herself, Grahamsdaughter visited the school with her own students and reconnected with her teacher.

Among the contributors to the Academie's programme, it is notable that Lydia Schouten, who had participated in the *Maart 1981* programme, later undertook a career as a teacher, starting at the ArtEZ University of the Arts in Arnhem, the Netherlands, in 1988.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, Schouten comments that her approach to teaching was characterized by showing her students different ways of working with video. This reflected the way in which several women pioneers had used video in the 1970s and 1980s as part of performances and installations: often this was a single, ephemeral element of a larger and more complex work.<sup>25</sup> Schouten had experienced this first-hand, in engagement, for example, with the American video pioneer Joan Jonas and the German performance, installation, and video artist Ulrike Rosenbach, both of whom Schouten had seen at De Appel, and with the American composer and performer Laurie Anderson, who performed at MIXAGE, an international festival of performance, expanded cinema, and installation held in Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Breda, the Netherlands, which Schouten co-organized with Gea Kalksma and Rob Baard in 1980.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Laura Leuzzi, email interview with Lydia Schouten, 26 November 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Leuzzi, "Embracing the Ephemeral: Lost and Recovered Video Artworks by Elaine Shemilt from the 70s and 80s," in *Arabeschi. Rivista internazionale di studi su letteratura e visualità* 7, 2016, <http://www.arabeschi.it/embracing-the-ephemeral-lost-and-recovered-video-artworks-by-elaine-shemilt-from-70s-80s/> [accessed 28.11. 2021].

Even this brief analysis of the selected case studies makes clear the importance of the under-researched contributions made by women pioneers to the development of video as an art form, specifically in their capacities as educators and initiators of educational programmes. In particular, some recurrent elements were outlined: the relevance of having empowering role models and mentors for women students, including being encouraged by women teachers to explore the new medium from and with a feminist perspective; an ‘expanded’ approach to video art as an art form encompassing single-channel video, performance, and installation; the ease with which women students could share with women teachers their personal experiences, in line with the motto “the personal is political,” which was at the centre of many feminist artworks; and a feminist approach to treating students as equals and peers.

From an initial survey, it appears that there are many other key examples of women pioneers in video art who made significant contributions to teaching in this field, such as British artist Tamara Krikorian, who taught at Maidstone and Newcastle, and German artist Maria Vedder, who taught electronic media at the University of Cologne from 1979 to 1989.<sup>26</sup> Another aspect that has been particularly marginalized is the work of women pioneers in the inception and development of video- and media-art programmes in Europe. One example of this is Italian video artist Federica Marangoni, who put Angiola Churchill from New York University in contact with the Centro Video Arte in Ferrara in order to create video studios for American students in Italy. Marangoni – a video artist herself – taught glass and fine arts in the programme for many years.<sup>27</sup> The author of the present essay believes that future research can shed further light on these activities, fully retracing and reassessing these materials, in order to inform our understanding of the histories of video art and related pedagogies.

In 2017 artist and researcher Hagen Verleger developed a collaborative art and research project with the aim of problematizing issues of gender representation and gender equity in institutions. With a feminist approach, he developed a programme across the Jan Van Eyck Academie, which he renamed the Margaret Van Eyck Academie. The studios, all of which had been named for men, were newly designated: Anne, Elsa, Luzia, Thérèse, and Wilhelmina. The names were retained until April 2020.<sup>28</sup> Hagen thus created, even if only for the duration of the project, a parallel world.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Vedder, *All the Time in the World*, Berlin, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Federica Marangoni, personal communication, email, 26 November 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Hagen Verleger (ed.), *Margaret van Eyck—Renaming an Institution, a Case Study*, ## vol., vol. 1: Research, Interventions, and Effects, New York, 2018.