

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

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Title: "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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In the 1970s when the portable video recorder was relatively new, several women artists experimented with a medium that at the time was considered easier and cheaper to operate than film and free from the heavy male-dominated imprint of traditional artist practices. For its intrinsic specificities, video allowed immediacy and intimacy, facilitating performances that included nudity and the body.<sup>2</sup> That benefited the work of many women artists, some of whom were involved in feminist movements and collectives or were exploring independently themes and issues that had arisen in Second Wave feminism.

In this essay, I will examine briefly the contemporary situation of Art School Departments and then I will focus on some case studies that are particularly significant in showing how women started teaching video and media art in the 70s and 80s.

Due to the COVID-19 restrictions and limitations, part of this research took an unorthodox route. The usual interviews, conducted online, were accompanied by networking on social media and mailing lists. This bottom-up research helped me not only to gather further knowledge on the topic but also to gain a sense of the relevance and legacy of women artists-teachers. After posting on this topic on Facebook pages dedicated to the promotion of experimental video and early video art, I received dozens of messages and comments pointing out the key role played by women video pioneers teaching video and media art in influencing and inspiring students all over the world.

In the 70s in several countries, the UK among them, many women video pioneers were students in Fine Art and Sculpture Departments that were marked by a strong male culture and where most of the teachers and students were still men.

At the time many Art Schools would offer opportunities to access the apparatus but offered no training. Most artists taught themselves how to use video and considered peer-to-peer feedback and knowledge sharing as essential.

One of the few opportunities to be taught and receive feedback by women artists working with video was when they were invited as guest lecturers on speakers' programmes. I am going to present an example of this.

Renowned feminist British video artist and author Catherine Elwes reports a similar situation at Farnham<sup>3</sup> and later at the Slade School of Art where, she said "All the studios were run by men."<sup>4</sup> There were very few women among the part-time tutors at the Slade, but some were

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<sup>2</sup> 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 also EWVA. See L. Leuzzi, E. Shemilt, S. Partridge (eds), *EWVA European Women's Video Art*, John Libbey Publishing, New Barnet 2019.

This is an initial investigation of the topic that I wish to develop in the upcoming months.

<sup>3</sup> Later Farnham School of Art and Guildford School of Art merged to form West Surrey College of Art & Design.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine 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*

able to offer valuable feedback in her first year in which Elwes was still making objects, before her transition to performance and then video. None of them were specialised in video or performance at a moment in which Elwes was transitioning towards those art forms. In particular, Elwes remarked upon the importance of being able to show personal materials to those tutors and share her personal life. At the time her personal life was having a major impact on her feminist practice, where “the personal is political”. Although limited, the support and mentorship of those women tutors at Slade appear to have offered significant guidance and reinforcement at the time for the young artist and her female colleagues alike.<sup>5</sup>

Elwes complained about the heavy male dominated culture and the lack of women tutors at the Slade School of Art. In response, and in an altogether unprecedented way, British artist Stuart Brisley gave Elwes – who at the time was still a student - the entire budget for the visiting lecture programme for the year. This allowed Elwes to invite as guest lecturers, feminist artists such as Rose Garrard and Tina Keane, who were working with video, and Rose Finn-Kelcey who was more generally using moving image in her practice. In an 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>6</sup>

Internationally renowned artist Elaine Shemilt, in 1974, when a student in the Sculpture Department at Winchester School of Art, started 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. At the time she considered video to be an ephemeral part of a more complex process, so that the artwork resulting from it would be the prints. She recalls that at Winchester School of Art at the time there were no female instructors and just three fellow women students.

Like many of her generation, she points out that the Department provided no training but allowed students to use their Sony Rover Portapak.

Later on, when she became a student at the Royal College of Art, she remembers 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.

Later on, when Shemilt was at the RCA, she started herself teaching printmaking. The nature of her practice - which consisted in incorporating different media, such as video and film - in my view - influenced deeply her approach to 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/ whatever. The important issue was to think of themselves as artists first and foremost. Technique is just technique at the end of the day”.<sup>7</sup>

It was only in the early 80s though that courses and programmes incorporating video art were gradually developed in Europe, and on a few 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. In 1980 the Scottish video pioneer Elsa Stansfield was invited to create the Audio/Video Department for Time Based Media (in fact it was soon renamed “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 and were able to use the workshops at the Academie to develop their project for a year, which could be extended to a second.

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*Education*, DRAF, London, 6 May 2014. For the quote: L. Leuzzi, Interview with Catherine Elwes, 16 November 2020, email.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> C. Elwes, ‘The Feminist in Art School. A Recent View’, *Feminist Art News* (FAN), no.1, August 1979.

<sup>7</sup> L. Leuzzi, Interview with Elaine Shemilt, 24 November 2020, email.

The Academie relied heavily on Stanfield's international reputation and authority in the field of video and media as Head of Department.

Stansfield was a video artist who had pioneered video in the 70s as part of the duo Hooykaas/Stansfield and exhibited internationally. In 1978 she had been awarded the first video Bursary of the Arts Council of Britain at Maidstone College of Art, in Kent, England, established by British video art's "godfather" David Hall.

At the Jan Van Eyck Academie, Stansfield structured the Audio/Video Department with a postgraduate programme that functioned as a platform that promoted independent research in which students – or participants as they were called – were invited to develop their projects.

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>8</sup>

In this brief description it is interesting to note that the Department adopted an expanded notion of "Time based media", which encompassed a range of different moving image art forms as well as performance and installation to pursue "their integration with Fine Arts".<sup>9</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".

In Stanfield's view, media would offer in the future a wide range 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>10</sup>

The Department encouraged distribution and a video/audiotheque (*teek*) had been established, collecting the participants' works developed within the Department since its inception in 1980.

At the Video/Sound department, screenings and seminars were often organised, providing the participants with precious opportunities to view, discuss and analyse pioneering work in the field. The selection of artists presented on those occasions shows a good gender balance. Also, trips to relevant exhibitions and museums in Germany, the Netherlands (the Stedelijk for example), and Belgium, were also organised.

At the Jan Van Eyck Academie, a key improvement - compared to the past - was the availability of technological knowledge as well as skills taught and available to the students. Technicians likewise offered high levels of assistance, enabling students to develop their original solutions and intuitions in the studios that could be individually booked.

An important feature of the programme developed by Stansfield was the recurring presence of 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 Abramovic, Nan Hoover and many others.

Stansfield also organised international events at the Department which became occasions to invite la crème de la crème of the European and American video community.

For example, in 1981, she organised *Maart 1981 [March 1981]*, an event that included video installations, single channel videos, performances, discussions and lectures for the participants.

In a brief introduction to the event, Stansfield underlined how at the time video was still in an early phase in the Netherlands and had not yet had the chance to develop fully, by contrast with other nearby countries such as the UK and Germany where several artists had started experimenting with the medium in the previous decade.

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<sup>8</sup> See Leaflet, March 1987, Madelon Hooykaas' Archive, Amsterdam.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

Stanfield explains that the situation was partly due to the complete lack of specialised departments and programmes within the country and the scarcity of equipment. Video, she recalls, was usually seen “as an extension of some other department and rarely as a fine art option”.

She praised the “foresight” of the Jan Van Eyck Academie, which had invited her to establish a Video Department in 1980 – the Video studio opened in September of that year.

After only six months since establishing the Academie, *Video Maart* was partially organised by the participants who had the opportunity to show their works – the fruit of those early months at the Video Department – alongside some of the most pioneering practitioners from the UK, Belgium, Germany and of course the Netherlands.

Artists invited included Dutch video artist Lydia Schouten, Belgian video artist Lili Dujourie, British video artists Mick Hartney, Ursula Wevers and David Hall.

The invited “specialists” 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 it was rare to have the chance to view much video art – and in particular video installations – *Video Maart* acted as a catalyst for the contemporary debate on video art as well as a key resource for the students’ practice.

In 1984 Stansfield also organised a symposium at the Jan Van Eyck to accompany the seminal exhibition *Het Lumineuze Beeld* (The Luminous Image) at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

For Elsa Stanfield her role at the Jan Van Eyck was very important. Instead of regarding it as marginal, she considered it to be complementary to her own practice as a highly accomplished, internationally renowned video artist. In 1988, in her text for the exhibition *Het magnetische beeld* (The magnetic image), she wrote “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>11</sup>

This quote by Stansfield utilises two powerful metaphors: the navigational directions for her teaching style and the journey in uncharted territories for the career embarked upon by her students. In my view, these metaphors represent vividly Stansfield’s approach to teaching: her way of cultivating students’ independence, very much in the spirit of the Jan Van Eyck Academie.

On this matter in an interview, Hooykaas commented: “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>12</sup> In a way Hooykaas’ words echo Stansfield’s: her method was to guide the students by getting them to get to solutions on their own through a sort of Socratic process.

The Swedish video artist Antonie Frank Grahamsdaughter – a student of the Academie back then – recalled its favourable gender balance and the attention paid to women artists in video at the time. In particular, she commented: “*Elsa Stansfield was aware in a way I had not encountered before, of lifting and supporting female students*”. Regarding Stansfield’s importance moreover she says, “*I felt that it was important as inspiration and identification to have a female teacher*.”<sup>13</sup>

And moreover, “*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*

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<sup>11</sup> See leaflet, 1988, Madelon Hooykaas’ Archive, Amsterdam.

<sup>12</sup> M. Hooykaas, private communication, 23 november 2020, email.

<sup>13</sup> L. Leuzzi, Interview with Antonie Frank Grahamsdaughter, 24 November 2020, email.

*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>14</sup>*

Stansfield's own work was particularly influential to Grahamsdaughter: referring to Stanfield/Hooykaas' famous installation *Compass*, she spoke of inspiration in terms of how video could be used in relation to space.

Regarding the rich programme of guest lecturers at the Jan Van Eyck, she explains that the visiting lecturers made a profound impression on the students. *“I still carry with me many of these experiences such as the workshop with Elsa Stansfield & Madelon Hooykaas' workshop, and with Marina Abramovic.*

Later Antonie Grahamsdaughter herself became a teacher at the University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm where she organised the first international screening of International Video Art. 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 Jan Van Eyck herself, Grahamsdaughter visited the Academie with her own students, and reconnected with her teacher Stansfield.

In the early 90s, the structure of the Academie changed and Stansfield left. In 1992 School was reorganised into three departments: Fine Art, Design and Theory.<sup>15</sup>

Also Lydia Schouten, who had participated in the *Maart 1981* programme, later undertook a career as a teacher, starting at Artez University of the Arts in Arnhem (The Netherlands) in 1988.<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that Schouten comments that her approach to teaching was characterised by showing to the students different ways of working with video. This approach reflected the way several women pioneers were using video in the 70s and 80s as part of performances and installation: often as an ephemeral part of the work, and as one element of a larger and more complex work. Schouten had experienced this first hand, for example with Joan Jonas and Ulrike Rosenbach, whom Schouten had seen at the De Appel, and Laurie Anderson, who performed at MIXAGE, which Schouten co-organised.

In this brief analysis it has been impossible to name all the women artists who taught video in the 70s and especially in the 80s.

In particular, I would like to mention Tamara Krikorian who taught at Maidstone and Newcastle and Maria Vedder who taught electronic media at the University of Cologne from 1979 to 1989.

Also, many others were key to the inception or development of video and media art programmes established in Europe. One example is Italian video artist Federica Marangoni who put Angiola Churchill from NYU in contact with the Centro Video Arte in Ferrara, in order to create video studios for NY students in Italy. Marangoni – who was a video artist herself – taught glass and fine arts on the programme for many years.<sup>17</sup>

From this brief analysis of selected case studies, some key common elements emerge: the relevance of having empowering role models and mentors for women students; the importance of being encouraged by women teachers to explore the new medium from and

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>15</sup> See J. Steetskamp, 'Looking back: the roots of video production at the Jan van Eyck Academie', in Jan van Eyck Video Weekend [online], Jan van Eyck Academie, 2017, pp. 1-7.

[http://www.janvaneyck.nl/0\\_4\\_6\\_text\\_files/Video\\_Jennifer\\_Steetskamp.html](http://www.janvaneyck.nl/0_4_6_text_files/Video_Jennifer_Steetskamp.html)

<sup>16</sup> L. Leuzzi, Interview with Lydia Schouten, 26 November 2020, email

<sup>17</sup> F. Marangoni, personal communication, 26 November 2020, email.

with a feminist perspective and approach; an “expanded” approach to video art as an art form that included single channel video, performance and installation; the ease with which women students could share with women teachers their personal life in line with the motto “the personal is political” , which was at the centre of many feminists’ artworks; a feminist approach to treating students as equals and peers.

My research has revealed though that not much is currently available on the topic, and that the role and contribution of women video pioneers in teaching is still wholly neglected, as is their legacy.

As I mentioned, at the beginning of this paper, I posted my abstract in various Facebook pages and communities and I received more than 100 comments: this has revealed just how much interest there is in the topic but also how much there is still to do.

In 2017 artist and researcher Hagen Verleger developed a collaborative art and research project with the aim to problematise issues of gender representation and balance in institutions. With a feminist intervention he developed a programme across the Academie and renamed the Jan Van Eyck Academie the Margaret Van Eyck, and the studios that had all been dedicated to men were now named after: Anne, Elsa, Luzia, Thérèse, and Wilhelmina. The names were kept until April 2020.<sup>18</sup>

Hagen thus created, even if only for the duration of the project, a parallel world.

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<sup>18</sup> H. Verleger (ed.), *Margaret van Eyck—Renaming an Institution, a Case Study*, Volume One: Research, Interventions, and Effects, Peradam Press, New York 2018.