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Introduction: From Video to Media Art

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PART

ONE

AND WE

CALL IT

1. INTRODUCTION: FROM VIDEO TO MEDIA ART

The history of video and media art in the period from 1985 to the present that is central to this book is a particularly turbulent one. The first years, 1985 to 1993, will be remembered as a period of failing national government policy in this area, with the absolute low point being the failure of the Grote Advies van de Raad voor de Kunst (Great Advice of the Art Council), which was intended to create a national institute for media art. The last decade is marked by the guillotine of State Secretary of Culture, Education and Science Halbe Zijlstra, who decimated V2_ in 2012 and put an end to the Nederlands Instituut voor Mediakunst (Netherlands Media Art Institute) (NIMk) and many other institutions.

The history of video and media art is a complex history. It includes very different, often interdisciplinary practices; as a result, its naming has often been a point of discussion and its orientations towards other disciplines just as plural. Yet in the end, the history of video and media art is a history of private initiatives, of 'entrepreneurship', of individuals who – thanks to the local government too – set up galleries, festivals, archives, associations, distribution centres and workplaces, of artists who ensured the content, dynamics and survival of the field. Compared to all this, *The Magnetic Era*, which is also the title of the book about the early history of video art in the Netherlands, is a relatively comprehensible period.¹ Video art found its way to galleries and museums, and if artists were not satisfied, there was always Stichting De Appel in Amsterdam or the Agora Studio in Maastricht. Let's not forget that there was no great need yet to insulate video art from various other creative forms of using the video camera. Perhaps because most users shared, and wanted to spread, the belief in a bright future for the medium. Video allowed one to keep in touch with the times, create one's own news and provide an alternative to television.² As a special form of communication, video served both art and social campaigns. As such, during this period, and definitely in the working field, discussions about video as *art* are postponed for a while, as is the question whether the word 'video' can still be maintained in view of all the technological developments. Specifically, the development of digital art with a history dating back to the mid-1950s. (Darko Fritz expands on this in his contribution to this book.)

1 Jeroen Boomgaard and Bart Rutten, eds., *The Magnetic Era* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2003).

2 Pauline Terreehorst refers to an 'expectation for salvation'. In her email of 22 November 2018, she makes a comparison with the high expectations of the first filmmakers with regard to the possibility of changing the social order with the new medium.

Pauline Terreehorst, 'Opkomst en ondergang van videokunst in Nederland', in *Kunst en Beleid in Nederland: Boekmanstudies*, no. 5 (1991): 15–66; here 16.

The period described in this book is heir to this early history of video and early digital art. Sometimes history seems to repeat itself, yet more often the distance to this period seems to be quite large. The latter has primarily to do with the new technological possibilities, but also with something that can be summarised as a change in taste. It is not only the black-and-white images of early video art, but also the way in which artists investigated the medium, the deliberate limitations they imposed upon themselves and the use of slowness as an aesthetic, even moral value, which are less and less appreciated.³ Perhaps even more so by critics and the new audience than by artists. With later media art, things are quite different.

Media art has already been referred to as a working field of artists; following Pierre Bourdieu, it could also be called a field of cultural production. At the same time, it is a domain with multiple actors. Aside from the artists themselves, there are the government and various institutions, stages or platforms. (The latter term is now often preferred over the word 'institution' and will be repeatedly used here.) We are referring here to traditional institutions associated with art, such as museums and galleries, but also organisations that have been created specifically for this field. Specialised institutions, but also the many festivals that are invaluable for media art. In addition, there is the club as a stage for media art and, more specifically, as a platform for VJing, a media art form that develops mainly during the period beginning in 1985.⁴ The picture would not be complete if we omitted the private domain, where, outside of the spotlights, the shift from consumer to producer is gradually taking shape, especially after the introduction of Web 2.0.

One of the actors, already mentioned above, is the government. Together with other, it will be discussed separately, albeit with some limitations. In the chapter on government policy, for example, we will focus primarily on the national government – even though media art owes much to local authorities. In the same way, we will not be able to treat all festivals in equal detail, and, in the case of traditional art institutions, we will look especially at the museums of modern and contemporary art. The final paragraphs focus on other media art platforms, in particular the specialised institutions, also without being exhaustive. Attention is paid to the policies and activities of the relevant institutions against the background of government policy and technical and artistic developments, but not only. The actual working field and the producer – whether a media artist or not – are also considered. What are the expectations here with regard to media art? What does the practice look like – in the various periods? No matter how disappointing the national policy was in the aforementioned periods, it is interesting to delve deeper into this matter and see how the government and in particular the Council for the Arts (later the Council for Culture) in the Netherlands viewed the field, examine what choices were made and what the politics at play were in the Council that advises the minister. It is further interesting to explore how this Council operated in the early years, but also how it functioned – or rather, was prevented from functioning – during the dramatic 'Halbe

3 Sander Kletter, *Turbulentie rond videokunst: Kunstkritische reflecties op een nieuw medium 1970–2010* (Rotterdam: NAI010, 2016), 43.

4 Marga van Mechelen, *De Appel: Performances, Installations, Video, Projects, 1975–1983* (Amsterdam: Stichting De Appel, 2006).

Zijlstra' years. Ultimately, the government also played an important part in the choice and embedding of particular concepts. The 'we' in the title of this introduction was certainly not only the artists or the curators, but also definitely the policymakers and critics.