EWVA European women's video art in the 70s and 80s.

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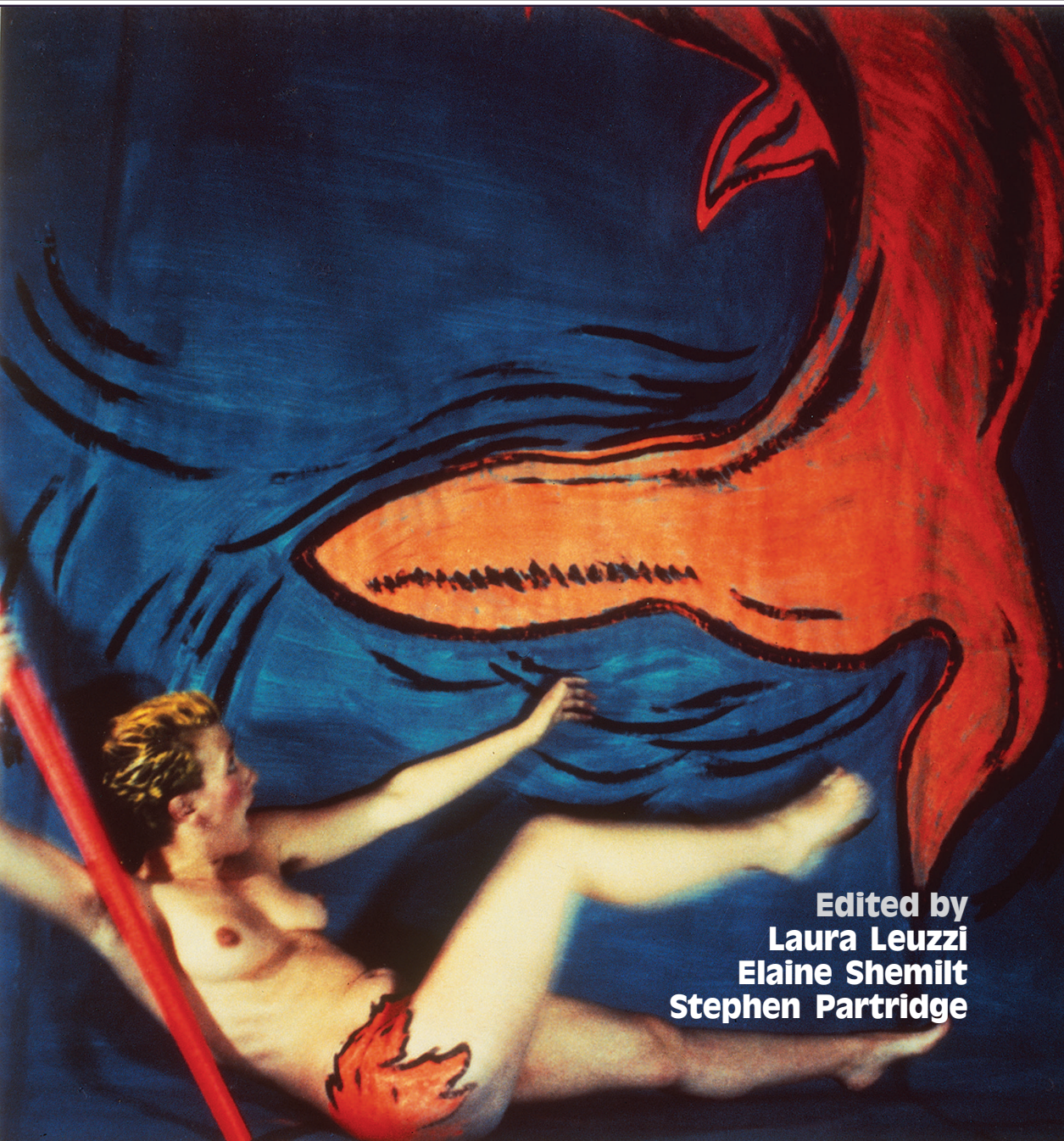
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Cover image: Lydia Schouten, *The Lone Ranger, Lost in the Jungle of Erotic Desire*, 1981, still from video. Courtesy of the artist.

EWVA European Women's Video Art

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EWVA
European Women's Video Art in the 70s and 80s

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Chapter 1

Self/Portraits: The Mirror, The Self and The Other. Identity and Representation in Early Women's Video Art in Europe

Laura Leuzzi

Self-Portrait and Gender

During the Renaissance, a new sense of agency in the role and identity of the artist stimulated the self-portrait as an independent genre. Since that period, many artists have explored this genre with different results and sensibilities, employing new and old media. For a number of reasons, including unequal access to professional artistic education, the marginalisation from 'high art' genres and the expected role of women within society in the past, many women artists were not allowed to become professionals in the field of art and allowed to reach 'the grandeur'.[1] Considering this, nonetheless, several key examples of women artists' self-portraits are to be found in the Modern Age. Self-portraits at the time not only depicted the artist's appearance, but also, and more importantly, represented the status and achievements she obtained. Ultimately, self-portraits were employed for professional and promotional purposes.[2] Relevant examples include Artemisia Gentileschi's *Self-portrait as Allegory of Painting*, and Sofonisba Anguissola's and Lavinia Fontana's numerous *Autoritratti* (self-portraits).

With advancing access to the art profession and practice, the number of women artists' self-portraits increased significantly during the 20th Century. For many of them, the self-portrait became a tool to defy the conventional and stereotypical image of the woman as a mother and a saint; to defy the idea of the female nude as the embodiment of beauty and the object of the voyeuristic male desire and to renegotiate their representation, with the aim to negate the 'male gaze' (a famous definition created by Laura Mulvey in her famous piece *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in 1975).[3] For example, as noted by Whitney Chadwick, Surrealist women artists frequently employed the self-portrait and self-representation and that, in Laura Iamurri's view, this can be explained by the

necessity to challenge 'the ambiguous mythicisation of women so typical of the Surrealist movement' and to face, particularly through photography, 'self-perception starting from their own bodies'.[4]

Marsha Meskimmon, for example, defines what she calls 'occupational portraits'. Since the beginning of the 20th Century, the representation of women artists at work, as makers, producers, in their demiurgic activity of creating art became a 'simple' but meaningful trope: it challenged the very art historical canon that has marginalised and excluded women. It represented a powerful statement: to affirm their status of professional artists and to proclaim their independence.[5]

With second wave feminism, many women artists felt the necessity and urgency to regain control of their image and representation in a patriarchal society, and incarnated in mainstream media, to present themselves with no mediation, ultimately defying the stereotypical equation woman/saint/sinner and the duality within the patriarchal art system of artist/man and woman/model.[6]

Themes previously sanitised by the hand of the male artist, including women's sexuality, desire, aging and pregnancy, were finally developed from a woman's perspective, becoming tools to question what is identity and draft their own self-portrait. Second wave feminism led to an unprecedented number of representations of the female body, including the artist's body; self-representation and self-portraiture were explored in different media and with different results, aiming to represent women from a woman's perspective and for women.

An image not meant to please, but as tool to express themselves, communicate, engage and challenge society and its stereotypes.

In this paper, I will argue how the category of the self-portrait is significant to critically interpret and contextualise some key women artists and early video artworks, which engaged in and tried to defy some tropes and topoi of this genre from various perspectives. In this respect, video became a tool to de-territorialise the genre of self-portraiture, as a means for female artists to actively position themselves in art history and to further challenge the art historical canon in general.

Early Video and Women Artists: Using their own Body

When video was made commercially available in the late 60s and early 70s in the USA and in Europe, it appealed to many visual artists as it presented several advantages.[7] Besides being relatively less expensive than film, the technology was comparably easier to operate.[8] Video did not require a large crew and artists were able to operate the equipment alone or in very small groups of two or three, creating an intimate set: a safe space for experimentation. Furthermore, video didn't need processing and printing, as in the case of film. The images could be viewed – while taping – on a feedback monitor and the artist could check the shot constantly. The video could be also replayed on the monitor after shooting. All these elements favoured the exploration of the body, identity and self-representation.

In 1976, the American video artist

Hermine Freed pointed out that artists used their own body because it enhanced a sense of control, allowing the artist to work alone.[9] This brings us to a point raised at the beginning of this chapter. In a context of re-appropriation of their own image as a way of self-representation, video was particularly attractive to many women artists in the 70s and 80s for these reasons, also because it was perceived not to be dominated by male tradition.[10] The progressive availability of the video camera coincided partially with second wave feminism and female artists and feminist collectives soon employed it in documentaries, performance documentation and artists' videos.[11] Women artists involved in video and performance in Europe and especially in England, were well aware of the risks of objectification that lay in the use of their body and nudity in their practice. They were keenly aware of the dangers of re-perpetrating the 'male gaze', especially using a medium – video – that was employed by Broadcast TV.

As noted by British artist and theorist Catherine Elwes, they 'looked for ways of problematizing the appearance of the female body whilst negotiating new forms of visibility'.[12] Elwes describes some approaches adopted by women video artists to bypass the 'pitfalls of sexual representation'. For example, Elwes discusses the case of Nan Hoover's use of 'the built in close-up lens of the video camera to disrupt the unity of the female body'.[13]

Educated at the Corcoran Gallery School in Washington from 1945 to 1954, Hoover moved to Amsterdam in 1969, and started to work with video in 1973, becoming a pioneer of the medium in Europe. In her analysis of strategies of re-mediating the image of the body, Elwes references Hoover's *Landscape* (1983, Figs. 1a-b) in which the camera peruses the artist's hand from such close proximity that its creases and surfaces look like a landscape and the female body loses its sexual connotation.[14] This illusion is reinforced by intense blue sky in the background of this unusual landscape. In this work, we can identify several key elements of Hoover's practice: the illusion, the use of light and the hand, which is a recurring element in her videos. On this issue, Dieter Daniels commented: '[…] the hand is a self-portrait reduced to its most essential elements'.[15] The hand of the artist evokes the gesture of painting and manipulating matter, the 'craftsmanship', the traditional practice (in Hoover's case, drawing was her most beloved technique), but also the status of the professional artist. The hand becomes a metaphor for what has been denied to women for many centuries, and a portrait of the artist by a visual synecdoche.

The body is central to Hoover's early video practice and we can detect several other strategies employed by the artist to re-mediate its image:[16] in *Movement in Light* (1975–76), for example, Hoover moves her body – which is only partly visible – very slowly in front of the camera. The slow motion combined once again with the 'fragmentation' – as well as the strong use of light – leads into abstract forms, and as a consequence, totally de-sexualises the body. Two other elements contributed further to a de-objectifying effect of the artist's body: colour and light. This can be observed, for example, in Hoover's

Figs. 1a-b. Nan Hoover, *Landscape*, 1983, stills from video. Courtesy of LIMA Amsterdam.

offering herself to the eye of the viewer.

Hoover always stated she was not a feminist and defined herself as an 'apolitical', 'free person' and her approach was informed by 'equality thinking' as she used to think of herself as an artist first and then as a woman. On this issue, Jansen comments that Hoover's shadows and silhouettes could as well be 'male or female'. The de-sexualisation and manipulation of Hoover's own body appear to be part of a process of neutralisation of the sexual connotation and de-personalisation of the self-portrait: the self-images are aimed to become something else, the body is a gateway to imagination. Although the body seems to become a way to tell 'other' stories, and to avoid the artist's own life story, at the very same time it is a way to express their internal world and a desire to narrate it.

The artist's hand assumes a key role in several artworks. A relevant example of this is *The Motovun Tape* (1976, Fig. 2) by the Croatian artist Živa Kraus. The video was made on the occasion of the Fourth Encounter in Motovun which was dedicated to the theme of identity – this was when Kraus used video for the first time. In *The Motovun Tape*, Kraus explored the theme of identity in relation to personal memory as well as the historic memory of the city of Motovun through the physical contact of her hand. Originally, as shown in some photographs taken during the shoot, the video was meant to open with a shot of the artist's navel. The artist reckons that Paolo Cardazzo – co-director of Galleria del Cavallino and producer of the video – cut out this

Projections (1980). The camera captures shadows of objects on the wall, creating perspectives and illusions from ephemeral effects. The viewer once again tries to identify forms and elements, deformed by lighting effects; at some point we detect a window and the artist in the darkness, as a shadow. At the end of the video, the artist slowly crosses the screen: a confirmation that we have not seen a ghost and, using Plato's allegory of the cave, the viewer is finally able to see reality as it is, unmediated. The artist finally turns her back to the camera, standing as an unintelligible presence, avoiding capture once again,

sequence later in the post-production phase in Venice.[17] The navel evokes fundamental concepts including the generative power of women's body or in some religions such as Hinduism for example, the generation of the world.

In the video, the portrait of the artist is reduced to a minimum: the hand, the hand that in Kraus' practice also draws and paints, acts as a synecdoche of the artist. The video is ultimately an investigation into the theme of identity that leads us to both a collective and personal memory represented by the walls of the city of Motovun, that are charged with history, made of Istrian stone creating a connection to the city of Venice, Kraus' new adopted home (to where she moved in the early 70s). This work opens up an investigation to the centrality of the representation of the hand in artists' self-portraits which has been the object of several studies.[18]

Portraits to an Electronic Mirror

The mirror has played a key role in history in shaping artists' self-portraits: beside the theoretical and societal reasons that accompanied the development of the self-portrait during the Renaissance, technical progress in mirror-making and the availability of mirrors greatly facilitated the practice of self-portraiture. Indeed, Italian Renaissance theorist Leon Battista Alberti conjoins the invention of painting with the myth of Narcissus (the doctrine of *imitatio/electio)*.

In Western Philosophy, the mirror has been a complex, somewhat ambivalent symbol: for platonic philoso-

Fig. 2. Živa Kraus, *The Motovun Tape*, 1976, still from video. Courtesy of the artist.

phy it was mostly considered to be the bearer of false and deceptive knowledge, an illusion (and Saint Paul would use a similar perspective in *1 Cor*, 13.12); in contrast, it could also be read as a symbol of the divine and a tool to reflect and capture spiritual essence of things (Saint Paul, *2 Cor*). In the visual arts, the mirror may assume a positive value. It was sometimes employed as a metaphor for painting itself, a supposedly trustworthy representation of reality and in the Renaissance it also assumed the function of amending reality from its imperfections (for example as in Alberti's *imitatio/electio* doctrine once again).[19]

As noted by Meskimmon, examining the traditional modern art historical canon, the mirror was a symbol of vanity and when included in female nude artworks painted by male authors, suggested a sort of innate desire for women to be objectified and act as a passive element of male desire. On this topic, the art historian Frances Borzello remarked that the very myth of women artists' affinity with self-portraiture – which in reality has no foundation – may likely have been supported by this negative

female association with the vice of vanity with the mirror.

In Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, the 'mirror-stage' is a fundamental moment in the formation of the *I*, differentiated from the mother, and in gaining an individual identity. Feminist thinkers and authors have challenged 'the logic of the mirror' that diminishes and objectifies women. As pointed out by Meskimmon, 'to challenge the mirror and its associations for women is again perceived to be an important stage on the path of female emancipation'.[20] Simone De Beauvoir, Lucy Irigaray and Virginia Woolf all employ the metaphor of the mirror to explain how, in patriarchal society, women simply reflected, and possibly magnified the 'first sex'.[21] The 'mirror metaphor' with its 'implications' is fundamental to analyse the attempt to renegotiate forms of 'representation outside the male dominated structures of art, philosophy, history and literature'.[22]

Most significantly, in the 70s the mirror was used as a powerful metaphor in video in several early theoretical essays. In 1970, for example, the Italian art historian and critic Renato Barilli defined video as a 'clear and trustworthy mirror of the action'. In 1977, the German art historian and curator Wulf Herzogenrath described 'Video as a mirror', as one of the three artistic ways to use video in his classification. Probably this metaphor was inspired by the instant feedback provided by video. Artists could see themselves on the video monitor whilst videotaping and the video was available immediately after the shoot. The monitor could generate an instant double of the artist that could play as an interlocutor or an antagonist; and

recording more than once on the same tape was also possible in order to make multiple ephemeral 'doppelgängers'. The viewers could see their own reflection in the mirror glass of the monitor on which the work was displayed (at the time projections were rare).

The mirror-metaphor was central in Rosalind Krauss' renowned essay about video, *The Aesthetics of Narcissism* from 1976.[23] Krauss states that 'unlike the visual arts, video is capable of recording and transmitting at the same time – producing instant feedback. The body [the human body] is therefore, as it were, centred between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror.' Proceeding from an analysis of Vito Acconci's *Centers*, Krauss linked this loop to a narcissistic quality of video, although at the end of her piece she took a step back from this assertion. Although her paper provided key elements to analyse video at the time and still partially provides avenues for today, we can consider its main point – the narcissistic nature of video, to be completely surpassed. In 2003, Michael Rush challenged this interpretation suggesting, very interestingly, that Acconci was instead addressing himself to the invisible – to the audience beyond the camera. Following from Krauss' essay, in *Sexy Lies in Videotapes* (2003), Anja Osswald highlighted that the metaphor of video-as-mirror is not completely accurate. Video doesn't offer a reversed image, but a double, so the 'other' breaks the narcissistic loop. Ultimately, video for Osswald, the

'electronic mirror' is 'rather the reflection of the self-reflection'.[24]

From Osswald's perspective, this would be supported by the fact that only a few videos include the term self-portrait in the title. These videos confine the artist to the depersonalised role of 'an empty container', exposing the 'rhetorical artificiality of self-images' (including the doubling, splitting that are part of our analysis) and what she defines the 'paradox of "self-less self-images"'.[25] Nonetheless, it might be worth remarking that relevant exceptions exist and that besides the title, several early videos – especially the ones by female artists – engage the issue of representing the artist's appearance, body and identity, challenging stereotypes and normative interpretations imposed by society and tradition. Interestingly enough, both Osswald and Krauss agree on the introspective function of video.[26] This element might suggest that the camera beyond its physical representation, in some way reconnects the electronic mirror to the spiritual interpretation of the traditional mirror.

Starting from all these premises, I think it is interesting to verify if and how the metaphor of video as an 'electronic mirror' – keeping the narcissistic element completely to the margins – and the creation of a double are fruitful in two lines of enquiry. First, to analyse women artists' video artworks that engage with issues of self-portraiture, self-representation, image and identity. Second, to question if these elements are still relevant to understand how women artists used video to challenge the traditional visual art genres, subvert the stereotypical version of women's representation, as a form of aestheticised beauty and object of desire and investigate, experiment and renegotiate alternative forms of visibility and exposure.

Among the examples of most renowned videos that include the word 'self-portrait' in their title, there is *A Phrenological Self-portrait* (1977, Fig. 3) by the Swedish video pioneer Marianne Heske, produced at M HKA in Antwerp. This work provides a key example of the examination of the very notion of identity through video and the use of both doubling and mirroring elements. In the work, Heske addresses herself and writes on a monitor that plays a video of herself. This monitor within the video evokes the system of video feedback that is core to the mirror-metaphor. The piece opens by showing the monitor with a video that displays Heske with her head down. The artist then raises her head facing the camera directly. Not only the camera of the video recorded on the monitor, but consequently the second camera, the one to make the video a *mise en abyme* is reinforced when the work is shown on a monitor. So Heske is addressing us, the viewer, directly, as Rush suggested for Acconci. Then another Heske enters the scene, placing herself in front of the monitor, facing herself towards the camera. There is the double, the other, the interlocutor of the artist, and a dialogue starts between the two: referring to what Osswald pointed out: the video allows for producing a doppelgänger of the artist.

Heske in the recorded video on the monitor lists with numbers and names the 'individual organs' that compose the brain and where 'functions' were localised according to the

phrenological theory invented by the German physician Franz Joseph Gall in 1796. The second Heske – the one that performs in the video – repeats what the one in the monitor says and draws on the reflecting glass screen, on her own image/portrait, the phrenological chart of the brain, of which she keeps a model in her hand. This repetition creates an echo, a form of reiteration or mirroring: there is no real dialogue between the two, the actions of the second seem to derive from the first. And yet, in a couple of passages, the 'live' Heske anticipates the other, reminding us that everything has been pre-recorded, it is a past action, the double provided by the electronic-mirror is just an illusion, as video ultimately is. It reminds us that the second Heske – the one outside the small monitor is the one in control: as such, a sort of shift in the power dynamic occurs. Finally, Heske moves in front of the monitor, in front of her own portrait and facing the camera, repeats the list, preceded by

her recorded self, but this time pointing out the parts of the skull on her head: the artist and her portrait/double coincide. The writing visible on the glass creates a halo around her face, and tautologically accompany this repetition. In the end, the 'monitor Heske' says 'That's the one', the 'live' Heske replies 'ok', echoed by the other. The 'live' Heske leaves, and her doppelgänger remains alone for a brief moment. The monitor is turned off and the writing on the glass stays to reveal once more the illusion of its materiality.

Phrenological thinking became extremely popular in the 19th Century, later dismissed as a pseudoscience. With this video performance, Heske ultimately raises issues of how man has tried to grasp, describe and explain human behaviour and attitudes in a constructed and artificial way; also of how our beliefs and perception of what is science and what has changed and transformed.

Heske stated: 'I am playing by

categorising my own mind with my alter ego in *A Phrenological Self-portrait*. Video is particularly suitable to reflect and correspond to the human senses'.[27] In this statement the artist summarises a series of elements that are part of our analysis: the double, the reflection and the investigation of the possibilities of video. Heske stated she was not part of any feminist movement – 'For me feminism = humanism = human rights'.[28] From this perspective, video is employed for an investigation of identity, of self-portraiture as a traditional genre and as a concept, and resonates with video works of that time in the way it experiments with the medium.

Heske's practice is deeply rooted in ecology, and she paralleled a phrenological approach of the human skull to a geographical exploration of the Earth.[29]

Examining other early video artworks by European female video pioneers, several European women artists also employed physical mirrors in their innovative video artworks when addressing issues of identity and representation, evoking both the traditional use of this tool in painting and the metaphor of video as electronic mirror and a tool. A relevant early video artwork that employs the mirror in and outside the screen is Elaine Shemilt's *Doppelgänger*. Today, Elaine Shemilt is an internationally renowned printmaker, but little is known about her early experimentation and work with video. This is in part due to the almost complete loss of her early video pieces. Shemilt started incorporating video in her practice in 1974 as a student at Winchester School of Art, with a Sony Rover Portapak. In the following years she made

several video artworks including *Conflict*, *Emotive Progression* and *iamdead*, which were featured in *The Video Show*, a seminal independent video festival held at the Serpentine Gallery, London (1 to 25 May, 1975).[30]

Although she participated in this exhibition, Shemilt was never part of the British video 'community' (which included London Video Arts) and her exchanges with other video artists were almost non-existent.

Due possibly to this isolation and to the fact that she considered video as part of ephemeral installations, in 1984, before moving to Dundee, Scotland, Shemilt destroyed the only existing copies of her 70s videos. The traces – including photographs, drawings and prints – from those 70s videos remain as the final artworks. Two videos from Shemilt's early production, both made before 1984, are still existing: *Doppelgänger* (1979–1981, Fig. 4) and *Women Soldiers* (1981).[31]

Doppelgänger is a performance to camera that was made by Shemilt at the end of a three-year residency at South Hill Park Art Centre, where, thanks to an award from Southern Arts, video facilities were available.

In the video performance, Shemilt draws with make-up a portrait of her reflected image on a mirror, placed in front of her. As the performance proceeds, the portrait slowly shapes up and the double – the *doppelgänger* is formed. The artist continues to mimic with her face the expression as if she were applying make-up onto her own skin. In the end, the double on the mirror is left alone, replacing the artist in front of the viewer. Shemilt's *Doppelgänger Redux*, a re-enactment of the video-performance at Nunnery Gallery, Bow Arts, London in 2016 was

Fig. 4. Elaine Shemilt, *Doppelgänger*, 1979–1981, still from video. Courtesy of the artist.

as an effective practice-based research tool to understand better how the video was originally taped. In the video, the portrait is apparently built merely on the mirror, but as the re-enactment reveals, the artist used a key feature of early video: the video feedback. A monitor that streamed the feedback was placed perpendicularly to the mirror so that the image was reflected in one of its angles: if one observes *Doppelgänger* closely, the artist is looking at her left. She is looking at the reflection of the feedback on the mirror. In this way, Shemilt clearly engages directly with the point raised by Osswald: she needs to reverse the image produced by the feedback in order to portray it correctly on the mirror. The artist shows in this case a deep understanding of the medium and how it functions.

Analysing the sequences, photographs of Shemilt interrupt the flow of the performance. Multi-layered images of the artist appear, sometimes naked, creating multiple doubles. This echoes the sense of multiple personalities conveyed by the schizophrenic audio recordings that accompany the performance. This image acts as a window to her inner-self: the mirror

(the electronic, but also the real one) is a gateway to her. Elizabeth Grosz's words about Irigarays' interest towards Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* come to mind: 'She goes through the looking-glass, through, that is, the dichotomous structures of knowledge, the binary polarisations in which only man's primacy is reflected'.[32] The artist offers her body to the audience, an un-sanitised version of it, in an attempt at de-objectification. Keeping in mind Elwes' point of view, this multi-layered representation of the artist's own body can also be interpreted as another strategy for remediating and representing the female body through a technique similar to the one that Shemilt was developing with her prints.

Furthermore, it destabilises the notion of the 'self', creating a representation that is – to use Meskimmon's terminology in the context of a feminist approach to the male-dominated genre of autobiography and its notion of a 'stable self'[33] – 'de-centred' and questions identity as a transient, constantly shifting and stratified element, uncovering its 'constructions'.

Re-enacting the traditional role of the painter with the mirror stage, Shemilt directly references the genre of artists' self-portraiture (and also specifically that of women artists) and therefore engages with the art historical canon. The piece stimulates reflections upon the perception of women as professional artists, their status in the canon and within society and more specifically within art schools and the art system. Once again the self-portrait is used to challenge the patriarchal art system and advocate for recognition.

For a powerful visual comparison for Shemilt's *Doppelgänger*, we can even go back to early Renaissance, to one of the many illuminated representations of Marcia – one of the characters of Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women* – in which the artist, placed obliquely in relation to the foreground in the intimacy of her studio, paints a self-portrait that look like a double, using a mirror.[34]

A direct reference to the use of the mirror with its symbolism in painting and notion of self-portrait is to be found in Tamara Krikorian's *Vanitas* (1977, Fig. 5). In the video, the camera frames the artist and an oval mirror reflecting a still life with *vanitas* and a TV monitor. The TV broadcast is interrupted by a video featuring Krikorian with an oval mirror reflecting the back of the artist's head and the monitor in which the artist speaks. In these interruptions, the artist explains how she conceived the work and her research about still life, and specifically the *vanitas* and the artist self-portrait. Krikorian's interruptions, in some sense, evoke the idea of what Stephen Partridge has defined as an artists' TV Intervention: an artist's piece that breaks the flux of normal broadcasting without the broadcaster's mediation. In her interludes, Krikorian explains that she drew inspiration from Nicolas Tournier's *An Allegory of Justice and Vanity* (1623–24, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum). Her analysis then focuses on some renowned pieces including David Bailly's *Vanitas Still-life with a Portrait of a Young Painter* (1651), where the artist is surrounded by his works and symbols of *vanitas*. In this case, as noted by Krikorian, the self-portrait becomes the subject of the *vanitas*. This notion

Fig. 5. Tamara Krikorian, *Vanitas*, 1977, still from video. Courtesy of Ivor Davies.

resonates with the very concept of the video itself.

Interestingly, the silent Krikorian in the foreground assumes a very reflective pose of melancholic meditation on the ephemerality of life. While in contrast, the Krikorian within the TV set is looking to the camera, addressing the audience (although her face cannot be seen clearly due to the low quality of the image), replicating the communicative strategy of the TV presenter. Her voice is mediated by the loudspeaker, creating a sound equivalent of the *mise en abyme*. Krikorian remarked that *Vanitas* is a 'self-portrait of the artist and at the same time an allegory of the ephemeral nature of television'.[35] In this quote, the artist underlines how the video explores two traditional artistic genres – the portrait and the still life with *vanitas* – of which the TV has become part, implying its transitory nature. Here, the artist employs some fundamental topoi of both genres: the portrait and self-portrait (the mirror and the *mise en abyme*) and the still life with *vanitas* (once again the mirror, the candle – usually extinguished, the fruit, the glass and wine as Eucharistic symbols). The inclusion of these elements

Fig. 6. Klára Kuchta, *Etre blonde c'est la perfection* [Being Blonde is Perfection], 1980, still from video. Courtesy of the artist.

and the words spoken in her interventions engage directly with art history, so that Krikorian positions herself in its canon, and indirectly – once again – encompasses the concept of the recognition of women artists.

The mirror in relation to portraiture and representation of the female body are also themes raised on many occasions by the Hungarian-Swiss artist Klára Kuchta in early video practice. In *Etre blonde c'est la perfection* [Being Blonde is Perfection] (1980, Fig. 6), for example, Kuchta combs her hair, one of her signature motifs, in front of a mirror and a female voice continues to repeat how being blonde means to be perfect ('*La beauté des cheveux c'est sa blondeur, être blonde c'est la perfection*' / the beauty of hair is its blondeness, being blonde is perfection). In this work, the mirror symbolises physical beauty and in order to break this stereotype, the artist physically breaks the mirror, destroying the integrity of the image. Also, with the friction between the image and the

voice – which becomes more and more distorted with time – the artist rebels against these stereotypes linked to women's beauty and creates a dramatic climax.

The themes of hair and stereotypical female beauty are part of Kuchta's life-long research into the capitalist socio-economic system. These themes have also been explored in her *Biondo Veneziano* [Venitian Blonde], a video artwork produced in July 1978 in Venice by Ferrara's Centro Videoarte for the exhibition *Venerezia Revenice*. In the video, Kuchta's hair is dyed in the traditional process of Venetian Blonde, a type of light red/blonde colour, which became popular in Venice during the Renaissance. For the artist, the hair acts as a 'social metaphor', to discuss the origins of the capitalist system and its degeneration in the 'accelerating global capitalist celebrity culture' of the 70s. In the exhibition, charts and graphs that describe Kuchta's research into how women

manipulated the appearance of their hair (at what age they started going to the hairdresser, how many times per month, etc.) accompanied the video. Referring to a traditional 'constructed' standard of 'angelic beauty' and symbolically captured in *Biondo Veneziano* by this particular hairstyle, the artist questions not only how these standards have always influenced women's self-perception in the past, but also how they are still influenced today.[36]

As explained by Kuchta, who had studied the traditional process of hair colouring as reported by Pietro Bembo, this particular way of bleaching the hair characterised the women in Tiziano Vecellio's paintings – from which it took its name. Once again, reference to the history of art seems to play as a tool to challenge the patriarchal, traditional portrayal of women's beauty, and how this embodies a mercantile economic and social structure as it does for capitalism even today.

In a letter to Janus, Kuchta also notes: '*Le mouvement de la camera était en spirale continuellement, symbolisant la continuité et perpetualité historique et gestuelle*' [The movement of the camera was continuously in a spiral, symbolising the historical and gestural continuity and perpetuity[37]]. As commented on by the artist, 'the shooting in the round' – from the 'theatre in the round' – aims to defy the 180-degree style of filming to show all sides in constant movement. This particular style aimed to increase a sense of 'intimacy and an immersive experience' and reflected the artist's approach to communicate more directly and in an enhanced way through video with the viewer.

Me, Myself and I: Ephemeral Doubles, Doppelgängers and Puppets in Front of the Electronic Mirror

A key element that emerges in our analysis of early video artworks dedicated to portraiture, is the double. Created with a mirror or with other media, the double appears to engage with other forms of re-mediation and re-negotiation of women's bodily visibility and provides an essential tool to explore the body. This use of the double can be observed in Anna Valeria Borsari's *Autoritratto in una stanza, documentario* [Self-Portrait in a Room, Documentary] (Fig. 7), and is a fundamental video performance produced by Galleria del Cavallino, Venice in 1977. In this piece, Borsari isolated herself in a room of the gallery, and through a photo and video camera investigated her body and her identity introspectively, in relation to the confined space. The viewer is walked through this intimate journey by the artist's own words.

In the video, the representation and exploration of the artist's body is indirect: we never see her. At first, the camera shows us the room: we see through her eyes, we are her. And then, the camera shows us a female
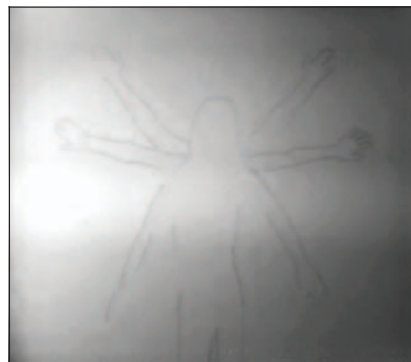

Fig. 7. Anna Valeria Borsari, *Autoritratto in una stanza, documentario* [Self-Portrait in a Room, Documentary], 1977, still from video. Courtesy of the artist.

version of Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man*: Borsari's drawing, which has been outlined from her own body, challenging the male dominated classical model which embodied perfection and becomes a tool to represent and study the artist's body. Once again, the reference to the traditional art historical canon re-emerges: the artist aims to question its assumptions based on the patriarchal system and propose alternative forms. With the drawing, the camera gently travels through the pencil line, visually caressing the artist's body. This light and conceptual representation is followed by a visually contrasting pile of soil, that materially occupies the space and replaces the artist's body, symbolising its connection to the earth, and its rhythms.

Another pioneer who employs the use of doubles in her early video practice is the Italian artist Federica Marangoni who started experimenting the medium while collaborating with Centro Videoarte of Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara, the only publicly funded Italian video centre in the 70s and 80s. In 1979, Marangoni made *The Box of Life* (Fig. 8), a performance initially shot on 16 mm and later transferred to video.[38] In the first segment of the work, Marangoni melts wax body parts, cast from her own body, and red wax flowers on an electrically heated table, with a blowtorch. In the action the artist retrieves the body casts from a small cupboard – the so-called *Box of Life*. Since 1975, Marangoni used to bring a similar cupboard to the city market (*Il baule del corpo ricostruito in una piazza al mercato* [The Reconstructed Bodies Trunk in a Market Square]);[39] selling those casts of female body parts as a

form of protest against the objectification of women's bodies and their image. Marangoni literally objectifies her body in multiple doubles and materially annihilates her doppelgänger to visually exemplify how the body is a territory of exploitation in capitalist society. Ultimately she raises her voice on issues such as human trafficking and the exploitation of sex workers. In the second part of the video, the double is incarnated by transparent plastic masks, moulded on Marangoni's face, worn by the artist and the group of people who surround her. Marangoni commented on this sequence, that she is like a priestess after the ritual of 'sacrificial offering'.[40] The doppelgänger in this case plays an ambiguous role: although at first the mask looks like a layer upon the faces, still perfectly recognisable, little by little, as the figures' breath opacifies, the veneer and the camera goes out of focus, single characters start to disappear and the face of the artist multiplies. This physical 'barrier' in some way de-personalises the singular and builds up a group of equals to represent the fact that life is ephemeral and that we are all destined to the same end.

This theme is reinforced by a quote from Marcel Duchamp's epitaph at the closure of the video: *D'ailleurs, c'est toujours les autres qui meurent* [Anyway, it's always the other guy who dies].[41]

In 1980, Marangoni once again employed the use of wax body parts on an electric table in the installation *La vita è tempo e memoria del tempo* [Life is Time and Memory of Time] for the Venice Biennale. In this work, the double is also embodied by a negative silhouette on a plexiglass surface:

it stands among two videos on monitors, which represent the transient quality of time embodying once again humanity's destiny, life and death. Looking to Marangoni's video artworks and installations, analogies can be drawn to Elaine Shemilt's early video performances (as *iamdead* or *Conflict*) in which the artist employed the use of casts and wire puppets.

Interestingly enough, for both Shemilt and Marangoni, these ethereal, indexical and in some ways de-personalised self-portraits play as tools to represent humanitarian or existential issues, their bodies become that of every person in an attempt to embody these reflections. Reading these elements through Elwes' point of view, the use of these ephemeral doubles could be also seen as strategies to re-mediate and to renegotiate new forms of visibility and representation of the female body. Ultimately, they also evoke, once again, traditional artistic practice: the demi-urgic labour of the artist that manipulates matter.

The reference to the art historical canon and the double is key to reading the renowned live video performance *Don't Believe I am an Amazon* (1975) by Ulrike Rosenbach, in which the face of the artist is superimposed onto the head of Stefan Lochner's *Madonna im Rosenhag* [Madonna in the Rose-bower] (Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud, Cologne, 1451). Arrows are shot by the artist and hit the reproduction of the painting and at the same time the portrait of the artist superimposed onto the video. The two faces/portraits (Robenbach's and the Madonna) were shot independently and merged together on a monitor: the audience of

Fig. 8. Federica Marangoni, *The Box of Life*, 1979, 16 mm transferred to video, still from video. Courtesy of the artist.

the performance could see the performance live and the video which merged the two images on the monitor. *Don't Believe I am an Amazon* addresses multiple issues from a different prospective. On one level, Rosenbach is directly addressing the traditional, stereotypical and idealised representation of women in the arts. She challenges the 'pure', 'ethereal' and 'unattainable' representation of the woman in art history, which relegated the female to the role of mother, saint and virgin, constantly embodied by the figure of the Virgin Mary or Saints. The idealised portrayal of the woman – fruit of a cultural, social and political construction fixed in centuries of western art history – is evidently represented in Rosenbach's video by the presence of Lochner's painting. The rose in Lochner's work, in particular, is one of the traditional attributions of Virgin, *rosa mystica,* particularly popular in the Medieval Age: 'Rose without thorns, you have become a Mother' were words from a popular song.[42] This image of pureness of the Virgin is contrasted by the violent action of the Amazon which could symbolise the patriarchal system, with its 'structures of power' based on aggression and attack.[43]

In the 70s, the conversation on the methods of representing women in western art history was opened up and debated by different authors – including, for example John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and an accurate analysis of motherhood was made in 1976 by Marina Warren in *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary.* Rosenbach's body of video work in those years complements and comments upon this debate and defies this tradition, directly referencing art history.

On another level, the ghostly portrait of the artist floats upon the more stable image of the Madonna, and creates both the effect of a sort of double, but at the same time a new image, that of a third character in which the lines of the two faces, as the two characters, merge. The Madonna and the artist are part of the same being. The arrow hits both, and its haunting sound shakes the viewer. In this case, agreeing with Osswald and Krauss' interpretation of video, we propose its use in connection with self-portraiture and the representation of identity, used as an introspective tool: quoting Annette Jael Leehman 'the video recording is mental feedback of the artist'.[44]

From this brief analysis emerges an understanding of how the genre of portraiture connected with themes of the representation of identity and image seem to be key to reading post-1968 women's self-portraits, and consequently some fundamental works of women video pioneers. The lack of a male dominated tradition within video art allowed the liberty to explore the tropes of this genre and re-appropriate them. The powerful tool and metaphor provided by the mirror play a new, renovated role: matching the mirror-metaphor associated with the video as medium itself, it assumed the function of the introspective device. In the context of the systems of art and academia, women sought recognition and status: in this respect, video became a tool to represent the professional artist and to advocate for a new status and a new position for women within the art historical canon.

Ultimately, with the rise of second-wave feminism, video became a new weapon for women artists to defy stereotypical representations of the body, to change the perspective from model to artist and again newly back to model, but with a shift from object to active subject.

Endnotes

1. Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' (1971), in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988).

2. Several examples of women artists' self-portraits are discussed, for example, in Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves. Women's Self-portraits* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1998).

3. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), pp. 833–844.

4. This includes for example Claude Cahun's photographs. Laura Iamurri, 'L'impronta e il corpo – l'ombra e lo specchio', in Laura Iamurri, Marilù Eustachio (eds.), *Autobiografia/Autoritratto: Eustachio, Catania, Montessori, Ricciardi, Monaci, Stucky, Woodman*, exhibition catalogue, Rome, Museo Hendrik Christian Andersen, 26 October 2007 – 20 January 2008 (Rome: Palombi Editore, 2007), p. 32. The translation is the author's.

5. Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection. Women Artists' Self-portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996), pp. 27–32.

6. For a general overview of female self-portraiture in the 70s, see Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves* (Thames & Hudson: New York, 1998), pp. 159–190.

7. On the benefits of video, see also Catherine Elwes, *Installation and the Moving Image* (Columbia University Press and Wallflower Press: New York and London, 2015), pp. 230–231.

8. Although it could be heavy if carried for long periods. On this specific issue see for example *ibidem*, p. 248 n. 36 and 'Interview with Catherine Elwes by Laura Leuzzi and Elaine Shemilt' available at http://www.ewva.ac.uk/catherine-elwes.html (accessed December 2017).

9. Helen Westgeest, *Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 56.

10. This view has been shared by several video pioneers interviewed during EWVA research, including Catherine Elwes, Elaine Shemilt and Anna Valeria Borsari. Furthermore, this point has been raised by critics and art historians on more than one occasion. Examples include: Yvonne Jansen, 'The Body and Light. Nan Hoover in the world of video and performance', in Leen Huet, Wim Neetens (eds.), *An unexpected journey, Vrouw en kunst/Women and Art* (Antwerp: Gynauka, 1996), p. 150.

11. On the topic, see for example Anne-Marie Duguet 'La video des femmes', in *Video la mémoire au poing* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), pp. 89–111; Stéphanie Jeanjean, 'Disobedient Video in France in the 70s: Video Production by Women Collectives', *Afterall A Journal of Art, Context, Enquiry*, n. 27, Summer 2011, pp. 5–16.

12. Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p. 48.

13. *Ibidem*, p. 49.

14. *Ibidem*.

15. Dieter Daniels, 'How to use a pencil as a video camera', in Rob Perrée (ed.), *Nan Hoover. Movement in Light* (Rotterdam: Con Rumore, 1991), p. 72.

16. For a survey of elements used by Hoover in her videos: U. Bischoff, 'Movement and Stillness – Light and Time – Line and Space', in *Ibidem*.

17. Interview to Kraus, unpublished, Venice, 31 August 2015. See for a photo of the shooting, Dino Marangon, *Videotapes del Cavallino* (Venice: Edizioni del Cavallino, 2004), p. 45.

18. Tommaso Casini, 'La mano "parlante" dell'artista', *Predella*, n. 29, http://www.predella.it/archivio/indexebb4.html?option=com_content&view=article&id=167&catid=65&Itemid=94 (accessed December 2017).

19. For an overview, see for example E. Di Stefano, 'Leon Battista Alberti e la metafora dello specchio: fonti bibliche e filosofiche per un *topos* artistico', in R. Cardini, M. Regoliosi, *Alberti e la tradizione per lo 'smontaggio dei "mosaici" albertiani*, Atti del Convegno del Comitato Nazionale VI centenario della nascita di Leon Battista Alberti, Arezzo, 23–25 September 2004.

20. Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, p. 6.

21. *Ibidem*, pp. 5–7.

22. *Ibidem*, p. 7.

23. Rosalind Krauss, 'The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, v. 1, Spring, 1976.

24. Westgeest, *Video Art Theory*, p. 55.

25. *Ibidem*, p. 56.

26. 'Interview with Marianne Heske by Laura Leuzzi', EWVA. Available at http://www.ewva.ac.uk/marianne-heske.html (accessed July 2017).

27. *Ibidem*.

28. 'Interview with Marianne Heske by Laura Leuzzi', available at http://www.ewva.ac.uk/marianne-heske.html (accessed July 2017).

29. See Nicolas Bourriaud, 'Marianne Heske or the Art of Relocation', http://www.marianneheske.no/ ?page=texts/art_of_relocation (accessed 17 July 2017).

30. *The Video Show* included a selection of some of the most relevant international video pioneers of the time as well as British artists among which Ian Breakwell, David Critchley, David Hall, Brian Hoey, Tamara Krikorian, Mike Leggett, Stephen Partridge, Lis Rhodes and Tony Sinden were included.

31. Both were finally recovered and migrated to digital in 2011 by the AHRC funded research project REWIND (2004–ongoing), led by Prof. Stephen Partridge and based at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee. Media Archivist on the project is Adam Lockhart. A still from the recovered version of *Doppelgänger* was published for the first time in Sean Cubitt, Stephen Partridge (eds.), *Rewind | British Artists' Video in the 1970s & 1980s* (New Barnet: John Libbey, 2012), p. 88. *Doppelgänger* was discussed by the author of this chapter in: Laura Leuzzi, Elaine Shemilt and Stephen Partridge, 'Body, Sign and Double: A Parallel Analysis of Elaine Shemilt's *Doppelgänger*, Federica Marangoni's *The Box of Life* and Sanja Iveković's *Instructions N°1* and *Make up – Make down*', in Valentino Catricalà (ed.), *Media Art: Towards a new definition of arts* (Pistoia: Gli Ori, 2015), pp. 97–103; Laura Leuzzi, 'Embracing the ephemeral: lost and recovered video artworks by Elaine Shemilt from the 70s and 80s', *Arabeschi. Rivista internazionale di studi su letteratura e visualità*, n. 7, 2016, http://www.arabeschi.it/embracing-the-ephemeral-lost-and-recovered-video-artworks-by-elaine-shemilt-from-70s-80s/ (accessed 25 March 2019).

32. Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), p. 130–131 quoted in Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection*, p. 7.

33. *Ibidem*, p. 72.

34. See for example, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, Ms. Fr. 12420, fol. 101 v.

35. Text by Tamara Krikorian dated 1978, REWIND Archive, DJCAD, University of Dundee. Available on http://www.rewind.ac.uk/documents/Tamara%20Krikorian/TKR053.pdf (accessed December 2017).

36. 'Interview with Klara Kuchta' by Laura Leuzzi and Viola Lukács, http://www.ewva.ac.uk/ klara-kuchta.html (accessed 12 July 2018).

37. Lisa Parolo, *Biondo Veneziano. Klara Kuchta*, in Cosetta G. Saba, Lisa Parolo, Chiara Vorrasi (eds.), *Videoarte a Palazzo dei Diamanti. 1973–1979 Reenactment* (Ferrara: Fondazione Ferrara Arte, 2015), p. 110. Translation into English by the author.

38. The film was directed by Gianluigi Poli. *The Box of Life* is available on Marangoni's website, http://www.federicamarangoni.com/portfolio/1979-the-box-of-life/ (accessed 17 July 2018). See Lorenzo Magri (ed.), *Centro Video Arte: 1974–1994* (Ferrara: Gabriele Corbo, 1995), p. 27 and Gabriella Belli (ed.), *Federica Marangoni. Il filo conduttore/The Leading Thread* (Venice: Ca' Pesaro International Gallery of Modern Art, 2015).

39. Viana Conti (ed.), *Federica Marangoni. I luoghi dell'utopia: iconografia e temi fondamentali nell'opera di Federica Marangoni* (Milan: Mazzotta, 2008), pp. 68–69.

40. Vittorio Fagone (ed.), *Camere incantate, espansione dell'immagine*, exhibition catalogue Milan, Palazzo reale, 15 May – 15 June 1980 (Milan: Comune, Ripartizione cultura e spettacolo, 1980), p. 146.

41. In Italian, 'D'altronde sono sempre gli altri che muoiono'.

42. Jean Delumeau, *History of Paradise: The Garden of Eden in Myth and Tradition* (1992), (New York: Continuum 1995), p. 125.

43. Annette Jael Leehman, 'Actions and Interventions of the German Video Ant-Garde', in Randall Halle, Reinhild Steingröver (eds.), *After the Avant-garde: Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film* (Camden House, 2008), p. 84.

44. *Ibidem*.