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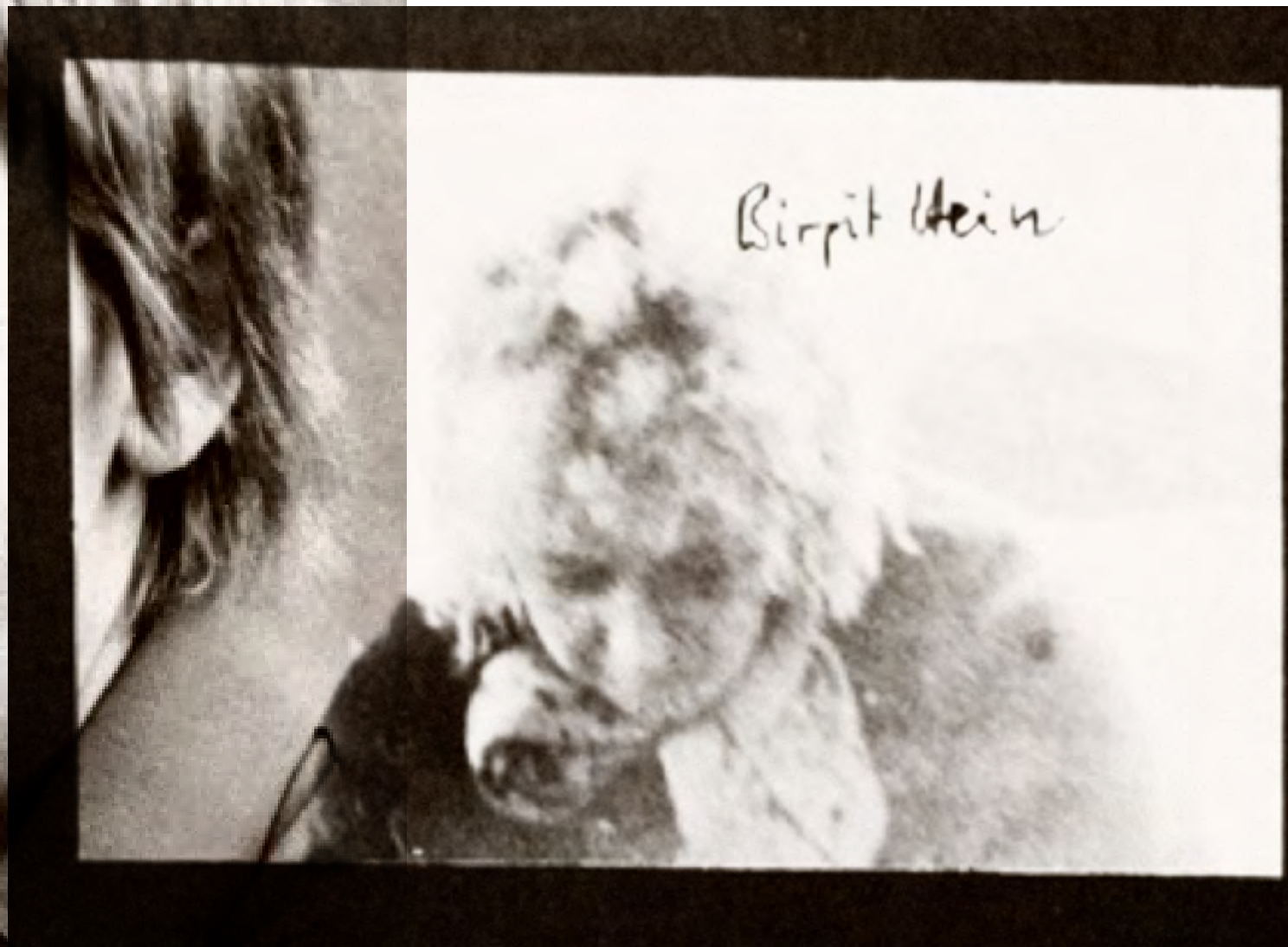












Cataloguing data available from Library and Archives Canada.

ISBN: 978-1-9991930-4-1

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Printed and bound in Canada

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INTRODUCTIONS



Introduction

MIKE HOOLBOOM

The godmother of German experimental film is dead. Birgit Hein died at the age of 80, peacefully, while sleeping.

I met her at the European Media Arts Festival in Osnabrück at a precipitous moment. Every day hundreds poured across the East Berlin border amidst rumours the wall would be torn down soon. The Green Party sat on Berlin's city council, vocal in its support of squat culture and its super-8 emporiums. The legendary trio Schmelz Dahin (melt away) had come to show their latest chemical outrage, though it would turn out to be their final work together. The Alte Kinder (Old Children) group was also dissolving. And through it all a larger-than-life figure ranged, touching and smiling, focusing the attention of everyone in the theatre, the centre of every scrum in the overcrowded bar next door where everyone fueled up between dizzying bouts of avant-gardism.

Birgit seemed to know everyone there. Quick to smile, to embrace her comrades and raise a glass, there was

a charged aura about her that set her apart somehow. She had a man in her face, and a nose that looked like she had taken a few shots for the cause. She was the object of a thousand quick glances, as if the crowd needed to keep watch, because beside her formidable debating skills and reputation as an artist, there was something deeply fragile about her; it seemed as if she might crumble right before our eyes. I discovered only later that she had been part of a legendary couple that had helped kickstart underground film in Germany, and they had recently divorced, so this festival visit was part of a coming out display. She was on her own now, carrying the weight on her own capable shoulders.

This is a collection of love letters from friends and familiars. We needed to hear her voice again, so we rescued some Q&A's, Randall, Duncan and Daniel kindly donated thoughtful interviews. Matthias and Michael sent materials and provided encouragement. Caspar started the ball rolling and helped with translations. Stefanie opened the vaults, Clint pitched in

everywhere. cylixe found the old pictures. Nina and Çiğdem said yes. New writings abound and because the fringe remains an oral culture there are recordings of after-screening conversations. Everything was donated. Everyone worked for free. As if we lived in a world where thoughts and art and pictures could be free.

The hope was to gather a temporary community in these pages, to be able to hear from a few of the many she touched along the way. It is a wreath to lay beside her memory, which lives on in the words and teachings and movies that will continue to flow, and from which she might be felt as a stiff wind of clarity or an encouraging embrace. She is missed.

Establishing Shot

MARC SIEGEL

This is an excerpt from Marc Siegel's essay accompanying the 2012 DVD release of "W+B Hein Materialfilme," featuring seven films by the Heins.

Wilhelm and Birgit Hein came to filmmaking from painting. They met as teenagers in 1959 when they exhibited paintings in the same group show. In 1962, they began university studies in Cologne: sociology (Wilhelm) and art history (Birgit). By 1966, they decided to focus their attention on filmmaking and were joined in their efforts by Birgit's brother, Christian Michelis, a trained musician, who created soundtracks for all of their early films.

Three important events in the fall of 1967 catalyzed their interests in avant-garde cinema and provided the inspiration not only for their early films but also for their ongoing dedication to film exhibition. In October in Rome, Birgit met Gregory Markopoulos at a screening of his film *Bliss* (1967) and spontaneously invited him to Cologne for the first Germany screening of his films. The December 11 screening of Markopoulos's *Eros, o Basileus* (1967) at the University of Cologne (with an audience of 1000 people!) marked the first of scores of similar avant-garde film events that the Heins would organize over the next decade.¹ Secondly, during a brief stay in Paris in late November and early December, the Heins were introduced to numerous



films of the New American Cinema in a retrospective presented by P. Adams Sitney at the Cinémathèque Française. The Fluxus films, Andy Warhol's *Harlot* (1964), and Taylor Mead's *European Diaries* (1966), among many others, provided aesthetic resources and reference points for years to come.

Finally, they were invited to present their first film *S&W* (1967), an experiment in single-frame technique, at the 4th International Experimental Film Festival at Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium in December. Knokke provided a venue for filmmakers to show and discuss work, as well as to make plans for international cooperative efforts in avant-garde film distribution, programming and criticism. As such, it marked a key moment in the consolidation of the European avant-garde film scene. In March 1968, the Heins joined together with a number of filmmakers and journalists in Cologne to found XSCREEN, a regular independent screening series focusing on the international avant-garde. Their organizational work with XSCREEN, the Munich-based Undependent Film Center (founded in 1968 by Wilhelm's brother, Karlheinz Hein and Werner Schulz) and the First European Meeting of Independent Filmmakers in Munich in November 1968, cemented their importance to the development of post-war European avant-garde film culture.

In 1971, Birgit published a seminal history of avant-garde film, *Film im Underground*, and XSCREEN published

a lavishly illustrated book documenting its commitment to the contemporary living history of the underground.² In the mid-1970s, the Heins were involved as co-curators and organizers of major film exhibitions, including the film section of documenta 6 (1976) and *Film als Film* (curated by Birgit Hein and Wulf Herzogenrath, 1977).

Throughout this almost ten year period of intensive film curatorial work and advocacy, the Heins also forged an impressive oeuvre of over thirty 16mm films in a formal, material or structural mode, and numerous installations. In 1977, after the completion of the final film in a series of material films, they abandoned filmmaking and the rarified world of the avant-garde for a number of years in order to develop multi-media performances which they presented in bars and clubs. This work involved the introduction of more consciously chosen personal content that could better reflect the psychological, emotional and sexual concerns of the artists. In the 1980s, the Heins produced three personal and provocative feature-length films: *Love Stinks* (1982), *Verbotene Bilder* (1985) and *Kali-Filme* (1987-88).

In 1988 they separated privately and professionally. Individually, they have remained productive and influential figures in various modes of filmmaking, film exhibition, and film education. Birgit was a professor of film and video at the Braunschweig University of Fine Arts from 1990 until her retirement in 2007. Wilhelm

has remained a committed underground filmmaker and archivist.³ The majority of their collaborative work from 1967-1988 remains unknown and their central place in the history of the German and international avant-garde is yet to be acknowledged.

NOTES

1. Markopoulos had to return to the United States to complete work on *The Iliac Passion*, so he sent filmmaker and star of *Eros, o Basileus* Robert Beavers to Cologne in his place. See Christiane Habich, ed. W+B Hein: Dokumente 1967-1985 Fotos, Briefe, Texte (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1985), 11.
2. Birgit Hein *Film im Underground: Von seinen Anfängen bis zum Unabhängigen Kino* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1971) and Hein, et. al., ed. XSCREEN.
3. In 1993 Birgit Hein's personal experimental film, *Die unheimliche Frauen* (The Uncanny Women) received the German Film Critics Prize for Best Experimental Film, an honour that, in 2005, went to Wilhelm Hein's underground opus, *You Killed the Underground... or the Real Meaning of Kunst bleibt... bleibt...*



Harlot by Andy Warhol

EXPRMNTL 4 in Knokke-le-Zoute, 1967





REFLECTIONS

XSCREEN



XSCREEN

MATERIALIEN

ÜBER DEN

UNDERGROUND-FILM

HERAUSGEBER:

W & B HEIN

CHRISTIAN MICHELIS

ROLF WIEST

PHAIDON



Underground Film: against commerce and the culture industry

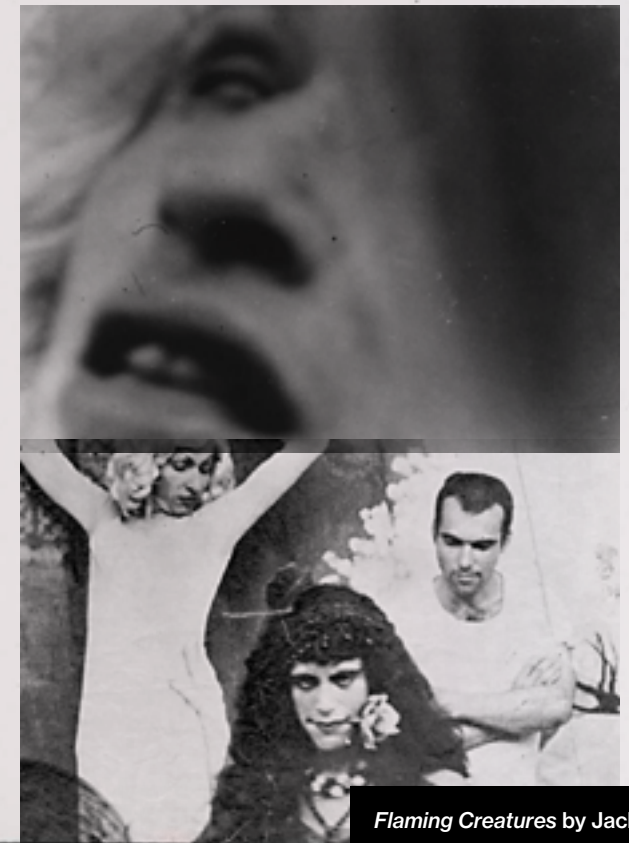
XSCREEN COLLECTIVE

Originally published in: XSCREEN – Materials About The Underground Film ed. W + B Hein, Christian Michelis, Rolf Wiest (1968)

“Terror from the screen and protest in the hall.” “The naked and the red.” “Protest with the bare reverse side.” “A lot of pornography and little politics.” Under these and similar headlines, underground film is widely discussed in the press for the first time in January 1968. The occasion was the 4th International Experimental Film Competition, held at the turn of the year 1967/1968 in the Belgian seaside resort of Knokke. The unusual appearance of the filmmakers and the events during and after the screenings take up much more space than the description of the films. The perplexity of the critics is clear; they can do nothing with these “lunatics” and their products, nor can anyone be found to help them understand, for Knokke is a festival of filmmakers where, unlike other comparable events, the critics, organizers and dignitaries are unimportant.

In these reports it becomes clear not only that new films are shown in Knokke, but that a new attitude towards life is connected with these films. The much-cited protest is directed against the established culture industry as the playground of bourgeois society and against the commercialism that confirms it.

The term underground is not a stylistic term that classifies the films, it provides information about a situation. The films exist underground, i.e. there are no screening venues, no financing possibilities and no publication organs for them. Underground film belongs to a large



Flaming Creatures by Jack Smith

subculture which has developed since the 1960s, a worldwide movement of progressive art in music, theatre and literature running parallel to official culture as a reaction to museum reproductions of traditional taste and values. It is a reaction to “cultural events” that only serve the needs of consumers, where every living process is eliminated by being tied to state and industrial subsidies and where even the so-called avant-garde only confirms the old systems of domination.

The underground film has only the film material in common with the commercial film; in content, form and production process, the two areas have nothing to do with each other. Here there are no longer divisions into director, cameraman, editor, etc., the filmmaker does all the work. Like the products of other art fields, film is the personal work of an individual. This explains the immense variety of forms of expression that underground film encompasses, from abstract and formal works to narrative and erotic films. The films are only entertainment in the same way that the other arts are. They make the same kinds of demands on the viewer and require an equal amount of engagement.

In contrast to commercial film, the filmmaker produces his or her own work and is thus completely independent of the constraints exerted by commerce. Since the underground film is created outside commercial production systems, it is also excluded from the

commercial distribution system. The crucial reason for its underground existence, however, is its form and content, which radically overturn previous notions of film, attacking social and aesthetic taboos and challenging ideas expressed in commercial film.

In museums and other cultural institutions, underground film did not stand a chance until the end of the 1960s, not only because of its radical avant-garde

stance which made it a threat to the entrenched cultural establishment, but also because of the notion, derived from commercial cinema, that film was merely for cheap entertainment.

In Knokke, the European underground met for the first time. Here the beginning was laid for international cooperation with the goal of creating its own distribution and publication system against the



Exprmntl 4 (Festival), Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, 1967

resistance of the commercial sector, in order to bring the new film to the public. At the same time, this was intended to create a livelihood for the filmmakers, because other ways of earning money did not exist at all; after all, selling films like books or records is still a future dream. Since films cannot be sold as originals, distribution via the art market is also ruled out, capitalizing on petty-bourgeois notions of sole ownership, where even photographs have to be signed so that they once again possess the air of the unrepeatable masterpiece.



The only model for film distribution outside of commerce exists in America, where in 1960 filmmakers joined together to form the “New American Cinema Group” in a cooperative that gives all profits to the filmmakers and retains only a small percentage of the revenues to cover organizational costs. Four years later this cooperative founded its own screening centre, a “Filmmakers Cinematheque” in order to disseminate the films even better.

The attempt to establish a European cooperative based on the American model in Knokke failed. Nevertheless, the festival was followed by a wave of activities in individual countries. Screening centers were founded, festivals organized and an attempt was made to break up the established festivals that excluded underground film for fear of scandal.

In Germany, XSCREEN in Cologne and the Undependent Filmcenter in Munich emerged in the spring of 1968 as the first independent screening centers for underground films. Crucially, these organizations assumed the financial risks and guarantee the filmmaker a fixed sum, regardless of the success of the event.

The more popular underground film becomes, the more screening centers are established in different cities. Some of them exist only for a short time, and most do not work as radically and uncompromisingly as the first organizations.

This book published by the XSCREEN collective bears the name of this group because our work, recorded here in photos and text material, stands as a model for the success and vitality of underground film. The program of screenings since XSCREEN’s inception provides an overview of the most important works of international underground film. The structure of the book is not historical, just as the work of XSCREEN is not aimed at the systematic presentation of a closed historical sequence. The primary goal is to represent and support new films. A systematic overview is not possible for financial reasons alone, films cannot be brought from America because of the high expenses, and it is not possible to invite representatives of the cinematheques, which do not lend copies without accompaniment. The underground situation forces improvised work. Programs are played as they present themselves, when filmmakers are on the road with their work, such as Albie Thoms from Australia or Takahiko Imura from Japan, or when cooperatives circulate a program among the various screening venues, such as the New American Cinema Group’s large circuit program of 80 films shown in various European cities. One group refers films to the other. Underground magazines publish the addresses of screening centers in various countries. Since XSCREEN became quickly known in the international underground, Cologne is a permanent stop on filmmakers’ European travels. Thus, a complete picture of the most important currents of underground film assembles by itself.

Exprmtl 4 (Festival), Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, 1967

Important historical films are also shown over time, such as Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*, of which a copy suddenly appeared, or *L'Age d'Or* by Luis Buñuel, which for decades was only shown in a few European cinemathèques. Thus, through contemporary film, the old avant-garde film is re-experienced and perceived as the sensational pioneering achievement it was in its time.

For the new films, the normal cinema is ill-suited, as it forces the viewer into passive consumption just as the conventional culture industry does. It only allows screenings in a single plane; expanded cinema actions, multi-projections, film actions that embrace

the whole space and partially involve the viewer are hardly possible here. In underground film there are no norms for the length of films as in the commercial field. In works that last several hours, the viewer must be able to leave the room, allowed to smoke and drink. They are no longer subject to the compulsion of having to sit through an event from beginning to end. The bourgeois separation of everyday life and "cultural enjoyment" is increasingly abolished, which manifests itself not least in the abolition of the difference between everyday and festive clothing.

During the events, the battle between viewer and film

is openly fought. The confrontation with new experiences, the training in hierarchies of value and quality is not taken from them by the organizers through prior selection. The time of submission to "masterpieces" is over. Premises that meet the needs of underground events exist in London and Amsterdam but hardly in Germany. Here, the organizers have no choice but to rent a normal cinema, even if chaos ensues, as in the first XSCREEN event with films by the Vienna group and with actions by Peter Weibel and Valie Export.

Despite many disadvantages, however, the cinema has the great advantage of being completely free of that rarified atmosphere of the palaces of culture, which for many is an insurmountable barrier. As a place of a proletarian culture, it is also familiar to the worker, a figure much sought after in the culture business that aims to justify the high subsidies granted to institutions such as theater and opera, although they primarily serve only to confirm a reactionary bourgeois class.

The underground must finance itself. The film events must pay for themselves, otherwise they become pointless because then the filmmaker receives no money. Unsuccessful organizations inevitably cease their work. The idealism needed to bear the risks of financial deficit and legal prosecution quickly disappears if the work is not successful.

However, it is crucial that success is not based on cheap compromises. The audience is there, informed by a



L'Age d'Or by Luis Buñuel

raucous publicity with self-painted posters that speak a shrill language. The need for new forms of experience is extraordinarily great. The viewer wants the risk of a new situation, the awareness of participating in a process of creation in which they themselves can intervene. Here, there are sensations that the established culture industry cannot offer because people who fear for their position and authority do not want to take risks.

Only financial independence makes the radical presentation of new art possible. And only the risk of venturing into new areas ensures success, i.e. the interest of the public. Only as long as truly underground work is done is it alive—when the large-scale event documented in the appendix was closed by the police in the half-finished subway station during the 1968 Cologne Art Market, there were 1000 visitors down there who took part.

In the underground, organizers and producers work closely together, often they are one person. This connection is necessary to muster a commitment to the work that cannot be expected from people with secure salaries. As already mentioned, underground films have not only existed since the 1960s, but for much longer. However, until the appearance of the new films, the historical avant-garde films were almost non-existent. The few film histories that exist devote at most a few lines to the avant-garde films of the 1920s as curiosities. To this day, only content-based categories are used to judge films, and even these are hardly

derived from progressive ideas. Even historical films formed a kind of subculture in their time; they existed outside of commerce or were banned like *L'Age d'Or* or Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour* in the 50s. These films, as well as *Flaming Creatures* by Jack Smith or *Sodoma* by Otto Muehl, expose the pseudo-morality of commercial films, which in voluntary self-censorship submit to the mendacious bourgeois notions of decency. The underground films disregard any kind of censorship, and that is the reason why the organizers constantly come into conflict with the law, which exists only as an empty convention.

Narrative films are no longer about reproducing society's clichés but about exposing them, as in the work of Warhol, or exploring one's own reality, as in the work of Brakhage, or about relentless documentation, as in militantly political films. New areas of design are explored.

The rules of editing and montage, of brilliance and rhythm are abolished, and a wealth of new visual expressive possibilities is gained for film. Underground films are hardly comfortable entertainment; they attack the viewer not only in terms of content, but also formally—often to the point of physical pain.

It goes without saying that not all films categorized as underground are equally radical. The scope in the commercial sphere is so narrow that even less progressive films have no chance there. The underground film is open and not interested in the segregation of an esoteric and commercially exploitable elite like the art business.

In this documentary account, XSCREEN and the underground film with all its contradictions has its say. The book is intended to offer materials for lively debate, and to present the results of a historically closed phase.



Un Chant d'Amour by Jean Genet

Art communicates knowledge: an interview with Birgit Hein by Randall Halle (2006)

HEIN / HALLE

RANDALL: When European film historians talk about the birth of New German Cinema, could we say it was also the rebirth of a New German avant-garde film? Do you understand your work of the 60s as having been at the center of this new avant-garde?¹

BIRGIT: When I started to reinvent experimental film together with Wilhelm Hein in the middle of the sixties, we didn't do this as filmmakers but as painters. Our aim was to discover film as a potential medium of fine art. We didn't have any knowledge about classical filmmaking at that time.

We knew that there was a New German Film. But in no way would we have connected it with the term "avant-garde" which for us was exclusively connected with the fine art movements of the beginning of the twentieth century like Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism, as well as Dada and the abstract and Surrealist films by German and French painters.

We had internalized the idea of modernism that one must derive the rules of an art from the characteristics of its material. We approached film according to the definition of László Moholy-Nagy, who in 1925 taught that the basic materials of film are light and

time.² We wanted to define the fundamental elements of film in order to find our way from the depiction of reality to the reality of depiction. We wanted to explore the medium of film as a visual system and thereby analyze and examine the process of reproduction including the film material itself as well as the chemical and perceptual processes. The single-image structure of film also enables a montage based on visual principles that are independent of narrative continuity. We believed that only through this fundamental detachment from the context of traditional narrative cinema could film become a visual arts medium.

RANDALL: If the death of the German avant-garde tradition took place in 1933, was it reborn in 1963, when Ferdinand Khittl's *Die Parallelstraße* (The Parallel Street, 1961) won the grand prize at EXPRMNTL 3 in Knokke, Belgium?³

BIRGIT: Oh no, don't come with *Die Parallelstraße*! Let me quote what I wrote about the film in 1971 when I was writing about the Knokke Festival of 1964: "The distribution of prizes is certainly grotesque. The grand prize

went to the German film *Parallelstraße* by Ferdinand Khittl, an addled pseudo-philosophical film."⁴

RANDALL: So when do you think experimental filmmaking returned to West Germany?

BIRGIT: I can answer that only with a general observation: it happened at the start of the 1960s with the first short films of the Young German Film movement [Junges Deutsches Kino]. They were not really experimental films, but they established a new form of personal narration through filmic means. These films were screened in Oberhausen at the Westdeutsche Kurzfilmtage [West German Short Film Festival],⁵ and in the student film clubs of the universities.



Thais by Anton Giulio Bragaglia

RANDALL: You went to Cologne in 1961 to study Art History. Did you select these subjects because of an interest in contemporary art? Cologne was developing one of the more lively gallery scenes at the time. What was your relationship to them?

BIRGIT: Contemporary art had been my life ever since I was a teenager. I studied art history because my parents didn't want me to study painting, even though I had already been accepted at the then famous Kunstakademie (Art Academy) in Düsseldorf. But of course back then, Art History was not about contemporary art, so the gallery scene was extremely important. Wilhelm and I would go to every one of the



The Parallel Street by Ferdinand Khittl



Thirteen Most Wanted Men by Andy Warhol

many openings. In 1967, Rudolf Zwirner opened his first gallery in Cologne with Andy Warhol's "Most Wanted Men." I will never forget how deeply I was touched by his sense of an autonomous, mass media aesthetic.

RANDALL: As a student and developing artist, how much attention did you pay to the oft-cited political markers of the 1960s in West Germany: the Auschwitz Trials in Frankfurt (1963–65), the founding of Kommune 1 (January 12, 1967), the shooting of Benno Ohnesorg (June 2, 1967)?

BIRGIT: We didn't need the trial in Frankfurt in 1963 to open our eyes. My generation had already been confronted with the Holocaust as very young teenagers in the middle of the fifties. And many of us, myself included, were traumatized. We were deeply unhappy to be Germans. In 1963, even to think about the trial filled me with anxiety. The shooting of Benno Ohnesorg: at that time the student revolt was already in full swing. Anything was possible, since policemen had started riding their horses directly into the demonstrating students. The founding of Kommune 1 confirmed our Zeitgefühl [sense of the times]. It summarized some of the sensibilities we had in our era. By the way, the famous photo of them was shot by a friend of ours, an XSCREEN member.⁶

RANDALL: Would you describe 1967 as a breakthrough year for you personally? You and your then husband Wilhelm began to move in broader circles:



Benno Ohnesorg demonstration, 1967

you were in Rome at Filmstudio 70, in Munich at LOFT, and in November you went to Paris and participated in the Cinémathèque's retrospective of New American Cinema. And also in November the first public screenings of your own work—*S&W* and *Olé* (both 1967)—took place,⁷ and you received the news that your work would be screened in Knokke at EXPRMNTL 4.

BIRGIT: It all happened at the end of 1967. I see it more as a preparation for the real breakthrough, which took place in 1968, first with the founding of XSCREEN and, most importantly, with the success of *Rohfilm* (Raw Film, 1968) at the filmmakers meeting in November in Munich.⁸

RANDALL: That meeting brought you together with other West German experimental artists and the Austrian Filmmakers Cooperative. What was it about that gathering that had such resonance for you?

BIRGIT: That's not exactly how it happened. We had already met the Austrian filmmakers in February 1968 at the Hamburger Filmschau. We viewed their films with great enthusiasm, because they came from the same arts background that we did. We opened our first XSCREEN event in March 1968 with works from the Viennese Actionists. At that time, our own films were a bit more modest in their goals. The breakthrough came with *Rohfilm*. Peter Kubelka praised the film in Munich as the best film of the gathering. That was our official recognition.

RANDALL: So, beyond the experimental moving image art, what was your relationship to the experiments in narrative and documentary cinema taking place at the time? You paid attention to the New American Cinema but not to the DOC 59 in Munich. You went to Knokke but not to the Westdeutsche Filmtage in Oberhausen. You took up contact with Gregory Markopoulos but not with Haro Senft or Alexander Kluge.⁹ Why? How did you develop your understanding of an independent, experimental, underground cinema?

BIRGIT: Cinema had not played the slightest role in our socialization until we started to study at the University of Cologne in 1962. Today, this is hard to believe. We did not watch television and would not go to the movies, as we did not consider them to be high culture. An important event was the retrospective of Luis Buñuel's Mexican films, organized by the student film club at the University of Cologne in 1962, which opened our eyes to film and as a result shifted our attention to the Nouvelle Vague films and to New German Cinema, which was just taking shape at the time.

We had gotten our hands on the American magazine *Film Culture* and were avid readers.¹⁰ The New American Cinema movement provided us with the vital impetus for making our own films as individual artists, even amateurs, who produce their films without any budget and who do everything by themselves: shooting, editing, and even acting. The writings of Stan Brakhage played an important role in this process. His



Harry Smith on the cover of *Film Culture*

notion of film—that mistakes, for instance, such as blurriness, could be an aesthetic device, or that one could directly manipulate the filmstrip's emulsion, and that it didn't come down to the narrative but rather to personal ways of visualizing images—had a crucial impact on our first film work.

The co-founders of XSCREEN were film journalists who wrote for the daily Cologne newspaper *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, whose regular Saturday film page was read by producers and distributors all over Germany. They especially admired Jean-Marie Straub and Jean-Luc Godard. Of course, Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz became prominent. Wilhelm and I didn't like Kluge very much, because his films were infused with literary symbolism. I don't remember any film by Haro

Kommune 1, West Berlin





Senft. Among the New German Cinema only Werner Herzog impressed us with his aggressiveness.

Why Gregory Markopoulos? I saw his film *Bliss* (1967) in October 1967 in Rome as the very first example of the New American Cinema, which until then I had only been able to read about. I was overwhelmed by the pure visual expression of the film and immediately promised Markopoulos to screen his work in West Germany. And it happened before Knokke! At the beginning of December 1967, I arranged a screening of his film *Eros, O Basileus* (1967) at the Film Club of the University of Cologne.

ROLAND: You literally began the year 1968 at EXPRMNTL 4 in Knokke, where your work was screened and where leftist film students from West Germany staged a protest against the apolitical underground film. You then spent the spring with people you met at the EXPRMNTL, founding XSCREEN in Cologne as an independent non-commercial screening space. Then, in October the police raided your screening of Otto Muehl's works.¹¹ And suddenly, you were at the center of a major protest in Cologne against

state censorship. The leftists who had denounced your projects as apolitical came out onto the streets to demonstrate on your behalf. How did you understand the relationship then between aesthetic experimentation and political action? Looking back on the events, how do you now evaluate the positions you took then?

BIRGIT: In our opinion the protest of the leftist students at Knokke against US imperialism in experimental film was completely ridiculous. Even today, whenever I see TV footage of the event, I can only shake my head over Harun Farocki's ego trip.¹² Of course, we were political with our XSCREEN activities. But we didn't follow any leftist ideology. We were subversively opposing political and sexual censorship, which caused many serious problems for us with the authorities, including a lawsuit. Nevertheless, as filmmakers with our own formal films, we were attacked by the left as reactionary and apolitical.

Later, as a still ostracized avant-garde artist, I tried to mount a defense of my work in 1977 in a publication I'd like to quote: "The problem lies in the paradox of artistic work and the function it is supposed to fulfill: it is meant to embody ideals—such as true freedom, or pure truth—that can't be realized in society, but which society needs in order to vindicate itself... Essentially, attacks on the avant-garde come from a conviction that art can have a direct effect... But all attempts by the classical and contemporary avant-garde to connect art to life have failed. Because either anti-art turns into art again, or else the production of art is given up in favor

of direct social activities... The progressiveness of political art depends on the progressiveness of its content. That means that any debate necessarily becomes a debate about the right content. In that case, we have to ask ourselves whether content alone can be art. Either way, what is clear is that you don't need art to convey the right content."¹³

In the 1920s, the Russian Formalists believed that the only possible approach to solving the problem of the conflict between "art and revolution" was to take on form. The constructivist painter El Lissitzky wrote in 1920: "many revolutions were needed in order to free the artist from his obligations as a moralist, as a storyteller, or as the court jester, so that he could follow unhindered his creative bent and tread the road that leads to construction."¹⁴ The formalists understood art as work in an aesthetic, formal field that is only slightly different from other specialist fields, such as science. In this way, art communicates knowledge that cannot be expressed in any other information system and that cannot even exist outside its own immanent language.

ROLAND: Those are provocative and compelling critical insights. Would you still maintain this position today?

BIRGIT: Today, we still confront the problem of people trying to mediate visual work with verbal work. Visual expression or visual quality is difficult to replace with another medium—that is the basis of a work's uniqueness. In order to assess the visual arts, one needs a lengthy set of visual experiences.



ROLAND: With XSCREEN you created a space to support non-commercial independent film. What motivated you to become engaged on behalf of films that would never screen in mainstream cinemas?

BIRGIT: In the first place, it was our own personal interest, as museums and exhibition spaces had no technical equipment and would not show films. Therefore, we needed to rent a cinema. At that time, documentary films were also not shown in mainstream cinemas. But in the sixties a new movement of political and personal documentaries started, and they really spoke to us, they were part of us. As I said before, we didn't even question that we had to oppose censorship of information. For example in October 1968 we screened *La hora de los hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces, 1968), the four-hour-long film by Fernando E. Solanas and Octavio Getino, a documentary on neo-colonialism in Latin America.

ROLAND: To what extent was XSCREEN part of a larger movement, along with the independent film center in Munich, the COOP in Hamburg, Germany?



The International Underground Film Festival 1970, London

BIRGIT: We were connected in a kind of network with a continuous exchange of information. We would cooperate in organizing screenings for traveling filmmakers. The “movement” was international. We worked with the London Filmmakers Co-op, The Electric Cinema in Amsterdam, the Austrian Filmmakers Cooperative, the Italian Co-op, and even the New York Filmmakers Cooperative. Together with the independent film center we organized the “First European Meeting of Independent Filmmakers” in

Munich in November 1968. In October 1970, The International Underground Film Festival was organized by the London Film-Makers’ Co-op (LFMC). As filmmakers and friends, we would share our homes and family life, including talks and drinking that lasted through the night and into the morning.

ROLAND: To what extent can we describe the period after 1968 as an institutionalization of the experimental/underground (West) German Cinema?

BIRGIT: Since the beginning of the seventies, so-called community cinemas (Kommunale Kinos) were established in many West German cities as non-profit organizations that were supported by departments of culture. Their program would comprise all the film genres of the time from historical to independent to experimental/underground films. In 1974, XSCREEN also started a regular cinema with daily screenings. In the same year, the exhibition in Cologne, now legendary, “Kunst bleibt Kunst, Projekt, 74” (Art Remains Art, Project, 74) included film, video, and photography as new art forms for the first time. Then, in 1977 at the Documenta 6 in Kassel, West Germany, we had the chance to present a permanent daily film program again. Looking back, I find it remarkable that with *Epileptic Seizure Comparison* (1976) by Paul Sharits, it took so long for a film installation to be included in an art exhibition in West Germany.

Also in 1977, shortly after the Documenta, the Kölischer Kunstverein [an Art Museum in Cologne]

opened the exhibition “Film als Film—1910 bis heute” (Film as Film: 1910–Today) with historical artworks, new film installations, and a permanent film program of around fifty short films, spanning from the abstract films of the 1920s to the Structural Films of the 1960s and 1970s, which dominated the international experimental film movement at that time. Ironically, this breakthrough of film in the art context marked at the same time the end of film’s reception in the art scene until the end of the 80s. But by that time, the avant-garde concept of linear progress had become intolerable. The purism of structural “film as film” had led to stagnation in formalism. It signified the end of conceptual art.

At the end of the seventies, West German Experimental Film showed a tendency towards narration. Also, a new young generation began to work with super 8 with a commitment to content and personal themes. Especially in West Berlin, a new super-8 subculture developed in the 80s outside of the art scene in connection with the squatter scene and the music scene in clubs and bars. Underground was followed by Punk, also in Cologne. Our cinema had a stage. We would therefore also host live performances including punk concerts with their wild audiences.

Consider also that up to the beginning of the 1970s, film could only be studied at film schools like the Deutsche Film und Fernsehakademie Berlin (German Film and Television Academy Berlin, dffb) or the Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film München (University of Television and Film in Munich, hff). Film and Video Studies were also established at art universities like Hochschule für

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Bildende Künste (Braunschweig University of Art, HBK), where I taught for years and where the Filmklasse (Film Class) actually forms part of the Department of Fine Arts. There, with the collective plenary discussion of student work and the weekly film forum, where classics of experimental cinema as well as new media art were shown, film was established as a full-fledged artistic medium inside and outside the HBK. Of course, the technical equipment of the school with the professional 16mm equipment and a 35mm animation stand, even a small printer, and later with video and computer equipment, supported by a graduate tutorial with two technicians, were important resources for advanced training. I am proud that filmmakers who are internationally known these days, such as Matthias Müller, Bjørn Melhus, and Caspar Stracke, as well as the curators Florian Wüst and Peter Zorn, to name only a few, have studied in the creative atmosphere of the Filmklasse, while I was teaching there from 1990 to 2007.

NOTES

- 1 Nanna Heidenreich, Heike Klippel, and Florian Krautkrämer, eds., *Film Als Idee: Birgit Heins Texte Zum Film/Kunst* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2016).
- 2 László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Fotografie, Film* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1925); László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film*, trans. Janet Seligman (London: Lund Humphries, 1967).
- 3 The seaside resort town of Knokke in Belgium hosted exprmntl (full official title: *Le festival international du cinema expérimental de Knokke-le-Zoute*) intermittently in 1949,

'58, '63, '67, and '74. Especially exprmntl 3 and 4 were defining gatherings for a renewed post-war avant-garde moving image arts. exprmntl 3 welcomed many of the most significant US underground filmmakers, and they dominated the festival screenings. Exprmntl 4 presented a lively European film scene on equal footing with the work of the American artists. The awarding of the prize to *Die Parallelstraße* was not without controversy as the film's narrative essayistic style was perceived as retrograde compared to the more material formal experiments of the New American Cinema.

- 4 Birgit Hein, *Film im Underground: Von seinen Anfängen bis zum Unabhängigen Kino* (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1971), 153.
- 5 The film festival was renamed the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen in 1991.
- 6 XSCREEN, or the Cologne Studio for Independent Film, was founded by Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, Rolf Wiest, Dietrich Schubart Rosenthal, Wilfried Reichart, and Hans-Peter Kochenrath upon their return from exprmntl 4. XSCREEN became one of the central screening spaces for independent, underground, experimental film in West Germany and in western Europe generally, as will be discussed further on in this interview.
- 7 These two early films formed part of the explorations of the material of film that would characterize much of the collaboration of Birgit and Wilhelm Hein. The films could be described as in line with the structural material films of the New American Cinema or the London Co-op movement.
- 8 The film screened at the 2018 Berlin International Film Festival.
- 9 Haro Senft and Ferdinand Khittl organized in Munich a group of young critical filmmakers in a reform movement experimenting with documentary film under the title DOC 59. They undertook training and public activity to support the renewal of West German film. The members of the group joined up with Alexander Kluge and others at the Oberhausen Short Film Festival to announce the now

famous Oberhausen Manifesto in 1962. These events can be understood as the birth of Young German Cinema.

- 10 Similar to Young German Cinema, New American Cinema was a designation coined to identify an independent non-Hollywood group of artists undertaking formal experiments to redefine filmmaking in the late 1950s and 60s; New American Cinema was coined by Jonas Mekas. The movement included Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, John Casavettes, Shirley Clarke, Maya Deren, Robert Frank, Alfred Leslie, Gregory Markopoulos, and Ron Rice along with Jonas and Adolfas Mekas.
- 11 Otto Muehl, one of the Viennese Actionists, had been arrested in Vienna in 1968 as a result of his participation in *Kunst und Revolution/Art and Revolution*. Muehl along with Kurt Kren had been filming these actions, and at a screening of those films in Cologne organized by XSCREEN, the police arrived and confiscated the materials as pornographic. The censorship led to mass protests in the city along with an occupation of the mayor's office.
- 12 Farocki, a student at the dffb, was one of the central organizers. Other students of the dffb who attended included Hartmut Bitomsky, Gerd Conradt, and Holger Meins. Students Oimel Ma and Jeanine Meerapfel of the Institut für Filmgestaltung Ulm (Ulm Institute for Film Design) attended as well.
- 13 Birgit Hein, "Can Art Change Reality?" in *Schwindel der Wirklichkeit: Closed-Circuit Videoinstallationen und Partizipation: ein Reader/Vertigo of Reality: Closed-Circuits and Participation: a Reader*, eds. Anke Hervol, Wulf Herzogenrath, Johannes Odenthal, Andrew Boreham, and Paul Brown (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2015), 214–16. Here, 214.
- 14 El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," in *Russian Art of the Avant Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, ed. John E. Bowlit (New York: Viking, 1976), 151–58. Here, 153.

XSCREEN 1968:

Material Film Aesthetics and Radical Cinema Politics

RANDALL HALLE

The fourth *expmntl* film festival in Knokke, Belgium in 1967 took place as the street and party politics of the 1960s intensified.¹ The international gathering, which spanned the winter holidays from December 25, 1967 to January 2, 1968, included the most important experimental filmmakers and moving image artists of Western Europe and North America. It served as a venue for screenings of what are now classic works of the filmmakers of the neo-avant-garde.² West Germany's Lutz Mommartz, Werner Nekes, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein were part of the official program. They were joined by other experimental moving image artists who participated on the periphery of the festival, or who traveled to the wintry coastal town simply to take in the event. The presence of the West German filmmakers on the program was a breakthrough moment for post-World War II West German visual arts. It marked their return to international recognition after the catastrophe of the Third Reich.

This return was not, however, a moment of simple celebration of cutting-edge, moving image arts. The West German visual artists, in particular, were subject to a broad rejection from a second group of filmmakers in



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attendance: leftist-oriented political filmmakers who favored didactic and even overtly “revolutionary” films over the experimental non-narrative work at Knokke. Reflecting the heady state of intense political dispute growing in the Federal Republic, the main participants in the protest themselves came from West Germany.

A group of students from the *Institut für Filmgestaltung in Ulm* (The Ulm Institute of Film Design), where Alexander Kluge and Edgar Reitz taught, and the newly formed *Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin* (German Film and Television Academy Berlin, dffb) attended the festival.³ They came not to view and

appreciate experimental films. Instead their goal was to undertake actionist protests against the avant-garde, accusing them of having no political content.⁴ They held demonstrations at the festival’s public venues and even disrupted screenings.

The protestors included Berlin’s Hartmut Bitomsky, Gerd Conradt, Harun Farocki and Holger Meins, along with Oimel Ma and Jeanine Meerapfel from Ulm. Showing little sympathy for non-tendentious art, they ridiculed formal experimentation. Film historian Xavier Bardon described how they demanded work that engaged politics, “reality,” and “awareness.”⁵ The politicized students also denounced the works screened at the festival as “formalist”—an especially sharp charge within the over-heated debates of the time. And because the festival was influenced greatly by the New American Cinema, the protestors also saw its aesthetic program as an expression of US imperialism.

Not daunted by the protests, the Heins and Mommartz, along with Dietrich Schubert Rosenthal, Rolf Wiest and other attendees from the Cologne and Düsseldorf region, returned to West Germany and founded XSCREEN—*Kölner Studio für den unabhängigen Film* (Cologne Studio for Independent Film). Its purpose was to foster experimental work, bringing it to both larger and broader audiences. And it was a success, at least in terms of audience numbers. Screenings of underground works could draw more than 1000 spectators, not all of them enthusiasts of experimental



XSCREEN in the news, October 1968

film. The raucous crowds were as prone to booing as much as they were to cheering. The reaction of authorities could be far harsher. On October 16, 1968, police raided a screening that literally took place in the underground, an unfinished station of the new Cologne U-Bahn. The police confiscated the films and charged them with *Verbreitung unzüchtiger Darstellungen*, a law forbidding the distribution of obscene images.⁶

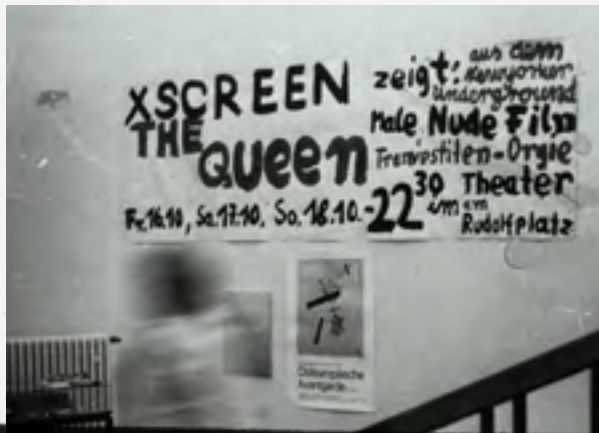
Almost paradoxically, where just a few months earlier German experimental film had been an object of leftist protest, it now became—as an object of state censorship—a leftist *cause célèbre*. In the days after the raid, protests erupted across Cologne. The Opera, viewed as a bastion of bourgeois culture, was stormed. Demonstrators barricaded streets and even occupied the police headquarters. The police action had, in effect, surfaced the underground scene, giving it striking public visibility and a new credibility in the German arts world.

In these two episodes, especially in the volatile climate of the fall 1968, we see both the juxtaposition and



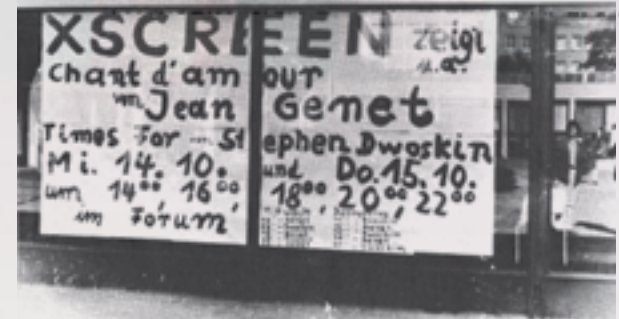
XSCREEN Kunstmarkt demonstration, October 1968

unexpected convergence between what experimental filmmaker and critic Peter Wollen described as “the two avant-gardes.”⁷ Reflecting on these developments, he discerned a rough but aggressive divide between those who pursued the autonomy of the medium of film and those who demanded a socially engaged cinema; between “an extroverted and an introverted ontology of film, one seeking the soul of cinema in the nature of the pro-filmic event, the other in the nature of the cinematic process, the cone of light or the grain of silver.”⁸ Wollen captures in general terms the prevailing divide at the time within Western European and North American moving image arts. Years later Birgit Hein, directly involved in the events in Knokke and Cologne, described the split far more sharply: “political filmmakers totally ignored the social relevance of formally innovative art. We were then considered reactionary avant-gardists... Conversely, we found political films with their clear statements to be reactionary since they worked with the same means as traditional commercial cinema.”⁹



Randall Halle

The episodes in Knokke and Cologne set up the central goal of this paper: to offer a new perspective on the much-studied renewal of West German film in the 1960s. Famously, the decade began with the drafting of the Oberhausen Manifesto, a call for the renewal of the German film industry. By the middle of the decade a new vision appeared on the screen with the award-winning debut feature films of Kluge, Volker Schlöndorff, Reitz, Ulrich and Peter Schamoni.¹⁰ The development of this “New German Cinema,” which attained renown throughout much of Europe and beyond, has been the subject of countless studies. Yet such extensive attention to this artistic movement obscures the fact that the 1960s also witnessed great successes in the experimental films of the neo-avant-garde. Ferdinand Khittl, Nekes, Mommartz, and the Heins, among others, all produced award-winning work. One could say that within West German film history two radical movements emerged out of the 1960s: one that has been titled the New German Cinema (NGC) and another we could identify as a New German Avant-garde Film (NGAF). These movements infused but also struggled with each other. The emphasis in scholarship on the former and its characteristic, narrative films has a powerful, underappreciated source. It was precisely at this moment—and alongside the advent of the NGC—that a New West German film criticism came into being. It clearly favored the narrative feature film and eyed with suspicion the work of the NGAF.



A consideration of the bifurcated history of German radical film in the 1960s and its unbalanced treatment in West German film studies (both contemporaneous criticism and subsequent scholarship) forms the second and perhaps more positional goal of this essay. I seek to give the NGAF greater due, while accounting for its lesser place in histories of German film.

To be sure, the relative neglect of the rich history of (West) German avant-garde cinema has many reasons, not the least of which are accessibility, both intellectual and literal. Narrative cinema is more comprehensible and oftentimes more pleasurable to the viewer. Experimental film requires (or may seem to require) knowledge of filmic form and a special interpretive vocabulary. Such films, moreover, have weaker distribution and fewer screenings; and experimental film’s visual challenges are often posed in a museum or gallery context with which cinema audiences are generally less familiar.

But beyond these barriers, the neglect of NGAF results from a clear tendency in West German film studies to



focus on the “extroverted” experimentation in narrative characteristic of the NGC’s *Autorenfilm*, and to dismiss the “introverted” experiments in form characteristic of the NGAF. In multiple standard works on German cinema, NGC and its narrative films have been designated as experimental and avant-garde, without any mention of the experimental work of the NGAF.¹¹ Even Thomas Elsaesser’s text *New German Cinema: A History*, which recognizes the developments of the formal avant-garde, positions the structural material experiments of Nekes, Mommartz or the Heins as ancillary to the innovations in narrative cinema introduced by Kluge, or Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Vlado Kristl, Hellmuth Costard, and especially Farocki.¹² The lack of care in distinction, or the relegation of the NGAF to minor status, has implications beyond what is included in film histories. It indicates problems in the very parameters with which we engage the moving image and understand the avant-garde.

In this essay, I first review the history of this late-1960s moment. Because the histories of this period have largely attended to NGC, this essay focuses primarily on the

NGAF. However, I first consider how in the post-war period the calls for renewal of German cinema included experiments in form and narrative strategies. I then go on to explore how this period of Young German Cinema gave way to a split into two trajectories of radical filmmaking. There is much work that needs still to be done on this history and it is important to recognize that the legacy of the 1960s continues to dominate our understanding of the relation of aesthetics and politics. So understanding this essay as an incitement to a rethinking, as conclusion I step back from the specific story told here to offer five considerations of how a more thorough attention to NGAF might compel a shift in our understanding of German film history and aesthetic-politics as such.

POST-WAR GERMAN FILM: RECOVERING LOST TRADITIONS AT THE FESTIVALS

The end of World War II brought the collapse of film production in Germany and a fundamental shift in the apparatus of production. Let us recall that while narrative film flourished in the Third Reich, the violent repression of the avant-garde and modernist aesthetic practice in general meant that the rich dynamic of experimentation in the visual arts came to an end as well. A few filmmakers, like Walter Ruttmann, were able to continue in a limited fashion to work with modernist editing techniques. These works, however, were fully

subordinated to the totalitarian state.¹³ Thus, after the war, while narrative filmmakers could return to their craft, the practitioners of experimental cinema were absent. Experimental artists who had survived remained largely in the places to which they had gone in exile, especially the US. This lack of an experimental tradition meant that the reemergence of film production in West Germany, and across Western Europe, was largely the restoration of commercial cinema and traditions of narrative film. The eradication of avant-garde cinema went beyond the absence of moving image works. It entailed also the absence of distribution networks, as well as of potential audiences and informed critics.

XSCREEN schedule and photos



Film historians punctuate the story of West German film with restorations and aesthetic revolutions, such as the restoration of the film industry amidst the rubble of post-war society, or the aesthetic revolution of NGC out of the financial collapse and creative stagnation of the late 1950s. These histories are often organized around film festivals. By common accounts, the creation of the Berlinale amidst the destruction in West Berlin functioned as a symbol for the emergence of cinema in the new Federal Republic. The founding of the Oberhausen Short Film Festival created an alternative to feature films and became the site of demands for industry reforms.

The advent of New German Avant-garde Film could well be told in similar ways. Its emergence also began with a film festival, though one outside of West Germany. The first post-war experimental film festival took place in the small Belgian town of Knokke in 1949: the *Festival International du Cinéma Expérimental*. The festival was touted as a restoration of the grand European avant-garde, reprising how avant-garde filmmakers had gathered 20 years earlier in the summer of 1929 at the congress at La Sarraz in Switzerland. In similar fashion, small, out-of-the-way Knokke attracted a broad European audience. The gathering, however, did not feature a festival competition, as would be the case in later iterations. Birgit Hein noted in her groundbreaking study *Film im Underground/ Film in the Underground* (1971) that Knokke I was largely a retrospective showcase. The vast majority of the works submitted were created before 1940 and included many German Dadaist and Absolute films by Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, Lotte Reiniger and Viking Eggeling.¹⁴ The festival, while breaking new ground, mostly glanced backwards.

The initial gathering in Knokke served four important functions. First, it helped return European and especially West German filmmakers and artists to the avant-garde trajectory from which the German-speaking world had been removed for almost two decades. Knokke provided for the moving image arts what Documenta 1 in Kassel in 1955 did for the fine arts. Second, beyond the historic European

avant-garde, the festival provided an overview of the New American Cinema, which was itself shaped by the work of the exiles in the United States, such as Richter and Fischinger. It introduced Europeans to the work of, among others, Maya Deren, Kenneth Anger, John and James Whitney. By extension, the gathering established a trans-Atlantic relationship that would shape the work of the neo-avant-garde over the next decades. Third, the Belgian festival inspired visual artists—and not just filmmakers—to experiment with the materiality of the moving image. While many of the works at Knokke can be described as poetic, symbolist, and surrealist, the festival also advanced a new experimental cinema. It featured aesthetic concerns and formal innovations increasingly distinct from those of narrative cinema. The filmmakers fashioning this aesthetic were not interested in storytelling or in realist representations but rather in the materiality of the filmstrip, the practice of seeing, and “the nature of the cinematic process.” They were enthralled, in short, with all the things a film can do beyond telling a story. Indeed, it should be underscored that as with the historic avant-garde, the aesthetic concerns that drove the interest in moving-image experimentation derived largely from questions posed in the fine arts, painting, printmaking, theater, etc. and not from the market concerns of feature film. Fourth, and finally, the festival both reestablished connections among artists and instigated new networks of critical discussion and aesthetic influence.

XSCREEN Kunstmarkt demonstration in the news, October 1968



After Knokke, the Lettrists in France, Peter Weiss in Sweden, Haro Senft, and Hubert Seggelke in West Germany, and Herbert Vesely in Austria undertook early, postwar experiments in abstract filmmaking. Two scenes—at once complementary and divergent—emerged in the German-speaking world. Herbert Vesely moved to Munich to join the developing film scene there, while in Vienna Peter Kubelka carried on largely in isolation from outside influences. Kubelka developed a concept of metric film. His metric works focused on the 24 frames

per second of the projected image and developed principles of rhythmic editing that parallel Arnold Schönberg's 12 tone aesthetic.¹⁵ In such work the individual frame comes to have an unfamiliar effect, serving not as a vehicle for the production of the illusion of cinema but precisely as a disruption of that experience. While Kubelka began his work in relative isolation, he eventually interacted with growing artistic circles. These included, among others, the filmmaker Kurt Kren; Viennese Actionists like Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, and Hermann Nitsch; and artist and media critics Peter Weibel, Valie Export, and Mara Mattuschka. Through the 1950s and into the 60s, the critical investigation of the materiality of film in Austria was unparalleled in the rest of the German-speaking world.

In the Federal Republic of Germany a youthful film scene began to develop in Munich. There the thread from Knokke was Herbert Vesely and Haro Senft, who introduced in 1957 the manifesto *Filmform—das dritte Programm* (*Film Form—the Third Program*).¹⁶ An attack on the existing film industry, *Film Form* called for new artistic freedom and a reform of the film industry. At that moment, narrative cinema was in decline and commercial production was increasingly struggling. Thus, it was a moment in which considerations of a need for experimentation in film form and narrative strategy were intertwined, meaning experimental and feature fiction film were not distinct categories for the reformers.



XSCREEN coverage after Kunstmarkt arrests, 1968

Two years later, building on this momentum, Haro Senft founded DOC 59, which brought together a group of young filmmakers. Inspired by the call for creative reform, they produced short and documentary films.¹⁷ In the run-up to the Oberhausen Manifesto, it is no surprise that the DOC 59 members, especially Senft, were joined by Seggelke, Vesely, Kluge and others to consider how to transform German cinema. Michael Wedel has described how these filmmakers

were central to the group that appeared at Oberhausen to denounce the failures of Papa's Kino.¹⁸ To be sure, their initial orientation was not towards experimental and abstract reformulations of the moving image. Rather, they focused their attention on narrative film, demanding fundamental changes within commercial cinema. They understood the short film as a kind of training ground for bigger projects. The effect of their efforts was to open a new space, a new moment for a young experimental German cinema.

Thus, when Oberhausen in 1962 spurred the development of the Young German Cinema, it did not entail any clear distinction of a NGC from a NGAF. A new institution soon came into being that at first served multiple artistic trajectories. In 1963, Kluge and Reitz established the *Institut für Filmgestaltung in Ulm* with the goal of the renewal of film education. Although it became a center of training from which the students protesting at *exprmntl IV* emerged, the Institute initially supported radical experimentation bridging narrative and avant-garde film. 1963 also witnessed the founding of the *Deutsche Kinemathek* (German Cinematheque), establishing what would become one of the most significant archives of the New Waves and of the global avant-garde. Oberhausen's success was evident in both institutions.

LEAVING PARALLEL PATHS: THE EMERGENCE OF NGC AND NGAF

Clearer distinctions between a new narrative German Cinema and an experimental underground German avant-garde film began to emerge a year later at a different film festival—in Knokke. The 1963 *exprmntl III* intensified international and trans-Atlantic contact. Works by New American filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith and Bruce Conner dominated the festival, but West German directors also had a strong presence. Kluge, Kristl, Reitz and Straub/Huillet screened works at *exprmntl III*. In the festival's competition, Khittl's lyrical poetic feature film *Die Parallelstrasse/Parallel Street*, with its existentialist themed narrative, won the grand prize. But even with Khittl's success—and the presence of significant members of the European New Waves like Jean-Luc Godard, Agnès Varda, Kluge and Straub/Huillet—the cineaste press took a dim view of the festival.

Important venues like *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Filmkritik* regarded the experimental underground cinema screened at Knokke with suspicion. They expressed outright disdain for the sexually liberatory images of Smith and Anger. Smith's *Flaming Creatures* precipitated a scandal. It had been removed from the competition because of its controversial drag performances and pseudo orgy scene, prompting Jonas Mekas, luminary of the NYC film, to resign from the jury in protest and screen the film without

official permission. A review in *Filmkritik* of *exprmntl III* described the experimental movement dismissively as “a liberation from any formal disciplines and a totally unreflected exhibition of highly subjective tendencies.”¹⁹ “Subjective tendencies”—a term used all too frequently in subsequent years to undermine the work of women, gays and lesbians, queer persons, people of color, and other people living in minoritized status—certainly did its job here of warning against participation in such “introverted” aesthetic directions.



XSCREEN poster for Takahiko Iimura

The anti-experimental positions of *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Filmkritik* rejected generally non-narrative, abstract work, i.e. films that follow art historical aesthetic considerations to explore the materiality of cinematic representation. Founded in 1957, *Filmkritik* was at first enamored with neo-realism and participated actively in the rediscovery of Brecht. That first year it programmatically emphasized support for film that “realistically takes up social issues and [holds] film criticism accountable for developing a socially critical position amongst the spectators, to awaken



him [sic] out of his obedient passivity and his false life.”²⁰ “Critique has to call forth Brecht’s ‘desire of our age to understand everything in such a way that we can intervene.’”²¹ Enno Patalas, the journal’s editor, had joined DOC 59 and supported the demands for a new German cinema. Following Oberhausen, *Filmkritik* supported a new German cinema that ultimately followed this political-aesthetic program. From the start, film criticism in Germany was primed to support NGC and its calls for government support while dismissing NGAF and its radical challenge to the form of film itself. It also continued a long tradition in German film criticism in which the purpose of film criticism was understood as pedagogical: to educate people away from popular film and “low” culture in general.

THE PROVOCATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS OF NGAF

Kluge, Reitz, and others from the short film movement soon took up longer narrative projects that would become classics of the German New Wave. Nonetheless, *exprmntl III* had a significant impact. The interaction with North American experimental filmmakers intensified. It is of major historical importance that at Knokke Peter Kubelka met Jonas Mekas, resulting in years of collaboration and the founding of Anthology Film Archives in New York City. Following *exprmntl III*, a show of “Low Budget Underground Film” drawn

from the festival traveled across Europe. In addition, the controversies that arose around underground film at Knokke and beyond demonstrated that experimental and non-narrative film could provoke the ire of social and political conservatives. For the enthusiasts of such film, this reaction only added to its appeal. Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* was again censored when the short film festival in Mannheim tried to screen it. The US Ambassador, wanting to stop what he felt were decadent and perverse representations of US culture, intervened directly at the 1964 Oberhausen festival. Specifically, he sought to prevent the work of Kenneth Anger from being screened.

For many, censorship by US state authorities confirmed the subversive power of formally and aesthetically innovative moving images. Thus, a new period of intensification began with the processing of the material of the image, underground representations, sexually provocative images, etc. An aesthetic orientation developed that was central not just to the NGAF but to a growing underground and independent experimental movement throughout Europe.

In West Germany, particularly important to the movement were Mommartz, Nekes, the Heins, Dore O., Ulrich Herzog, as well as Austrians like Kurt Kren, Ernst Schmidt, Peter Weibel, Valie Export and Peter Kubelka. In this period they each produced works that investigated the way films created optical illusions or visual problems. This structural material work—not to



Valie Export, Peter Weibel

be confused with Marxist materialism or the linguistic movement of structuralism—concerned itself neither with the content of film nor with the symbolism of the image. Instead, it was concerned with the formal problems and potential of film. In her programmatic essays from the period, Birgit Hein rejected a “contentist” role for the arts. In a position that paralleled Adorno’s discussion of autonomous art, she suggested that the specific terrain of the work of art “is the aesthetic and formal field. Through these means art mediates information, which cannot be assumed by other informational systems, and which cannot even be available outside of the distinct aesthetic language.”²² The point was to focus on the image as such and not to treat film as a vehicle of exogenous meaning, even in symbolic form. Their aesthetic concerns focused on image-effects and the technology that produced them. Some moving image artists went so far as to describe their work as painting with light—a far cry from using filmic images for overt social commentary, rooted in narrative

forms. They investigated the processing of film. They posed challenges in general to the perceptual apparatus. In this way, they sought to give the spectators both an experience of their blind spots but also an ability to operate better within the visual field. In sum, they made visible what is normally invisible in narrative cinema.

The NGAF rapidly expanded so that in 1967 at the above-mentioned fourth Knokke film festival European contributions were no longer overshadowed by the work of the New American Cinema. On the contrary, the Americans arrived eager to learn both about and from the impulses developing in Europe. The Heins, Nekes, Mommartz, among others, formed a strong contingent from the German-speaking world along with representatives from Switzerland like the AKS Gruppe of super 8 artists, and Austrian Actionists like Ernst Schmidt. It was in this context of success that the students of the Institute and the newly formed dffb staged their protest. From our current perspective in which narrative work predominates, it is important to underscore that the politicized film students posed their demands to a movement they saw as ascendant and not as marginal.

Not daunted by the protest at *exprmntl IV*, members of the NGAF continued to hold screenings and events throughout Europe. These flourished, especially amidst the revolutionary activity of the period. XSCREEN became a central stopping point for international

experimental filmmakers. While the Heins took an anti-ideological stance to filmmaking that exposed them to accusations of apolitical formalism, their distance from narrative film nevertheless created a radical alternative to conventional cinema as place and practice.



Action Lecture by Peter Weibel



European-wide networks and forms of cooperation facilitated the travel of filmmakers and long-term residencies in diverse settings. A series of publications devoted to independent and underground experimental cinema appeared and new institutions emerged like the Hamburg Filmmakers' Cooperative, the Austria Filmmakers' Cooperative and the New Arts Lab in London. In 1968 two important venues emerged in West Germany for the presentation of avant-garde work: XSCREEN in Cologne and the independent film center in Munich. The third, *Hamburger Filmschau*, devoted itself fully to experimental works, reaching a cooperation agreement with Oberhausen. That relationship

ultimately opened the doors at Oberhausen for the first time to non-narrative work and pushed through a democratization of the festival's selection process. Experimental work was soon screened in Cannes and Venice and appeared on the program of *La Cinémathèque* in Paris. And in 1969 Kubelka went to New York City.

In 1970 the major representatives of the movement met again at the International Underground Film Festival in London for what would be the last time on this scale. Although it was a lively and dynamic environment, the structural material movement was reaching certain limits. The sharp lines against commercialism began to blur. In large part, the movement was undermined by its own successes. In its beginning phase, works had been created without financial and institutional support, in part as a rejection of the monetary concerns of entertainment and culture industries. By 1968, what had been an overwhelmingly underground and independent movement had developed institutions that established the preconditions for its works to enter the art market; in this way, boundaries with the commercial world began to erode.

In addition the rejection of narrative and the singular focus on cinematic materiality was becoming a restrictive aesthetic. Over the course of the decade many directors turned to new forms, including aspects of narrative and of representation. The Heins, for instance, began to engage in expanded cinema style performances. Moreover, the very institutions created

by the NGAF—its archives and screening venues, its cooperatives like Anthology—started to create a canon of avant-garde work, excluding the new directions of established filmmakers and ignoring new and emerging artists. Finally we can observe that the political conditions of the 1970s changed after the revolutionary attempts of 1968 developed into splintered radicalism and general political malaise.

There is a great deal more work that could and should be done to elaborate on the history outlined here. It could be brought further forward and we could explore how the trajectory of NGAF traced here could be connected to the new social movements of the 70s, the Punk underground super 8 movement of the 80s, the digital new media work of the 90s, etc. However I will draw this essay to a conclusion by suggesting some ways in which this history of an NGAF impacts the way we tell the story of German film, but also the way that we generally approach the aesthetic-political debates that emerged out of the 1960s and which still inflect our approaches to this day.

NOTES

- 1 EXPRMNTL - *International Experimental Film Competition*, Festival Programme (Knokke, 1967).
- 2 For the classic discussion of the Neo-Avant-garde see Bürger, *Theorie Der Avantgarde*; Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.
- 3 Schubert and Maus, *Rückblicke: die Abteilung Film - Institut für Filmgestaltung an der HFG Ulm 1960-1968*; Arnold, *Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin (dff)*.
- 4 Bardon, "EXPRMNTL," 53-64; Baumgärtel, "Holger dachte Ästhetik und Politik zusammen," *Jungle World*.
- 5 Bardon, "EXPRMNTL," 63; Caen, "Knokke...," 101-102.
- 6 Stahl, "Kulturkampf' in Köln," 177-200.
- 7 Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," 92-104.
- 8 Wollen, "The Two Avant-Gardes," 97.
- 9 Jutz, "Interview with Birgit Hein," 121.
- 10 Alexander Kluge *Abschied von gestern/Yesterday Girl*, Silver Lion, Venice (1966); Volker Schlöndorff, *Der Junge Törless/Young Torless*, "Fipresci"-Preis Cannes (1966); Edgar Reitz, *Mahlzeiten/Lust for Life*, Prize for Best First Work Venice (1967); Peter Schamoni, *Schonzeit für Füchse/No Shooting Time for Foxes*, Silver Bear Berlinale (1966); and Ulrich Schamoni *Es/It*, five German Federal Film Prizes (1966).
- 11 O'Pray, *Avant-Garde Film*; Jacobsen, Kaes and Prinzler, eds, *Geschichte des Deutschen Films*; Corrigan, *New German Film*; Pflaum and Prinzler, *Film in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*; Franklin, *New German Cinema*.
- 12 Elsaesser, "The Author and the Avant-garde." *New German Cinema*, 77-86.
- 13 Consider his work on *Triumph of the Will* (1935) but more directly his own short works starting with *Blut und Boden* (1933), and especially *Metall des Himmels* (1935) or *Mannesmann* (1936).
- 14 Hein, *Film im Underground*.
- 15 Jahn, "Monument Film," *Electric Sheep*; Emons, *Film - Musik - Modern*; Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*.
- 16 Ast, *Vogelfrei im Zauberbaum*; Wedel, *Filmgeschichte als Krisengeschichte*.
- 17 Wedel, *Filmgeschichte als Krisengeschichte*.
- 18 Wedel, *Filmgeschichte als Krisengeschichte*, 363-8; Lewandowski, *Die Oberhausener*.
- 19 "Befreiung von jeglichen formalen Disziplinen und totale unreflektierte Exhibition höchst subjektiver Neigungen." Heidenreich, Knippel, and Krautkrämer, eds., *Film Als Idee*, 30.
- 20 "Aus seiner ergebenen Passivität und seinem 'falschen Leben.'" *Filmkritik*; Nechleba, "50 Jahre 'Filmkritik,'" 25.
- 21 "Gerade die Kritik müßte Brechts 'Lust unseres Zeitalters' hervorrufen, 'alles so zu begreifen, daß wir eingreifen können.'" *Filmkritik*; Nechleba, "50 Jahre 'Filmkritik,'" 25.
- 22 "[I]st der ästhetische und formale Bereich. Durch diesen vermittelt die Kunst Informationen, die von keinem an deren Informationssystem übernommen werden können, und die sogar außerhalb ihrer eigenen Sprache nicht vorhanden sein können." Hein, "Avantgarde und Politik," 4; Hein, "Avantgarde and Politics," *Millenium Film Journal*.









W + B Hein's *Material Films*

MARC SIEGEL

This is an excerpt from Marc Siegel's essay accompanying the 2012 DVD release of "W+B Hein Materialfilme," featuring seven films by the Heins.

In the mid-to-late 1960s, a number of filmmakers, including Malcolm Le Grice in England, George Landow (Owen Land) in the United States and W + B Hein in Germany, made works that drew attention to the mediating presence and function of the film material (for example, the film strip, the emulsion, the frame, the sprocket holes, etc.). By confronting spectators with the

physical presence of film and the constituents of cinematic projection, instead of signification, narrative and the illusion of cinematic representation, these material filmmakers, as they were sometimes called, strove to make audiences aware of the artistic, technical, and/or ideological processes involved in both filmmaking and film viewing. British filmmaker and theorist Peter Gidal



described these radically anti-illusionist films as a political wake-up call to spectators previously accustomed to the narrative lures of commercial cinema.¹ He referred to the films not as “material,” but as “structural/materialist” so as to make explicit the political implications of such aesthetic innovations.

For their part, the Heins tended to distinguish between the formal innovations of avant-garde material films and the political relevance of a broader underground

film culture in which such films and filmmakers circulated. In her contribution to a panel discussion on the avant-garde at the 1976 Edinburgh Film Festival, Birgit Hein argued that “a formal non-representational art meets vehement rejection from both the right and left.”² Therefore, she refused to accept claims for a direct relationship between radical innovation in art and progressive political change. In a recent interview, Hein takes up this issue once again and straightforwardly rejects Gidal’s influential formulation, claiming that

“material film has nothing to do with materialism... Materialism is a Marxist theory and material film (is) not Marxist. Not directly.”³ Whether or not one agrees with Hein or Gidal about the materialism of material films, I would venture that from today’s perspective it is difficult not to situate the Heins’ assault on cinematic meaning in their 1968 film *Rohfilm* against the backdrop of the era’s political radicalism.⁴ Nevertheless, the Heins’ material films—a label that usefully describes a significant strand in their production of formal films between 1967-1977—seemed almost to emerge as a by-product of the filmmakers’ diligent, though at times refreshingly naïve and often anarchic, investigation of the elementary aspects of the reproductive process of filmmaking itself.

In 1968, after having produced a number of films that paid obvious debt to the formal strategies of the New American Cinema, the Heins came into their own with the anarchic, aesthetic bomb of sound and image that is *Rohfilm*. In her thorough description of the making of the film, Birgit Hein makes evident both their brash irreverence and their meticulous attention to a variety of processes of reproduction. She writes: “Dirt, hair, ashes, tobacco, fragments of cinematic images, sprocket holes and perforated tape are glued onto clear film. This is then projected and re-photographed from the screen, since the thick, glued strips technically allow only one projection. During this process, the original gets stuck now and then in the projector gate, so the same image appears again and again, or film frames

Remedial Reading Comprehension by Owen Land, 1970





melt under the excessive heat of the projector which is running at a very slow speed. The ensuing film is put through all kinds of reproductive processes, projected as video, displayed on an editing table and a viewing machine, and is filmed again in order to capture the specific changes engendered solely by the processes of reproduction. Other pieces from various positive and negative strips and from 8mm and 16mm strips with their different frame sizes are also glued together and re-filmed. 8mm film is run without a shutter through the viewing machine and re-photographed so that the frame borders and perforations—in other words the film strip as material—become visible.”⁵

In its conception and impact, *Rohfilm* is obviously far from the romanticism and lyricism of a film like Stan Brakhage’s *Mothlight* (1963) which was also made by affixing objects (moth wings, grass and flowers) onto clear film, or from the self-referential irony of a material film like Land’s *Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc.* (1965-66). Instead, as Hein writes, the film conveys an overriding impression of “monstrous destruction.”⁶

Fragments of images—a male figure in negative, Wilhelm Hein’s face in positive and a long shot of the Cologne Cathedral, among others—float aimlessly across or flicker on the screen. Sprocket holes, frame edges, lettering, scratches and abstract blotches and shapes flash rapidly before our eyes. At various points in the approximately twenty minute film, seemingly real-time sequences of only a few seconds of Wilhelm working at a desk, or of the Heins’ naked bodies embracing on a bed, offer rare moments of calm. But the onslaught of moving and pulsating film material seems to bury such moments in its path. In fact, coupled with the same sense of destruction is a strong impression of wayward movement. The film seems to push and pull spectators in different directions at once. Two halves from parts of different filmstrips meet in the middle of the frame forming a black vertical line that generates a split-screen effect. The black horizontal bar on a television monitor severs this verticality yet stands in contrast to another rush of abstract forms visible behind it. Images and sequences are repeated, but there doesn’t appear to be any recognizable structure that organizes the chaotic visual aspects of the film. Instead, Christian Michelis’s rhythmic and aggressive soundtrack, which includes a mix of manipulated sound effects, noises, songs and machinic pitter-patters—all of which sound as if they too, like the images, were subjected to various processes of technical reproduction—plays a crucial organizational role.

Sound was indeed one of the Heins’ foremost concerns. Through their commitment both to a division of labour—the Heins worked on the images and Michelis concentrated on sound—and to non-representational, formal film, they hoped to achieve a radical, non-harmonious and asynchronous relationship between sound and image. Michelis explained his approach to the soundtracks as follows:

“Sound underlines or overrides certain formal, associative or atmospheric aspects of the films and provides a kind of interpretation. Analogies to the formal or technical problems of the films are sought in the acoustic realm. However, this is not about a direct correspondence, but about similarities in the organization of materials. What is more important than analogies in theoretical concepts, however, is the interaction of what is directly perceivable to the senses, of the effects of film and sound.”⁷

Additionally the Heins and Michelis wanted to challenge audiences by not allowing them the comfort of the welcome recognition of familiar songs or compositions on the soundtrack, a “naïve” tactic they identified with some films from the New American Cinema.⁸ On a number of Michelis’s soundtracks for the Heins (*Rohfilm* and *Reproductions*, 1968, for example), one does, however briefly, hear manipulated excerpts of songs and other pieces of music that provide fleeting moments of recognition and shifts in emotional registers. These acoustic aspects of the film solicit, thereby,

similar sense perceptions to those occasioned by the momentarily identifiable images on the screen.

Rohfilm premiered in Munich in November 1968 at the First European Meeting of Independent Filmmakers and quickly became a sensation. Screenings in New York, London, Tokyo, and Cannes (the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs) rapidly followed. The film was often greeted with extremely visceral reactions from audiences, motivated in no small part by Michelis's uncompromising soundtrack. As Birgit Hein notes in a letter to

Italian filmmaker Alfredo Leonardi, the audience in Cannes was "very lively. When we showed *Rohfilm* with full sound, they screamed and clapped for the last ten minutes to make us stop. It was real terror."⁹ According to newspaper reports of the film's screening in competition at the 5th International Film Festival in Mannheim, audiences reacted with a "concert of whistles, boos, and screams." For one reporter, this was "an appropriate response to the (film's) massage of noise."¹⁰ Among critics, fellow filmmakers and other avant-garde aficionados, however, the film was rightly recognized as a radical milestone of material filmmaking. Distinguishing three of the Heins's early films, *Grün* (1968), *Rohfilm* and *Reproductions*, from related formal and structural works of the New American Cinema, the British film critic David Curtis wrote: "their affirmation (particularly in *Rohfilm*) of the film's substance and its physical presence in the projector is overwhelming, more powerful than any American film I have seen."¹¹ German filmmaker Klaus Wyborny, who saw the film at Aldo Tambellini's Gate Theater in New York in November 1968, was extremely enthusiastic. In a letter to the Heins, he referred to the film as "a true masterpiece, as 'kaputt' as anything that lay deep in the ground, submitted to all types of atmospheric factors, which suddenly comes to the surface, completely ruined, but of a radiant beauty. What a drive! Onward! Onward! Like a high-speed train racing across the States. Wow."¹²

In retrospect *Rohfilm* can be viewed as a masterful condensation and compilation of a plethora of aesthetic



Rohfilm by W + B Hein

Materialfilme by W + B Hein



strategies that the Heins pursued individually in a number of the films that followed. *Reproductions*, for instance, completed with relative speed after the lengthy process of making *Rohfilm*, explores the aesthetic and perceptual effects of the reproduction of just a single type of image: strips of black and white slide positives from the Heins' vacations in North Africa, Italy, and Greece in the early 1960s. To make the film, the Heins cut these numerous small images into little strips which they manipulated by hand on a moviola viewing machine. While one of them maneuvered the strips (inserted them into the machine and moved them in different directions), the other filmed the projected image as it appeared on the machine's small screen. They describe the effect this process as follows:

“While filming the many different little strips (hundreds of them) a rhythm is gradually established: quick and slow changes, pauses, a stronger movement of the pieces and a slow insertion, their sudden appearance. As a result of the course enlargement and the chance movement, these repeatedly reproduced photos are only recognizable as a progression of dim images, whose flow is arbitrarily interrupted by pauses of light and darkness.”¹³

Michelis's improvised soundtrack of radio static, audio feedback, outdoor location sounds, human breathing and excerpts of songs—all of which were run through his mixing board and recorded in one take—echoes the arbitrary construction of the visuals. Aesthetic

innovation through chance procedures marked almost all of the Heins' work and distinguishes it from some of their most perfectionist colleagues in the field of structural and material film. Unlike their close friend and formal film ally, Kurt Kren, or like Peter Kubelka, for instance, the Heins never shot or edited a film according to a preconceived score. They approached each film as a means of focusing on a specific theoretical or formal problem. But, influenced by Fluxus and the Dadaists, they allowed the vagaries of chance in the (re)production process to shape the final aesthetic of the work.¹⁴

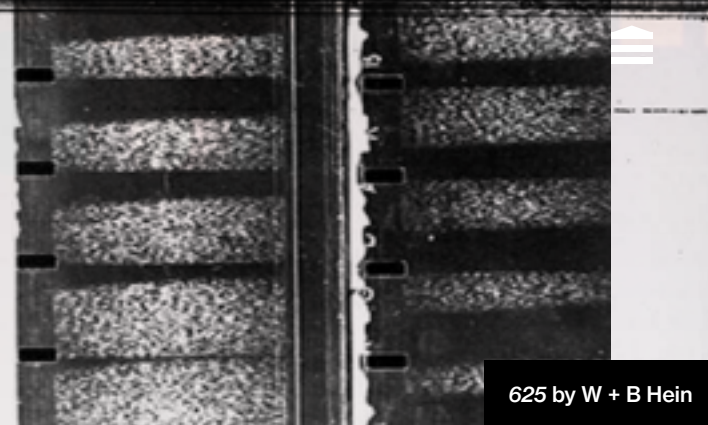
In contrast to *Rohfilm*, and despite the impressions of forward movement generated by Michelis's repetitive yet ever evolving soundtrack, *Reproductions* comes across as a relatively quiet, contemplative film. The consistency in the quality and type of images, the random coming into focus and slow dissipation of a face, a detail of clothing or a landscape, and the scanning movement of the camera across the images, lend the film the quality of a journey through a specific personal archive of memories and experiences. The frequent interruptions of blinding light or obfuscating darkness, as well as the filmmakers' steadfast refusal over the course of the film's 26 minutes to relish any vacation slide for a significant length of time, disturb the sentimentality that sometimes characterizes such personal films. David Curtis noted astutely that “the choice of the title *Reproductions* for one of their earlier films was an apt

one, for the Heins' films attempt to reveal just what happens in the process of reproduction—the moving of one image from another. The structure of their films, and the commonplace look of the images, frees them from association and abstraction which would tend to obscure this process of observation.”¹⁵

Many of the Heins' structural and material films are distinguished by the use of “personal imagery in a formal context,” as Birgit Hein puts it.¹⁶ The film *625* (1969), however, marked a departure from this

tendency and signaled an expansion of their interests to include pure—or, more appropriate to their working method, impure—abstraction. The title refers to the number of scan lines per frame on a PAL television. In a letter to Kurt Kren in the fall of 1969, Wilhelm Hein explains: “We shot a really beautiful long film (34 minutes) that admittedly exhausts the audience completely with its ‘longwindedness.’ The whole time you see the roll bar (white) on a television that constantly changes in width, speed, etc. It was shot according to a particular system with 8-32 frames/second. Since we developed all the material ourselves, the film has a wonderful graininess, a very lively surface... The whole is in negative. That’s why the roll bar is white. (All hell broke loose in Munich at Karhlheinz’s Undependent Film Center when the thing went on the screen.)”¹⁷

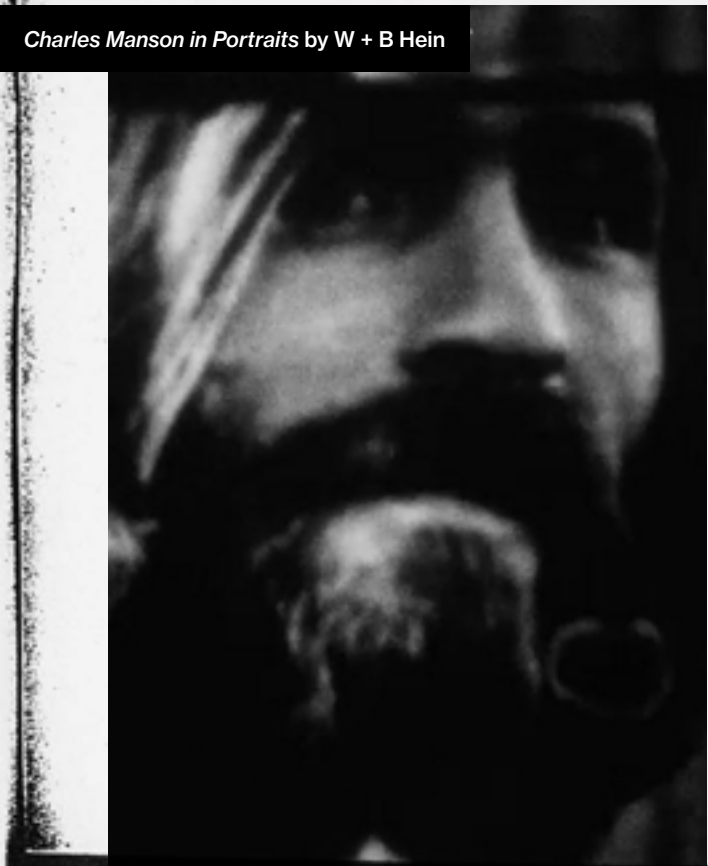
Shooting the television image with a Bolex 16mm camera produced a visible, thick black roll bar as a result of the difference in frames per second between analog video and film. With *625* the Heins simply thematize this product of the cinematic reproduction process by altering the speed with which they record an image of television static or snow. They thereby subject the roll bar to the vagaries of an imposed rhythm, the rhythm of their film camera’s shooting speed. As Hein’s comments to Kren indicate, the film material itself “has a wonderful graininess, a very lively surface,” one marked by the scratches and arbitrary alterations incurred as a result of the Heins’ homemade method of developing the film strips in a bucket in their Cologne bathroom.



625 by W + B Hein

By contrasting television static and the roll bar with film grain, *625*, we could say, subjects the materiality of video to the materiality of film.

This seemingly academic exercise, which apparently exhausted audiences completely at its Munich premiere, results in an at times mesmerizing experience. After a few minutes, as one adjusts to the black and white image of static, the varied movement of the white (and occasionally black) roll bar becomes noticeable. This horizontal variation is countered by the constant movement of hundreds of tiny black and white squiggles in the television static which are themselves in tension with the moving grain of the 16mm film stock. These complex dynamics of movement within the frame generate a quivering film image, one that appears at times to sway from right to left, to sink below the screen or to withdraw into itself. Michelis created the soundtrack of chugging noises by attaching a light-sensitive microphone to the screen’s surface during the film’s projection. As a result, quivering sounds occasionally synch up rhythmically with the visible movement of the roll bar. Hence, the film’s



Charles Manson in Portraits by W + B Hein

soundtrack, like the visuals, returns spectators now and again to the surface of the image.

The series of portrait films that the Heins made between 1970-73 attest to their deepening interest in the movement generated solely through cinematic processes of reproduction. Over this three year period, they worked intermittently on five individual short portrait films based on images of serial killer Charles Manson, British criminal Ronald Biggs, German artist Kurt

Schwitters, their daughter Nina and Wilhelm Hein. The portrait of Wilhelm is the only one in the series based on a real-time recording; all others were taken from still photos from newspaper articles (Manson, Biggs) and historical and family photos (Schwitters, Nina Hein). *Porträts* (1970) is a collection of three of these films—Manson, Biggs and Wilhelm Hein—that each underwent distinct processes of development so as to highlight different perceptual and aesthetic effects.¹⁸ The static images of Manson and Biggs were filmed with a single-frame technique. Through a slight repositioning of the photos between the shots, as well as through the discrepancy in alignment of the strips of negatives during the process of hand development, the likenesses of Manson and Biggs both appear to tremble within the frame. In the case of the Manson portrait, the close-up photo of his face with its penetrating gaze into the camera seems to move independently of the visible filmstrip on which it is ostensibly printed. White and black flashes obscure Manson's frequently out-of-focus image, as does the wandering of the filmstrip across the screen. Manipulated sounds of laughing hyenas are heard irregularly throughout the film and serve to underscore the disconcerting feeling provoked by Manson's literally unsettling image.

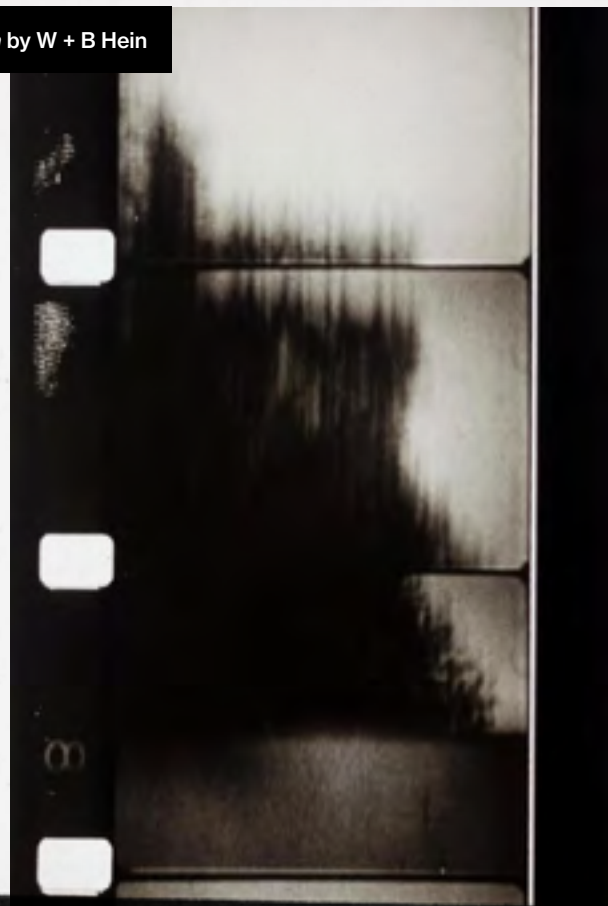
Biggs's portrait film, in comparison, is more static. The image of the criminal in a bathing suit lounging outdoors on a chair tends not to wander frequently across the frame. Instead, it appears doubled, inexact-ly superimposed over itself. The image seems thereby

to separate into different sides—presumably caused by the inexact alignment of the two negatives that were used in the developing process—that refuse to come together as a whole.

Formally, the final portrait of Hein marks a radical break from the other two. As the Heins note, it introduces pro-filmic movement as a means of contrast to the varieties of movement imposed on an image solely through the techniques of hand development and hand copying.¹⁹ An extreme close up of Hein's face as he laughs and grimaces appears as a disturbing grey-silver image, the result of the unusual method of developing and copying the three negative and positive filmstrips. The coloration and contrast lend the image the look of a relief, as if Hein's face were burned into and is emerging from the film material itself. The Hein portrait, the sole silent film of the three, functions like a three-dimensional horror film, a portrait of the artist as laughing, unrepentant criminal. Indeed, when asked why they grouped Manson, Biggs and Hein together, Birgit Hein replied half-jokingly, "we were all criminals."²⁰

The criminality of an underground artist, as the Heins knew perfectly well, is of course no comparison to that of an infamous mass-murderer or mail train robber. Nevertheless, the Heins had an acute awareness of the fact that their filmmaking and programming interests situated them solidly outside the confines of polite, bourgeois society (and in opposition to legal restrictions on exhibiting obscenity). Although working

Rohfilm by W + B Hein



artistically in a formal mode, they certainly considered as explicitly political their non-commercial approach to film practice and exhibition, as well as their insistence on forging spaces and institutions that supported varieties of non-commercial cinema, including, say, the provocative films of Otto Muehl.²¹ One might argue, however, that the Heins filmmaking practice did, if only in one respect, verge on the criminal, namely in their predilection for found footage. From *Rohfilm* to their final collaboration on the feature length *Kali-Filme*, the Heins regularly “stole” images and in some cases actual film materials from the work of other artists and commercial filmmakers. In their series of single and multi-screen 16mm and 35mm *Materialfilme* (1976-77) they intentionally thematized found footage as the material of their films. With the *Materialfilme* they were no longer interested in subjecting photographs, home movies or other films to the arbitrary alterations incurred through re-photography, copying and developing—all the processes of cinematic reproduction that contributed to the foregrounding of film as material in much of their previous work. Instead, they chose to explore the already given materiality of the found object.

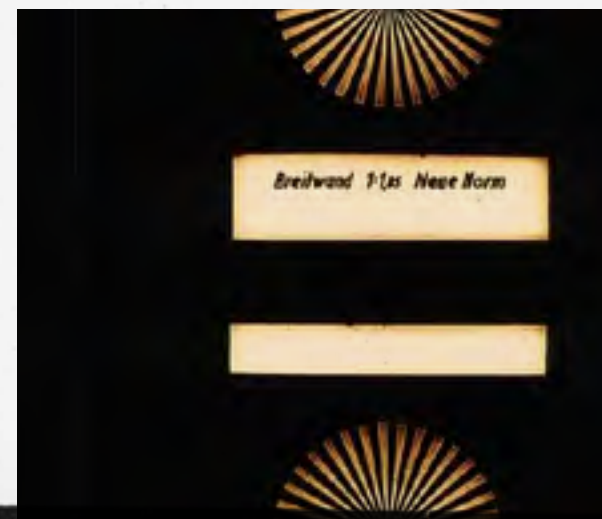
For their 35mm *Materialfilme* (1976), the Heins randomly spliced together a mix of colour and black-and-white material taken from the header and footer of commercial films. The scratches, scribbles, hand-written and commercially printed numbers and dots that adorn such footage rush past the eye until they are replaced

by images consisting only of washed-out colours or scratched black-and-white frames. The Heins acquired this material during their years as programmers and projectionists for various avant-garde and commercial film screenings. In the 1960 and 70s, colours were often painted onto the header and footer of commercial films, to aid the projectionist in ordering the different reels. Over the years, this watercolour paint has faded and cracked, and various blotches, scratches and other irregularities have scarred the surface of the filmstrips. In projection, these marks on the material enter into arbitrary rhythmic relationships with the movement of colour and the interrupting flashes of white light. *Materialfilme* thus offers a lush, visual symphony of the textures, the visible liquidity (emphasized by the watercolours), and the colours that mark the usually overlooked or unseen beginnings and endings of films. While *Materialfilme* marks the conclusion of the Heins’ immensely productive ten-year period of material filmmaking, this digital reproduction of these five important and underknown films represents a new beginning. The availability of these films on DVD ensures, of course, that knowledge about the Heins’ significant artistic achievements will more easily reach a broader audience. Moreover, this digital reproduction puts the films literally in people’s hands to screen in a variety of contexts and to score with different soundtracks. In this spirit, the DVD offers a variety of soundtracks, including the original one, composed specifically as accompaniment to *Materialfilme* (1976). In conclusion, it’s worth emphasizing once again the Heins’ steadfast

Materialfilme by W + B Hein



interest—throughout and after their period of collaboration—in the aesthetic and perceptual effects enacted upon an original through the processes of reproduction, whether analog or digital. Concurrently with their cinematic installation, *Film Space*, at the Museum of Lucerne in May 1970, Christian Michelis, for instance, conducted an action that anticipates one of the possibilities of contemporary digital technology exploited on this DVD. I would like to bring this text to a close by quoting from Michelis’s description of *Action Film and Sound*:



“The different effects of film made possible by the selective combination with various soundtracks. In the action room several audio tapes with different sound tracks play simultaneously during the projection of a film. By operating a mixing board, the audience can select single tracks and contrast them with the film for any length of time.”²²

NOTES

1. See Gidal, “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film,” Gidal, ed. *Structural Film Anthology* (London: BFI, 1976), 1-21; and Gidal, *Materialist Film* (London: Routledge, 1989).
2. Birgit Hein, “The Avantgarde and Politics,” *Millennium Film Journal* 1.2 (Spring-Summer 1978), 23.
3. Duncan White, “Interview of Birgit Hein,” February 2009, March 26, 2011, 16 www.rewind.ac.uk/expanded/Narrative/Interviews.html
4. Indeed, as Birgit Hein notes: “In a retrospective in ’88, twenty years after ’68, some of our strongest opponents said that *Rohfilm* had been the only political film of that time.” White, “Interview of Birgit Hein,” 15.
5. Hein, *Film im Underground*, 149. I borrow (and slightly alter) the translation from Christine Noll Brinckmann’s important survey article on the German avant-garde, “Collective Moments and Solitary Thrusts: German Experimental Film, 1920-1990,” *Millennium Film Journal* 30/32 (Fall 1997): 103-4.
6. Hein, *Film im Underground*, 149.
7. Hein, *XSCREEN*, 80.
8. In Wilhelm Hein’s letters to Michelis, he warns of the hazards of continuous recognizable music distracting audiences from the radical innovations of the visuals. See Habich, W+B Hein, 4 & 6.
9. Habich, W+B Hein, 33.
10. Habich, W+B Hein, 38.
11. David Curtis, *Experimental Cinema: A Fifty Year Evolution* (New York: Universe Books, 191), 158.
12. Habich, W+B Hein, 27. Modified translation from Brinckmann, “Collective Movements,” 103.
13. Birgit Hein and Wulf Herzogenrath, ed., *Film als Film. 1910 bis Heute* (Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1977), 206.
14. Wilhelm Hein claims Dadaists Raoul Hausmann and Richard Huelsenbeck as particularly important influences. Interview with the author, March 27, 2011.
15. Curtis, *Experimental Cinema*, 160.
16. Mike Hoolboom, “We Are All Monsters: An interview with Birgit Hein,” *The Independent Eye* 11.2/3 (1990): 11.
17. Habich, W+B Hein, *Dokumente* 34.
18. For a more detailed description of the films’ production process, see Wilhelm and Birgit Hein, “*Drei Porträts* (Ronald Biggs, Charles Manson, Wilhelm Hein),” in Gottfried Schlemmer, ed. *Avantgardistischer Film 1951-1971: Theorie* (München: Hanser Verlag, 1973), 106-08.
19. Hein, “*Drei Porträts*,” 107.
20. Interview with the author, October 5, 2010.
21. They also had first-hand experience with state censorship, police harassment and legal cases. See for example their description of police actions against *SCREEN* in Habich, W+B Hein, 18-22. For a direct statement linking the Heins’ conception of underground cinema to a politically charged counterculture, see “*Underground Film: Gegen Kommerz und Kulturbetrieb*,” *XSCREEN*, 5-7. *XSCREEN* did, in fact, screen select commercial films, predominantly hardcore heterosexual or homosexual pornography. 22. Hein, *XSCREEN*, 80.

Network:

Babeth Mondini-VanLoo on Jack Smith

BABETH MONDINI-VANLOO

Originally published in: FIUWAC News, January 2008
http://www.fiuwac.com/html/fiuwac_news_-_www_fiuwac_com_.html

In 1974 I lived in New York. A young German artist/entrepreneur named Lutze introduced me to Jack Smith and we became friends. Jack introduced me to Piero Heliczer.

Jack Smith was well known for his live performances (with film, theatre and slides) that were mostly held at his studio in the Lower East Side. He was, just like the Kuchar Brothers, an inspiration for Andy Warhol and the Factory. Jack said I reminded him of the Hollywood actress Claudette Colbert as Cleopatra and because he felt I had the face of a movie star he invited me to participate in a live performance to be held as part of Art Cologne '74 where I was to perform with him. Jack



Mario Montez in *Flaming Creatures* by Jack Smith

was also in the piece himself with me. He was dressed like a kind of Pharaoh. It was a moving slide performance also performed live at the Botanical Gardens in Cologne. The title of the performance was "Moses."

Art Cologne must have been some months after Beuys did his live coyote performance at the Rene Block Gallery in New York. In Germany we visited my artist friends in Düsseldorf. I remember inviting Jack to Sigmar Polke's country house in Willich where Jack wanted to cook a strange course for us with nettles and something else we didn't feel like eating. Katharina Sieverding (Raum 20/Beuys Klasse) was also there. It was a memorable evening beyond the ordinary. Being with Jack was great fun but he also was "a piece of work," if you know that expression; unpredictable, high and low.

At the time I had an old, vibrant green Mercedes 190 with an open roof. During trips Jack stood up in the car, sticking his head through the open roof with his Texas hat on and waving his Pharaoh staff. In all the villages we passed, people gazed at us in amazement, and later on also in Amsterdam where Jack stayed with

me for a couple of weeks. We left quite an impression. When he left back on the plane to New York, he was thrilled to take a huge amount of my strange collection of antiquities and real stuffed animals, which he later used in his live performance pieces.

Our mutual performance was documented in about 10 to 12 photographs taken by Prof. Wilhelm Hein that are now in the collection of the Film Archives in New York because I gave them to Jonas Mekas (gifted filmmaker and collector of Smith/Warhol/avant garde cinema). They were shown as part of the travelling exhibition that took place in the US on the work of Jack in the 90s. Some of them are depicted in the book *Flaming Creature, Jack Smith, His Amazing Times and Life*, 1997.



Birgit Hein, Babeth Mondini-VanLoo, Jack Smith, Cologne 1974

On Structural Studies

(excerpt)

BIRGIT HEIN

Originally appeared in: *Structural Film Anthology* ed.
Peter Gidal, BFI, 1978

If an artist needs to write explanations about his work, there is something wrong with the work. This opinion is widely spread and it is possibly true to a certain extent in the area of the fine arts, where a long tradition of professional criticism exists. In the area of the experimental—or avant-garde—film the situation is different, as there exists no comparable tradition. Here the artists themselves have to work out categories to judge their work. Therefore it is necessary to write about the films to help in their understanding.

Since the beginning, our work in film was concentrated on the medium. *Rohfilm* was the first film where this concern was obviously expressed, via an emotional explosion against the film-system and its narrow limits of expression. It was also an effort to overcome the influence of the aesthetic of the New American Cinema and of Brakhage, whose work was the main influence in the beginning.

Most important for further development were the Fluxus films as a collection of very short films, each concentrated only on one subject and each a statement about film. The simplicity of the films, the renunciation of any



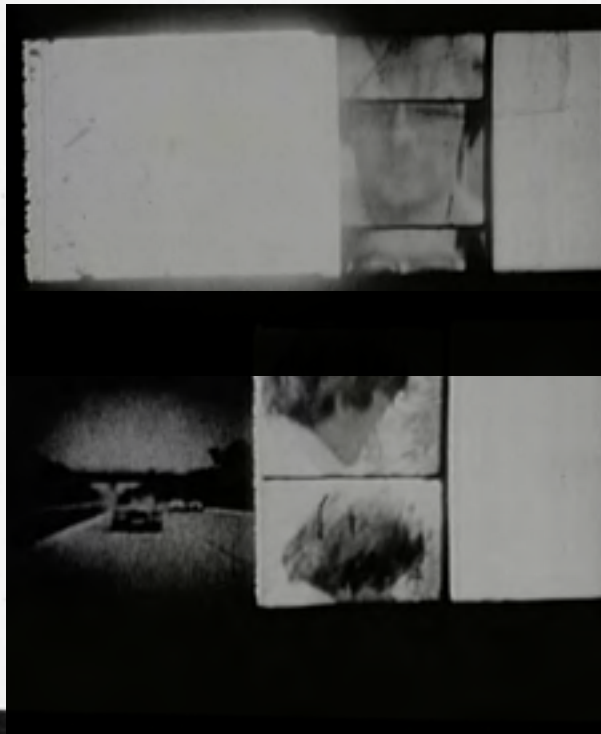
Rohfilm by W + B Hein

creative transformation of the material, was an essential step towards a new aesthetic. Of course credit also goes to Warhol. But at that time his films existed only in literature; there was no possibility of seeing them.

The first step to a more controlled work in this sense was *Work in Progress Teil A* (1969) which was composed of six single films of 3 to 10 minutes length. Each film was made separately, dealing with one special problem: 1. Commercial film, 2. Printing process, 3. Illusion of perception, 4. Reality, 5. Time, 6. Illusion of movement. The films were put together not as a continuous statement but as reactions to each other. Then the *Portraits*

were started (1970), also not as a planned series; it grew parallel to the other work. It continued the theme of film technique as a basis for film aesthetics.

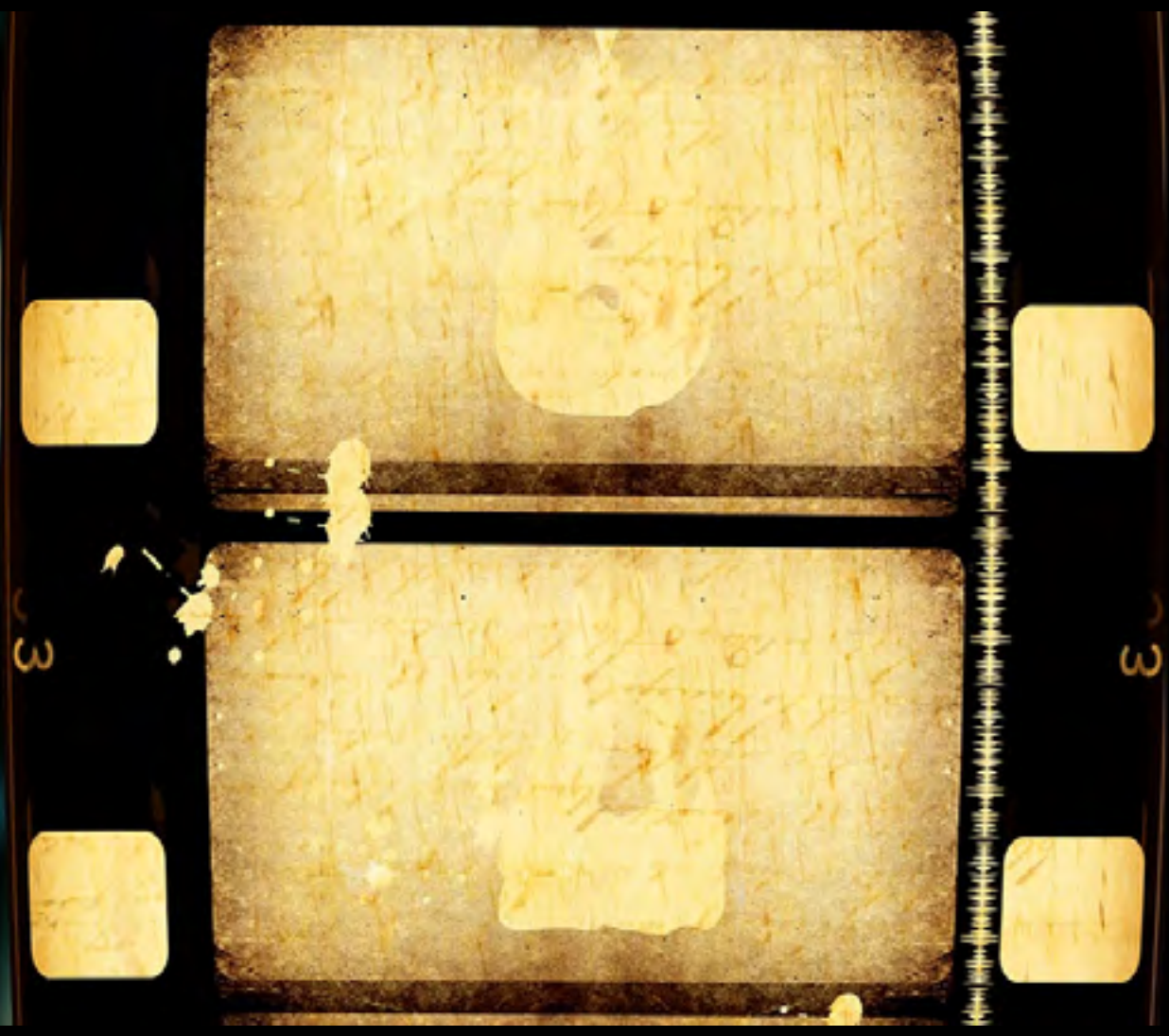
Another approach to this problem was *Work in Progress Teil C* (1971), which is constructed only with pieces of found films: Hollywood, contemporary and historical documentary, home movies, TV news. It shows the different appearances of film, and acts as a counterpart to our own shooting. The first series of two-screen films, *Teil C*, is concentrated on the interaction between two parallel images, on movement by changes of light inside the images and from one image to another. A new series of two-screen films, which is in production,



deals with angles. Here two images explain each other through their difference.

To a certain extent, *Structural Studies* is a condensation of the work done so far. It includes the experience of the earlier work, and demonstrates this by combining old and new films in a new statement about structure. Technical and perceptual laws are the basis for each film, these are singled out and visualized. The theme of the overall film is the analysis of the phenomena of the perception of movement. The short single films each deal with one problem.

What is new in the film is the confrontation of abstract demonstration material and real image material, both shot using the same technique. Here the possibilities and the limits of technique are shown, and the importance of the image material becomes obvious. Getting control over the expression of the image is of major interest in all the work to come. Like all the earlier films mentioned here, *Structural Studies* is an open construction. It can be continued or changed without any danger of losing its essence.



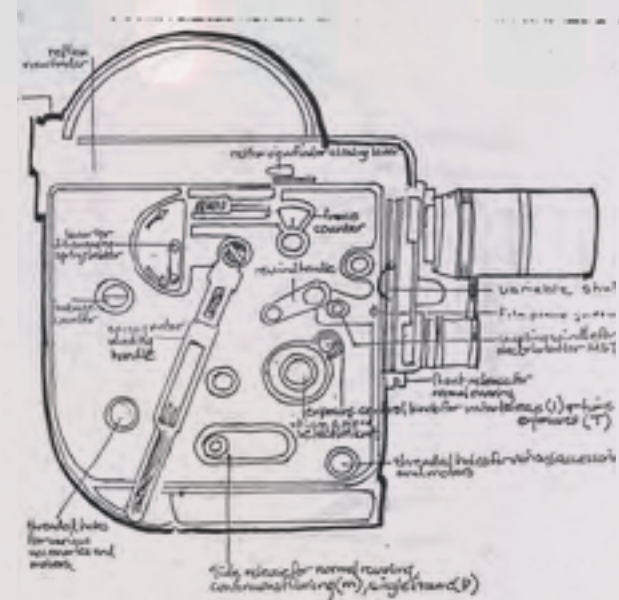
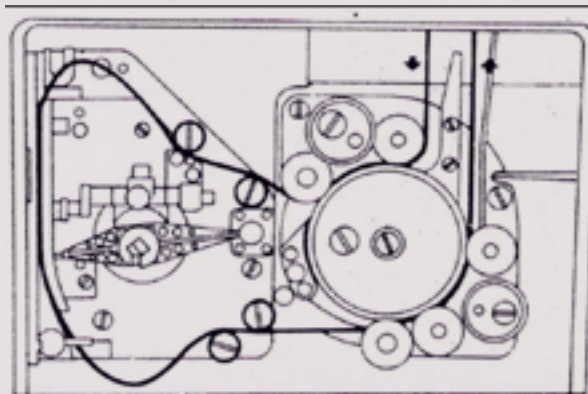
Return to Reason

(excerpt)

BIRGIT HEIN

Originally published in: *Studio International*, Nov/Dec 1975.

The progressive start inaugurated by Warhol's radical break with traditional aesthetics and by the Fluxus movement, which similarly aimed at anti-art, has not found any further development in independent American films. On the contrary, this work was taken up in Europe, where artists worked on similar problems at the same time. An important role has been played here by the work of Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka. Their early films are the first examples of formal work with very limited image material, where the formal structure determines the content. From this basis a new rational understanding of art and the artist developed. The task of art is no longer seen as mystification but as clarifying reality. Accordingly the functioning of the



medium has become the main subject and content of the work. The artistic consequence is seen in the reduction of the image material, the exposition of formal structure and the renunciation of any meaning which is not conditioned by the structure of the film.

Filmmakers who work in this direction in Germany and Austria are Kren, Schmidt, Scheugl, Weibel, Export and the Heins. A significant new example is the film *Strukturelle Studien* (Structural Studies, 1974) by W + B Hein. It aims at an investigation of film technique as the technique of film art: at disclosing this working process to the spectator in order to reveal the processes of creation and perception. The film builds on previous work. The main concern has been to obtain consciousness and control over the process of working. This has

led step by step to a concentration on basic structures and single images. It also led to simple work on short films in order to make them clear and understandable by themselves.

To some degree *Structural Studies* is a condensation of work done so far. This is demonstrated by the parts of shorter films which are included in the sequence of 33 short films. The theme is the analysis of the phenomena of the perception of movement, which as a basis for the functioning of the film belongs to its structure.

The short single films each contribute one statement to the subject. The optical laws on which the illusion of natural movement depends are also basic to the generation of pure filmic movement. The different kinds of movement in film are “discussed” in three parts. 1. Illusion of natural movement and deceptive movement; 2. Movement by shooting and projecting (frame steadiness in camera and projector); 3. Movement by camera operations (zoom, change of focus, change of light). As an introduction, the film begins with short quotations of the laws on which the perception of movement depends: after-image, persistence of vision phi-phenomenon. The emphasis lies on the law of the phi-phenomenon, as it is the basis for filmic animation. These film quotations consist of demonstration material: dots, squares and refilmed examples of scientific film documentation. The film as a whole follows the principle of confronting demonstration material with

chosen real image material, each time taken with the same technique.

Thus the film poses questions about the basic problems of aesthetic creation: where does it start; where is the border between art and science; to what extent is the technical process of reproduction already an elementary step in aesthetic transformation; how far are the simplest manipulations with the camera when shooting already interpretations of the reproduced reality?

In this confrontation of manipulated abstract and realistic image material another problem becomes clear. It occurs in any dealing with art, for example when you compare the catalogue description and the real object. It is the “expression” of a visual formulation which can be physically experienced but not expressed by verbal language. As B. Eichenbaum says it is the “photogenic, the zaum—essence” of the film, “the language that transgresses reason, that lies before reason.”

Structural Studies is a first effort to tackle this problem, to see how far it is possible to make the “unconscious” element of the work into a conscious process. This question becomes important if you want to overcome the romantic ideology of the unconscious creative power, of the genius, where art and artist occupy a position outside and above society and its historical process. In reviews the film was often called a training exercise or non-art. This reaction is provoked by the loose or open construction of the film. It is part

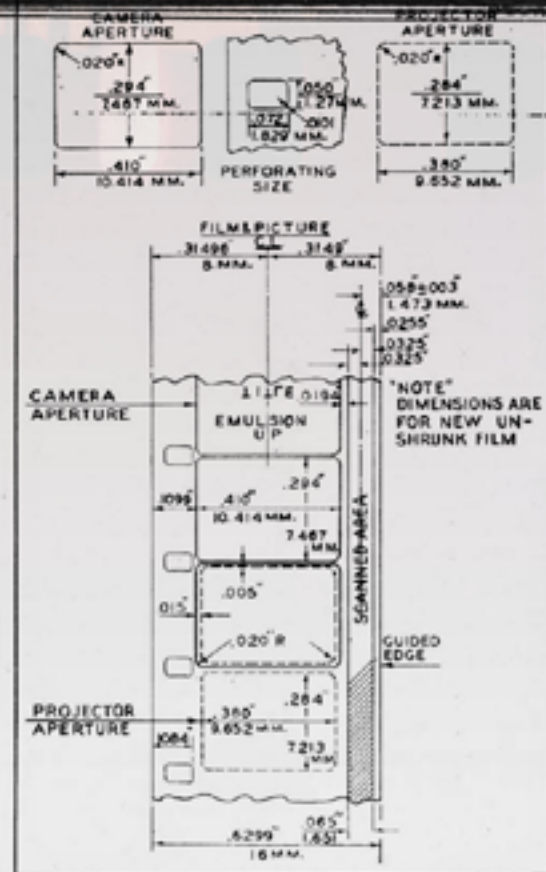


FIG. 1. Recommended standard, 16mm. sound film.

of the concept of opposition to the closed form of the classical work of art and its ideology of uniqueness. The structure of the film is open to change and continuation. The “work of art” must not close but open itself. It is therefore necessary to lay open the process of working, to build the film up almost didactically and show how it is made. The aesthetic information must become a part of everyday communication and not remain a domain for specialists.

Dear Mike

FRANCESCO GAGLIARDI

June 16, 2023

Dear Mike,

It was great seeing you last night, and it made me feel silly for not reaching out to you for such a long time. I have been thinking about what you said about the work feeling remote—addressed to people different from us, people from another time. It's absolutely true. I remember seeing those films some twenty years ago and even then still receiving them as if they belonged to a shared discursive world. The conceptual moves they made, the claims they staked to certain questions about meaning and representation, still felt compelling and generative. And last night it felt like watching Méliès. You see the tricks, and they are delightful, but it's extremely clear (and this is in part where the delight comes from) that they're addressed to someone who lived in a very different world, someone who saw the world very differently. In Frampton the tricks are conceptual, rather than practical, and the delight has a slow, drawn out, and muted quality that makes it very different for the sort of delights offered by Méliès, but the effect last night was very similar.

Specifically, one thing that struck me is how differently we think about representation. In the films we saw yesterday, representation really just seems like a conceptual problem—the question is how representation works, what its mechanism is. Whereas today the question has become political: it's a question about the forces that shape it, the consequences it has on the material life of the planet. Anyway—it was very interesting watching these films again, and thinking about them with you.

Have a wonderful screening on Friday and a great early summer, and see you in August!

Francesco

On Performance:

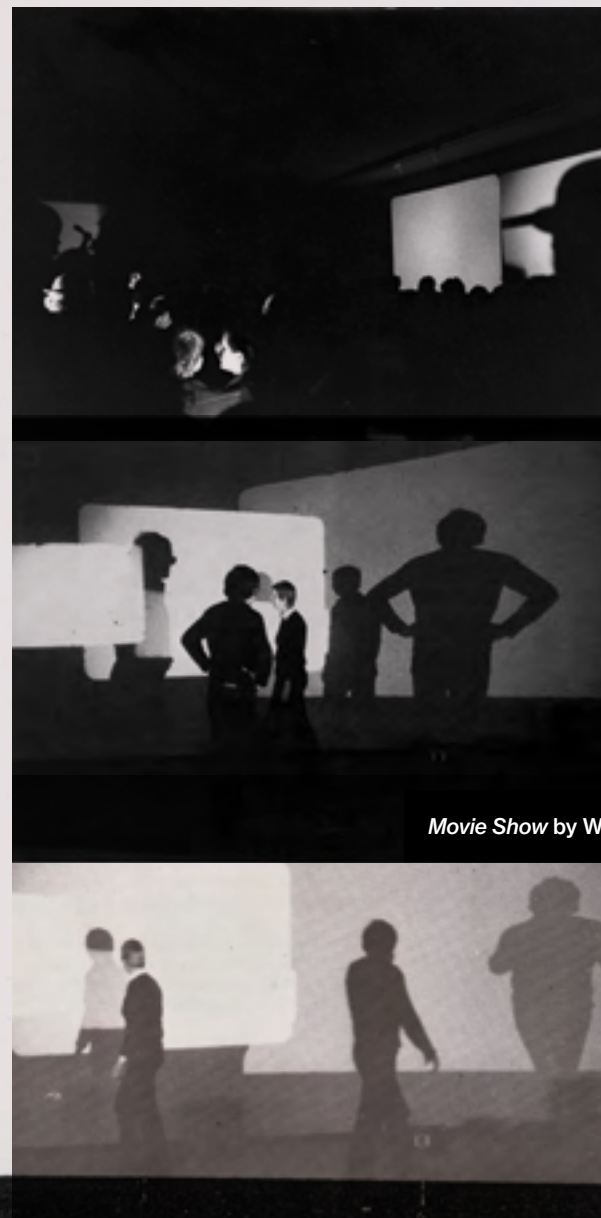
Expanded Cinema Work in the 70s, Interview by Duncan White

Originally published in *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*, edited by David Curtis, A. L. Rees, Duncan White and Steven Ball, London: Tate Publishing, 2011.

BIRGIT HEIN: What I find most interesting about expanded cinema is that it really makes a connection between film and art. It goes into the space, it's an event. And of course in this way film could get into the gallery/museum structure—expanded cinema extends film into the art scene. But there are so many different forms of expanded cinema. I would say expanded cinema is very much a rethinking of cinema. Expanded cinema never really functions in a movie theatre because you need more space, you need more than this one flat screen and often the audience must be able to move in the space. This is why we started our *Performance* in the exhibition space of the Kunstverein in Cologne because we needed the whole space, all around us.

DUNCAN WHITE: You were saying earlier that in the UK expanded cinema tends to be “flat.”

BIRGIT: It was, in my opinion, it was more because of the screen or the wall—a flat space to project onto. This was how Wilhelm and I worked until documenta 1977. Our work was also about the screen and only visual. It was not until afterwards that we started performing—performing and screening. We were basically

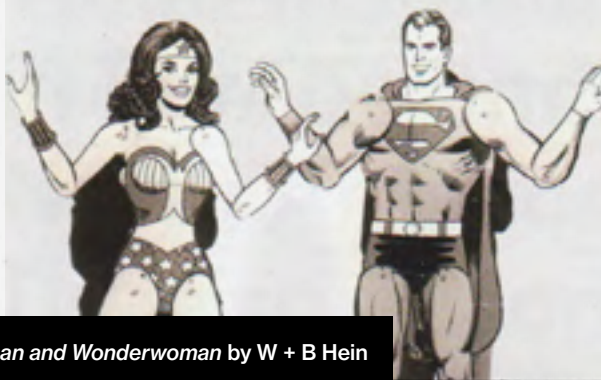


Movie Show by W + B Hein

using three screens. In the beginning there were more but when we started to move around places we reduced it to three screens, three projectors and a slide projector. We had huge slides so we could project very big. And we also changed the format of the screens. Zoom lenses created smaller and bigger frames. So, it was three projectors and the slide projector. And an end.

DUNCAN: What was it an end of?

BIRGIT: An end of basically concentrating on form. I had tried to write a text for Edinburgh (International Forum on Avant-Garde Film, 1976) about form and



Superman and Wonderwoman by W + B Hein

content, but it turned out that the work was becoming too specialized, and the questions became more and more specialized and nobody could understand. In reaction, we ended up having screenings where the projector was in the room and the (film) material was damaged—we had arranged that—so, the people, while they were looking, always had the feeling that behind them the film was exploding and crackling. (laughs)

It was very much an angry art. Then we decided that we wanted to get ourselves more personally into the film. This was very important for the future. Because for the first time we included super 8 home movie material, TV newsreel material of the war in Vietnam and the trailer of *From Here to Eternity*, which we found in the projection booth of one of the cinemas we were running at the time. We loved this trailer, it's so perfect. It's really like the whole film in ten minutes.

DUNCAN: A kind of compressed narrative. An abbreviated form?

BIRGIT: Yes. You have everything. You have the emotion. You understand the story. You don't need the whole film. We took it as an example or an encapsulation of Hollywood in contrast to the formal pieces we had and in contrast to the TV documentary footage. Wilhelm at that time worked at the WDR—Wester German Television. He found newsreel material from Vietnam in the wastebasket. They had thrown it away because it was too heavy to show on television. For example, a dead soldier being carried by soldiers out of a

river where he had been shot. And it was very close and very real, you know?

DUNCAN: What year was that?

BIRGIT: Around 1968. Wilhelm just took it and later we included it in the performances. The show developed and changed very, very much. These (life-size paper cut-outs of Superman and Wonderwoman) we found when we were on tour in the United States. You could buy them in a souvenir shop. We would glue them on cardboard, so that they are strong and then we would move them like a jumping jack.

DUNCAN: And it would be quite sexualized. So, was that a separate show from *From Here to Eternity*? The *Superman and Wonderwoman*?

BIRGIT: It started as *From Here to Eternity* which at that time we called *Performance*. And then we realized “performance” is a very bad word because everybody thinks performance is boring.

DUNCAN: Yes, it's very freighted, loaded.

BIRGIT: Then we started to call it *Movie Show*. *Superman and Wonderwoman* would come in after—when we had found these puppets. The *Show* was almost never the same, always changing.

DUNCAN: Did you have a kind of structure for the

show? What would go first and what would follow? And who was operating the projectors? Was it friends?

BIRGIT: We did it.

DUNCAN: So you were in front and behind the projector?

BIRGIT: Yes, but we had one piece, *Die Monster* which could *not* be done by us. The cinema had to be dark. We would silently go to the screen and then the lights should come on. Our helpers should switch on the light at the right moment. Our daughter, she was seven years old at the time, she did it best. She sometimes travelled with us. For example, when we were in UCLA in this famous Hollywood art school, we had a student who was supposed to help. The light went on—it was just the projector light—music would start and we would dance a kind of slow rock and roll. We also had found these rubber (Frankenstein) heads on the tour in America, I don't know where. And then we had a piece which I really, really loved, which we only developed after we had been in Milan in 1979. We were in this big square in front of a cathedral and people were selling doves—plastic doves—there were loads of them. They would fly beautifully. Really perfect. So we bought a big box of these doves and we would let them fly in the cinema. It was always very, very nice and very funny in whatever space that we worked.

With the *Movie Show* there were fewer pieces, but the length of the show was always the same. It started with eight or nine different pieces and it ended up with 27. And there was stress to it. For example, in one

show in Geneva we realized that we had forgotten one reel. One of the three reels (for the three screens). I don't know how we managed it but we had to improvise heavily and of course leave out some parts.

DUNCAN: Did you think of it as theatre? Or did you think of it as something else?

BIRGIT: Theatre? No, because we were always in the audience with the machines. For example, we needed to stand on chairs to run the machines. You would hear the sound of the machines and would see the illusion there on the stage at the same time. For example, we had this *Kiss* number. That was every effective. We always did it until the people started shouting or coughing. So it was never the same length.

DUNCAN: You would wait for people to react?

BIRGIT: That's right. We called it *Kiss* as a reference to Andy Warhol. Lit by one 16mm projector image, we would stand there and start kissing. In a movie you would have the kiss as a huge picture on the screen. But there, we were very small and we were there in person. And everybody would know that we were kissing and kissing and kissing.

DUNCAN: So, in terms of the audience you were (by now) very keen to get out of the art world, weren't you?

BIRGIT: We would play in the weirdest places. Like,



for example, in a pub, where it was often difficult to have (a stage). So we would take two tables. We preferred pubs that already had a cabaret program. That was very popular at the end of the 1970s. In America, as well, filmmakers would show their films in bars and it was very popular to have pubs with programs of music or cabaret or literature or whatever. We had the problem that sometimes they said that the bar must run all the time. But we needed complete darkness, like for the monster number. And the best thing was what happened sometimes when they turned off the light without having asked for it. Then we knew they liked

it. In this surrounding we learned very, very quickly which pieces were really good and which pieces were (just an) intellectual construction. This influenced us very much of course.

DUNCAN: You mean the way people responded to the work influenced its content?

BIRGIT: The funny thing about the performance was that even if nobody would say a word you always knew what people thought, if they liked or hated it. You could really feel it. And, of course I loved it—this tension.



DUNCAN: And would that influence how you would improvise and how you would respond to the audience?

BIRGIT: No, we wouldn't improvise because the pieces were constructed. And we would never address the audience. There were no such pieces.

DUNCAN: Is there something you wanted to say about the question of narrative? Because it seemed to me that for you—after 1977—you saw expanded cinema and narrative as being related?

BIRGIT: Yes, definitely because at that point (we needed) to get a certain kind of content, real content, into the show.

DUNCAN: What do you mean real content?

BIRGIT: As I already said, the trailer was a kind of “instant” Hollywood film but at the same time it was also a World War II drama, whose tragic content—in the *Movie Show*—came into direct conflict with the actual war documentary of a dead soldier in Vietnam, which in turn is commented on by the safe world of the home movie, but also by the white plastic pigeons as “doves of peace” which flap their wings over the heads of the audience and throw shadows on the screen.

The performance wanted to get us out of this narrow structure of the laws of structural film but it was completely based on that. It was dealing with the idea of cinema, sometimes even without using film. The



whole show was always dealing with illusion and reality—with the illusion of perception and the images of reality. So us being there became important, in order to contrast with what was on the images on the screen. It was very important to have these two realities—the screen and us operating as a reality, and the machines. The projection machines as reality. The narrative of the content was also dealing with such questions. For me that's also a story. You can construct a story. For example, the Frankenstein number. Of course, it referred to the film. The audience always had to construct their own interpretation. They were always asked to consider what they knew and to access their knowledge, so they could understand what we meant. For example, if somebody has never seen the Frankenstein film, of course he will not understand the irony. Or Superman and Wonderwoman.

DUNCAN: But of course everyone has, everyone knows...

BIRGIT: Yes, this is why we took these. And at the same time you have the real material.

DUNCAN: So, it wasn't so much that you were leaving the art world as you were combining the art world with other places, other narratives.

BIRGIT: Yes, with life. And it was amazing that we could survive. The whole performance period stopped when we got our PS1 grant and went to New York for more than a year in 1981-2. We had intended to continue. But then we were confronted with a completely different, professional scene. The performance spaces were very professional and we understood very, very quickly that we would not have the level to perform there. Which was also good, because it made a complete break in our work. In the end it led to (the film) *Love Stinks* (1982). And so for me, that was what I really always wanted—to work in that way, because it was also a narrative: there was no continuing story but (a series of) situations, and in the same way viewers had to construct the content.



Film-Show mit Live-Auftritten



Histories and Consent: an interview with Jürgen Brüning

JÜRGEN BRÜNING

(Experimental film) is thriving, but is not yet integrated in the art market. P.A.P. intends to seize this opportunity and takes part in art fairs to promote a catalogue, for instance at Art Basel in 1970, 1971 and 1972. Hein, joined later by Dieter Meier, won't meet success. Their program was based on a demanding selection and the movies come from the underground culture. The art market didn't show enough interest in P.A.P.'s catalogue.

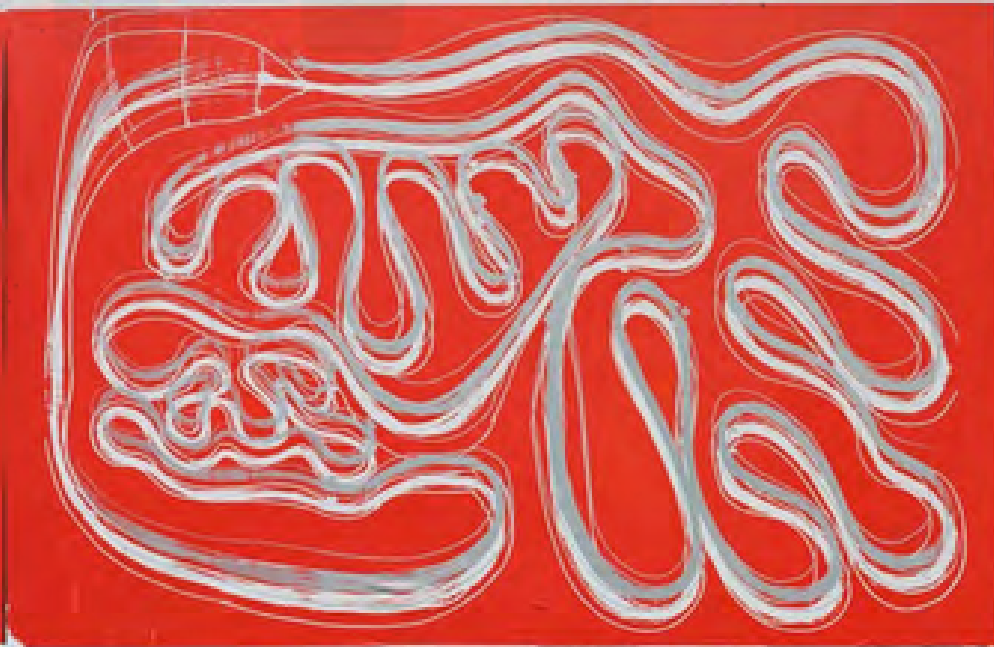
(Kunsthalle Friart Fribourg, 25–29 January 2017)



P.A.P. Catalogue Cover



Jürgen Brüning



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P.A.P. poster



JÜRGEN: Wilhelm Hein had a brother whose name was Karl-Heinz Hein (21.11.1940-8.2.2022). He started a project called P.A.P. (Progressive Art Production), a “Filmgalerie” based in Munich dedicated to experimental film distribution that ran from 1969-72.

MIKE: P.A.P.’s first catalogue included work by Marc Adrien, Stan Brakhage, Paul Fuchs, W + B Hein, Takahiko Imura, Hans Peter Kochenrath, Kurt Kren, Malcolm LeGrice, Gregory Markopoulos, Dieter Meier, Otto Muehl, Robert Nelson, Klaus Schönherr and Paul Sharits.

JÜRGEN: Later they distributed Fritz André Kracht, who made experimental films from 1969-1975. Karl-Heinz Hein died on February 2023. Last year he gave all of Kracht’s prints to Kracht’s daughter who then approached me. In the late 60s and early 70s Kracht showed his films at Birgit and Wilhelm Hein’s XSCREEN in Köln and I wanted to know what the reception was like at that time. So I called Birgit a couple of weeks before she died and asked her. Birgit replied, “Sorry, I don’t remember.” I had the feeling she didn’t want to be bothered by this at all. She had been having problems with memory. But she was very clear, “It’s very nice that you called Jürgen, but I don’t remember.” At least she remembered me and I will keep her in my memory.

MIKE: Both Caspar Stracke and Michael Bryntrup said that in the late 70s the Heins had finished a long body of work in structural film, and were looking for ways to

reinvent themselves. Some of these new hopes attached themselves to Kino Eiszeit and the young super 8 filmmakers who gathered there, including yourself.

JÜRGEN: I moved to Berlin in 1978 to study sociology and psychology at the university. At that time it was very difficult to find an apartment, not because of the prices, but because there was a shortage. West Berlin was an island subsidized by the German government. Many houses were empty because owners made more money not renting them out. I was young and didn’t know anyone, but people I met at university said let’s squat a house. We squatted a big house with four floors, we were altogether 26 people. The second floor was the community floor with a big kitchen. Everybody would cook once a month and we would have dinner together; it wasn’t mandatory but it worked without rules and schedules and plans. We were busy fixing the house and went to a lot of demonstrations.

Our house was at Blumenthalstrasse 15 in the district of Schöneberg. Next to us were two more squatted houses—number 14 and number 13. Soon after moving in I heard that house 13 had a back house; in the late 19th-early 20th century these had been small factories. Each floor was an empty loft space of around 200-300 metres without walls. They had turned a big empty loft into a venue for screenings, concerts and performances. I asked if I could join the group which was headed by founder Heinz Hermanns. They were running this space which they called Kino Eiszeit. I became part of the Eiszeit crew in spring 1981.

Everything was improvised. We had two old 16mm Bauer projectors, so we built an upper level where we had the projectors and used a ladder to climb up. During screenings you could hear the projectors because we didn’t have a booth. I was with the projectors one afternoon when I heard someone climbing the ladder. They poked their head up and said, “Hi, I’m Wilhelm Hein. Can we show our films here?” (laughs)

Birgit and Wilhelm were fed up with structuralist abstract filmmaking and wanted to meet new people, to connect with a different kind of scene. I don’t remember what they said or how they found us, but we were an open space and a lot of people came through.

In the late 70s and 80s, if you wanted to make films and didn’t have any money, you made super 8 films. We founded a filmmaker’s group called Oyko. There were 25 of us and we met in Kino Eiszeit. It was very male dominated, there were only three women including Katarina Peters. Michael Bryntrup, Ades Zabel and I were gay, but it was very heterosexual. (laughs) I was 20, still looking for what I could be.



Interfilm founder Heinz Hermanns (seated), 1982

I said to Wilhelm, "Yes you can show the films here." I didn't know the Heins at that point. I don't remember when but we showed the films. Later I made a super 8 film that was accepted at the European Media Arts Festival in Osnabrück. It was the first or second

edition and they took all films submitted. (laughs) Of course I went with my first little 10 minute super 8 film and got to know more experimental filmmakers. Everyone went to Osnabrück, Birgit and Wilhelm were regulars. I don't drink anymore, but I remember we were drunk so often then. (laughs) Birgit and Wilhelm were also good drinkers.

I was never really personal friends with Birgit and Wilhelm. We met and saw each other, and I watched their films. In 1982 they made *Love Stinks* which was about their relationship. I saw it in Osnabrück when it premiered. It was a little bit controversial. People were not happy that it was so personal. There's a little bit of sex between Birgit and Wilhelm, and there was a big discussion. Wilhelm couldn't deal with any kind of critique, he would get very excited. Birgit would try to have a more calm discussion. I was very impressed with the film so we showed it at Kino Eiszeit.

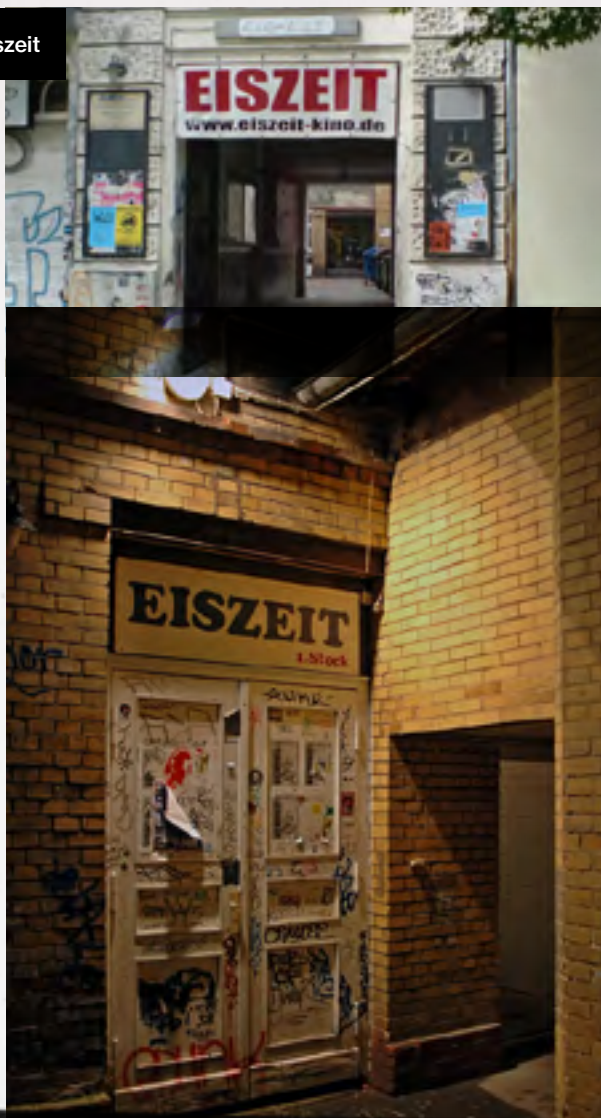
We did two years of Eiszeit in the squatted house before getting kicked out. We were a group of six people and wanted to continue. We moved to another place called Frontkino which was an alternative cinema. We programmed Thursday and Friday, the others did Saturday and Sunday. In 1985 we rented a loft space in Kreuzberg. I was part of the collective until mid-1988. Then I went to Buffalo on a job swap at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Centre. The original Eiszeit closed several years ago. A new group of people tried to establish in the same building a new cinema under the old name Eiszeit with three screens and an adjunct restaurant. Business was slow and it closed three years ago.

To tell you a little more about super 8. Birgit and Wilhelm never shot in super 8, they worked in 16mm so they were not very connected to the super 8 festival. Filmmakers started the first InterFilm Festival in 1978 in a bar called Café Mitropa. They were artists and didn't want to organize a festival, so in 1981 Kino Eiszeit took it over and did the festival with other squatted cinemas and showed super 8 films from all over the world. I think it was the only super 8 festival in the 80s. Heinz Hermanns, the guy who founded Kino Eiszeit, became the director of InterFilm which today is one of the biggest short film festivals in the world.

At Kino Eiszeit we tried to be a place where people could make and show their films. But we never had funding to buy equipment and provide it to people. We showed regular independent fiction films that were sometimes not so well attended. But special screenings were packed, every screening with the Schmelz Dahin group from Bonn had a hundred people. I don't remember what we showed from the Heins. We had not only films but performances, parties, concerts with new music, noise music. It was a great place. (laughs) In the 80s people were interested in discovering things they didn't know.

In 1994 Birgit made *Baby I will Make you Sweat* which premiered at the Berlinale where it had three screenings. I did the Q&A with Birgit in Kino Arsenal. An older woman presenting her sexual desire was controversial, unusual at that time. Doing work about sexuality in the 80s and 90s was difficult and courageous. I don't remember any remarks about how a

Kino Eiszeit



white privileged cis woman goes to Jamaica to have sex with a black guy.

Wilhelm separated from Birgit, and she really felt bad about it, rejected as an older woman. There was no Tinder or Grindr in the 90s, how do you get sex? If you have money you go where people need money and give affections.

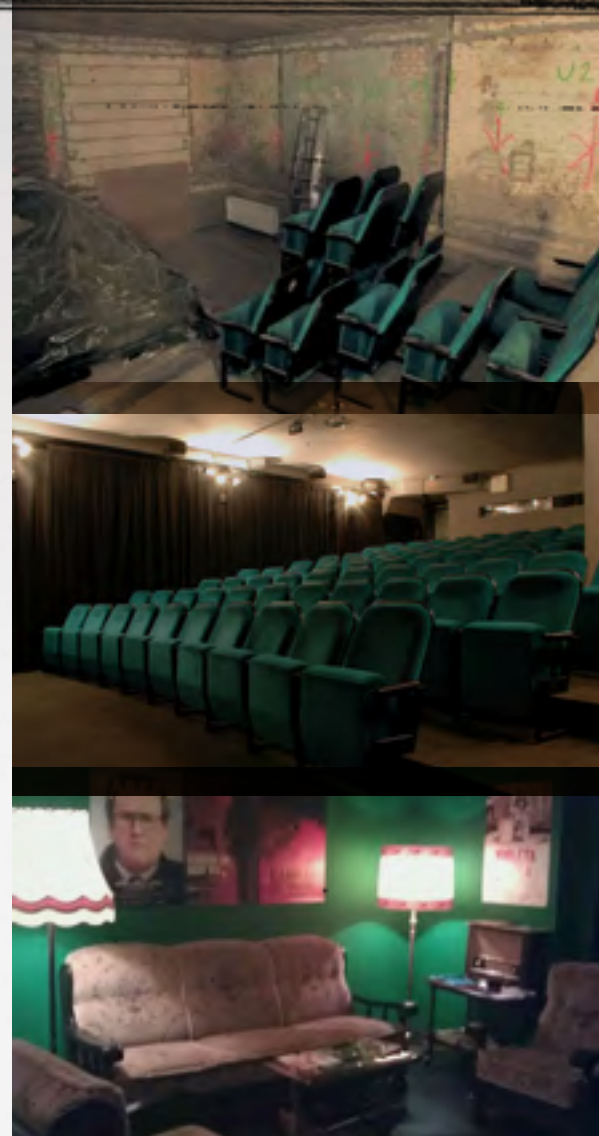
I showed the film at the Pornfilmfestival Berlin in 2010, where the discussion was more about colonialism (but not so much). Can you do this as a white person? I think it's a great film, very personal. Years later the Austrian filmmaker Ulrich Seidl made *Paradise: Love* (2012), where white women go to Africa to fuck black men. These issues arrived later in the mainstream. Birgit was one of the first women to address sexuality as an older person. Questions of gender and body politics are a focus at the Pornfilmfestival Berlin. All consensual desires and imaginations related to sex are presented in a public space.

Birgit invited me to the university in Braunschweig where she was heading the film department for a masterclass where filmmakers or curators would present a program. It made Birgit happy to work with young people and push them to their limits. A lot of good young filmmakers were in her class, and made really interesting films.

The last time I saw Birgit was ten years ago at a symposium about censorship hosted by the German Film Archive. There is no censorship in Germany (laughs) officially. In 1949 the so-called FSK (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle), comparable to the Hays Code in the

USA, was established. The FSK provided a rating system up to 18 years old. Producers would have to submit their films to get a rating and pay a fee. The given rating allowed them to publicly show films in cinemas. The depiction of nudity or violence could endanger your rating. The first controversial film was *Die Sünderin* (1951) with Hildegard Knef, whose naked upper body was shown in the film. If the agency found scenes representing sexual acts or acts of violence problematic they recommended cutting these scenes. The agency claims not to censor films, they only give recommendations to producers. One example is my production *Hustler White* (1996) by Bruce LaBruce. I gave the film to the agency but they didn't want to give it a rating. After an appeal they suggested two cuts in the film and finally gave an 18 rating. When you don't get a rating the film is automatically *indiziert* (undecided). For instance Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) was *indiziert* for 30 years. They revoked the verdict three years ago so it could finally be shown. Pornography in Germany doesn't get a rating so you can't advertise porn films. This is in order to prevent anyone under 18 from seeing them. Pornography is legal in Germany, but it has to be sold and presented in specialized sex shops where the shop owner has to make an age verification with the customers. The internet has changed access to pornography radically.

We appealed the rating of *Hustler White* and they recommended cutting two scenes: the stump fucking and the scene where the older guy gets cut with a razor blade. If you cut this out then you will get an 18 rating. I said I would do it but I didn't cut out the scenes. (laughs) The



situation has changed over the years. Now they are more flexible as films are becoming more and more explicit. Now you can have explicit sexual acts in a film and if they feel it's contextualized in a story then it's acceptable. There has to be a reason sex occurs. Not: the plumber is coming and fucks the person of the house. (laughs)

At a symposium on censorship by the German Film Archive, Birgit gave a lecture about her experiences with censorship in the 60s and 70s and they asked me to talk about pornography. I'm always the expert on pornography. Birgit's lecture was before mine and she liked to talk. She had a lot share. This was the last time I really saw her.

When you work in film you should always be sensitive about how people feel and how they're represented. Found footage films are a well established film genre. Experimental filmmakers like Birgit Hein in her late films used found footage to deconstruct the

original messages. Today many filmmakers take footage from the internet. Often they take clips from porn websites and put them in their own films without asking the performers for permission. For sex workers this can be very problematic. At the Pornfilmfestival Berlin we show around 150 short films and ask every filmmaker in our festival regulations: do you have permission from the performers? More and more films in the last years didn't, so after previewing the films, if we have doubts we ask the filmmakers directly if they have all the rights for the material in their film. If they don't have permission we would either not show the film or

ask them to pixel the faces. It becomes a kind of censorship but the festival is about consent and filmmakers have to learn that everything has to be consensual.

In the Pornfilmfestival we have lots of discussions about how people are represented. Recently I made an auto-fictional experimental documentary. The film is about personal experiences and has my perspective as an old white sissy cis person. It has shown in some festivals and for me it is self-evident to clarify this to the audience before they watch the film.



Die Sünderin by Willi Forst, 1951



Hustler White by Bruce LaBruce and Rick Castro, 1996



Salò by Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975

After the Underground

MARC SIEGEL

MIKE: Could we begin by talking about the word “underground?” Birgit often described herself as an underground filmmaker. What does that mean?

MARC: Underground is a period in North American avant-garde filmmaking situated in New York between the early ‘60s until Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* in 1967, when a new phase of structural filmmaking became dominant. It’s a period characterized by a playful, satirical, parodic relation to popular culture. Performance plays a role in these films, sexual and gender transgressions are significant, along with an inventive reflection on making images. Prime examples include Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* (1963), Ron Rice’s *The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man* (1963), the early films of the Kuchar brothers (‘50s and ‘60s), Andy Warhol’s early films (1963-), and the collaborations of Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith (late ‘50s to early ‘60s).

Birgit Hein is a German filmmaker who started making films in 1967, at the moment when the US underground cinema ended as a dominant mode of avant-garde film culture. There was a shift to more austere work than in the underground period, a focus on

perception, the material of film, the projector and the process of development, film as a means of reproducing images. Nevertheless, I think she’s inspired by the spirit of this earlier mode of underground making.

MIKE: I think underground film is characterized by a small community, a counter-culture of drop-outs and refuseniks, outliers and misfits, economically marginal, often turning deep cultural grooves into role play, creating alternative societies/scenes with its own codes and behaviours.

MARC: Yes. The way I’ve been talking about it so far might make it seem that underground film is a style or aesthetic, a film form. It’s also a culture of resistance against bourgeois life and commercial film culture.

There’s a productive tension in the work of the Heins. Wilhelm pushed himself into a life that is completely anti-bourgeois and anti-institutional, whereas Birgit retained an underground spirit but worked as a university professor. Birgit certainly gained a lot of strength and belief in the power of resistance from the underground history in which she was a key part in the late ‘60s and ‘70s.



Sins of the Fleshapoids by George and Mike Kuchar



The Queen of Sheba Meets the Atom Man by Ron Rice



Little Stabs of Happiness by Ken Jacobs

MIKE: You’ve met them both and spent time with them?

MARC: I’ve spent far more time with Wilhelm than with Birgit simply because I worked closely on artistic projects with Wilhelm for a wonderful and intense

period. We had a break and kept coming back to one another for certain events. We have an intimate personal and collaborative history. I met Birgit in the role of scholar and moderator. She's someone I've socialized with over the years.

MIKE: You must be a very kind and patient person to have such a long relationship with Wilhelm. He seems to have broken with nearly everyone.

MARC: Yes, he has. He broke with me a number of times too. I have a lot of respect for both of them, Birgit is a far easier person to be friends with than Wilhelm. But I've gotten a lot out of my friendship with Wilhelm. He opened my eyes to histories of artistic production and ideas about transgression. He's a great artist, with an incredible talent for collage and montage. I've learned a lot from him.

MIKE: Can you talk about their turn away from structural films?

MARC: Wilhelm and Birgit were never typical structural filmmakers, I wouldn't call them structural filmmakers actually. I think they did try. They were part of this mode, they set out to do structural work but weren't as rigorous or as anal as other makers with their strict scores and specific patterns. They were always more open to chance and letting the process allow for intervention in any preconceived plan.

Towards the end of the '70s they became

frustrated with their filmmaking because they felt it was trying too hard to shut out their personal, emotional and sexual life. It was trying to be so austere and focused on the process of filmmaking that the hard life

they were living—the fact that they struggled financially, that they were raising a child, the pressures of daily life—was not coming into the films. It led them into a crisis about what kind of work they wanted to do.

Wilhelm in Love Stinks



They stopped making these kinds of films, and their first artistic departure was to go into clubs and rock 'n' roll bars to do these strange live performances like *Superman and Wonderwoman* (1980-81). They still used film projection, incorporating scenes from commercial films along with images of their young daughter Nina, while they appeared live as superhero parody figures. I

think it was a way for them to negotiate a difficult passage in their marriage, and to puzzle out new ways that artistic production could relate to their personal lives.

Around this time they got a grant to go to New York for nine months and that was incredibly fruitful for them. New York was always an important reference point for many European experimental filmmakers and for them in particular. It was a moment of crisis in their relationship. The film they made was *Love Stinks* (1982), it's Birgit's film in a sense. It shows Birgit dealing with her sexuality, there are images of her menstrual blood, explicit scenes of them having sex, and displays of their naked bodies in ways they hadn't done before. It's one of the wonderful New York films made by people who are not from New York, like Chantal Akerman's *News From Home* (1976). There's a pervasive and sombre melancholy as Birgit tries to work through the presentation of female sexuality in her film and in their relationship. I see the work as a document of a crisis where they try to renegotiate the divide between art and life.

MIKE: Could you talk about the next film in their trio of '80s features: *Verbotene Bilder* (Forbidden Pictures) 1985?

MARC: It's not as well known as *Love Stinks*, a differently challenging film. Wilhelm suffered a psychological and physical trauma and couldn't speak, he had lost his voice. The film shows him in a psychoanalytic mode trying to find and reconcile with the source of his trauma.



News From Home by Chantal Akerman

I first saw it in a retrospective of Birgit's films in 2003, which was around the time I met Birgit for the first time. That was at the height of my intense collaborative work with Wilhelm. I couldn't understand why these two major figures weren't in contact because their collaborative work is essential to understanding not just German experimental cinema from the '60s to the '80s, but also international cinema. Naively, I wanted to facilitate their meeting so they could discuss and perhaps do something together.

I talked Wilhelm into coming with me to this retrospective where he had allowed them to show *Verbotene Bilder*. He only wanted to come for that film and it was a very tense evening. I recognized that Birgit felt uncomfortable with him there, he could be very aggressive and it was always difficult to know how he might react. It was peaceful but tense.

The film is striking and mysterious. Thomas Feldman was a filmmaker from Frankfurt, one of the first artists who died of AIDS in Germany, and he was in the film. It excited me to learn about Wilhelm and Birgit's connection to him. Karola Gramann appears

Love Stinks



in the film. She is a very important curator who now co-directs the Kinothek Asta Neilsen in Frankfurt. There's a scene with Karola and Katharina Sykora (art historian and partner of Ulrike Ottinger) where they take a shower together.

MIKE: Did the Heins have a conversation that evening?

MARC: I can't recall. I doubt it. They wouldn't really engage with one another, to my knowledge they never really did in any substantial way. In 2009 I got close again in my attempt at trying to mend their differences when I collaborated on "LIVE FILM! JACK SMITH!

Five Flaming Days in a Rented World" with Susanne Sachsse and Stefanie Schulte Strathaus. I knew that Birgit and Wilhelm had worked with Jack Smith in Köln in 1974 and 1977. Birgit did this fantastic TV short documenting a Jack Smith performance. She was supposed to interview him but he said he didn't want to do an interview, he'd rather do a performance. A Köln art fair was happening at the time, and Smith chose the zoo as the setting for his performance. Gwenn Thomas was an American photographer sent by Avalanche Magazine to document Jack Smith. He told her to come to the zoo where she made beautiful pictures of Birgit Hein's shoot of Jack Smith. Somehow Wilhelm got a sound file

from the television station WDR. It contained not just what we hear in Birgit's film, but the banter and everything Smith said during the shooting.

I worked with the Exile gallery in Berlin and proposed to bring these three "documents" together to give a complex depiction of a Jack Smith performance. I was almost successful. Birgit and Gwen Thomas immediately said yes. I was in negotiation with Wilhelm who initially refused to allow the sound to be in the same room with Birgit's film. We were going to give him a separate room but in the end he pulled out and wanted to do his own thing at the festival. I was a little disappointed, but happy in the end that at least both of them participated in this festival.

MIKE: Could you say a few words about the *Kali-Filme* (1988)?

MARC: The third of their '80s feature-length films. If *Love Stinks* is Birgit's in terms of its subjectivity and *Verbotene Bilder* is Wilhelm's, *Kali-filme* introduces us to both their interests. It sets out to destroy conventional ideas about representing women and women's bodies, women as passive objects of erotic interest. They wanted to do this using schlock images from popular culture and B films. There's a long sequence (*Kali-Frauenfilm*) culled from women-in-prison films where women fight back and take revenge on their oppressors. That's the most famous sequence and it was important to both of them. I've heard different accounts from both about who was responsible for that montage. But each are

Wilhelm and Thomas Feldman in *Forbidden Pictures*



committed to the radical feminist revenge style of Valerie Solanas, cutting up men as a way of cutting up bourgeois conventional representations of women and gender relations.

I think of it as a key film in relation to a later generation of filmmakers who worked with found footage. I'm thinking of Matthias Müller, the early work of Bjørn Melhus, Michael Bryntrup, Christoph Girardet, all of whom studied at Braunschweig with the Heins. I'm not arguing that they were influenced by this film directly—since some of them had already made their own found footage works—but the film opens up the Heins to a productive intergenerational dialogue with other German filmmakers who also worked to alter the circulation of images from popular culture.

MIKE: The reinventions of the self, the couple, and the cinema. The split of this dynamic duo allowed new artists to be born, but there was a cost.

MARC: The tension between Wilhelm and Birgit after their divorce has denied their collaborative work its central position in experimental/avant-garde film history. It's very sad to think that it may only find that place after their deaths. Perhaps only then can we access the complexity of their work and interested historians can further trace their collaborative process to show how instrumental they were in facilitating exchange among international filmmakers in the late '60s-early '70s. Their work on XSCREEN (the screening series in Köln) was pivotal. They collaborated with Wilhelm's

brother Karl-Heinz to organize a number of underground film events and performances in the context of the P.A.P Gallery, a film distribution company set up by Karl-Heinz and Dieter Meier. These events included screenings in 1969 in Munich, Frankfurt, Hamburg and during the *Quinzaine des Réalistes* in Cannes.

In the same period, they organized some of the first performances of Valie Export, Peter Weibel and Otto Muehl in Germany. They put together screenings that united the work of Gregory Markopoulos, Otto Muehl and Kurt Kren. Think of the stunning, pristine queer images of Markopoulos together with the dirty hetero macho work of Otto Muehl; that combination could only happen because of the beautifully perverse interests of Birgit and Wilhelm Hein. They went on to escort experimental film into the museum, curating the film section for the Documenta 6 in Kassel and the travelling exhibition *Film als Film (Film as Film)*, both in 1977, the latter together with Wulf Herzogenrath.

They published two books in 1971: Birgit's *Film im Underground* (1971) and the collectively edited *XSCREEN* (1971), which in its antibourgeois ethos and DIY aesthetic more strongly expressed Wilhelm's artistic and political interests. They were involved with *Supersuell*, a short-lived film journal based in Zurich that drew attention to the developing European avant-garde scene. They had deep collaborations and contact with Malcolm LeGrice and the London Film-Makers' Co-op. They were interested in building and extending a network where international filmmakers could connect with each other, show their work, stay at



each other's apartments and come together in events that mixed performance and screenings. They helped create the subculture of the underground, but the radicality of their break meant that their foundational work during their decades of collaboration, more or less the period of their marriage, hasn't gotten its due.

Love Stinks

YANN BEAUVAIS

Love Stinks (1982) marked the return to filmmaking for Birgit and Wilhem Hein, after three years of live performances. This return is conditioned by the fact that for the first time the Heins are using personal sequences and not found footage which was both the basis of their structural filmmaking and performances in which all types of conventional film extracts were conveyed. Here with *Love Stinks* we are in the private realm of the couple, during their residency in New York, in which they show their alienated sexual relations as much as the alienation of the city in which they are staying.

At the beginning of the 80s NYC is a quickly decaying city, in which the homeless and drug addicts are taking over empty spaces. Block after block are crumbling and remind us of the view of German cities after the Second World War; which is emphasized in the film by different views of Brooklyn buildings smashed to the ground and by the collection of Nazi graffiti in subways.

The film shows different sexual acts of the filmmakers, fucking or masturbating, but in this case it is mostly Birgit who is seen doing so, sometimes in a kind of reference to Valie Export's *Mann & Frau &*

Animal (1973). One could notice that within the couple, (the organization of) the voyeuristic gaze takes on the traditional social division of roles, thereby reinforcing the male gaze.

The film portrays a relation which seems exhausted (à bout de souffle), and conveys possible relationships between fractured societies, such as American Reaganomics and Germany which has to deal with its past. The best way to exhibit such an alienation is to work with fragments of representation delivering the burden of that time: no future. This film shares with some No Wave films (Scott and Beth B., Eric Mitchell, James Nares, Amos Poe, Diego Cortex) desperate views about New York. One can feel the quest for meaning within an alienated society in which new forms of art, poetry, crack, radical self invention, political graffiti, cruising, drag identities, turntablism, hip hop and electro, DIY galleries and magazines, post-punk collage aesthetics... could be the only ways out. Another link between the No Wave and the Heins is the fact they were truly creating new spaces to share their films, such as bars and clubs to get rid of the institutional avant-garde.





Within No Wave cinema, fiction and narratives were at the core of the project, but with the Heins it is their life and its representation which make the film possible. Shifting from live performance to perform their life in the film, the Heins open themselves to cruel criticisms, not only because their film is very intimate and personal, but also because it questions the works (structural, formalist) they had been doing before. One can find a similar research and questioning within the more narrative works of Valie Export, Laura Mulvey and to a lesser degree Malcolm Le Grice; but Birgit and Wilhem are the ones who took the greater risks, breaking from narrative supports and giving time to each sequence to breathe in a manner which is not scored. One could wonder about the understanding of

how images function in film as much as in society, as if “Le spectacle n’est pas un ensemble d’images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images.” *The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images.* (Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 4)

People We Trust:

Brett Story and Jason Fox interview

STORY / FOX

BRETT: The film asks me to spend time with other people's total checked outness. It's a profound moment of disillusionment and pessimism, bordering on nihilism. New York appears as an abandoned and neglected space, mirrored by a couple who wallow in the pointlessness of where they've arrived in their relationship and in the purpose of art.

JASON: It was impossible not to think about Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977) with its many subway scenes and downtown city portraits. They are both portraits of isolation, but there's a warmth and humanism in Akerman's film, while the Heins have little desire to find anyone except themselves to engage. In the daytime they record dilapidated housing while at night there are only pools of darkness. That's the city for them.

The container they never escape is the domestic. The first scene shows him not being able to get hard. But the camera never moves outside their coupledom, she's always interested in recording him, he's interested in recording her. It's an unfamiliar form of domesticity on screen. There is nothing comforting, warm or loving.

MIKE: Is it a home movie?

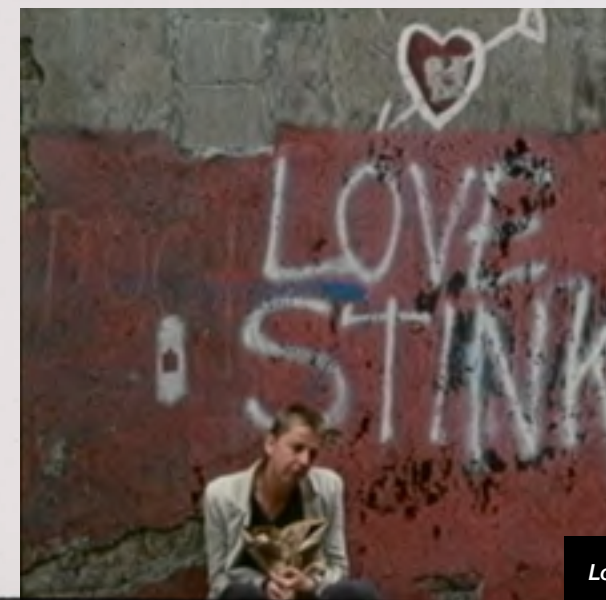
BRETT: I don't feel home is separate from art. They don't read as domestic figures, but as people who live constantly as artists. They are two isolated figures except when they're having sex, so the sex seems quite lonely. I never feel emotionally invested in whatever has gone wrong in their relationship, though movies aren't necessarily made for that.

Their relationship is a partnership around art, instead of a classic couple dynamic where we read the disintegration of a marriage. I had a profound feeling that they are at a crossroads, in a what-the-fuck-is-the-point moment. They decided there's some purpose in making images out of that, delivered through the lens of art, rather than a love relationship.

JASON: I liked the film best when it was deadpan, when what you see is what you get. We're going to film boredom. The masturbation is not titillating but banal. In the first five minutes there's a montage of shots devised as an excuse to record graffiti, various forms of tagging, and I like that there's no overt editorial being made about those images. It's more like, "We saw

it and decided to record it." In one scene, she masturbates while on her period with an audio ad for shiny red lips overlaid on the soundtrack. The juxtaposition is provocative, but it feels banal after forty years of ironic juxtapositions. Moments like that one worked the least well for me.

The first shot in the film feels loveless and cold. The next time we see them having sex is in a really long shot. We see them from across the loft lit by a bleak TV glow. From then on, the camera starts to get closer to



Love Stinks



them during their sex acts. It feels like they've explored the debasedness of the city, and then they got their groove back. They find a certain spirit where people draw dicks on subway ads, add Nazi signs or markup Marlboro posters. They're not recording these images because they happen to be there, they're taking an interest in these ads. That emerging sensibility in the film aligns with a camera that becomes more interested in the sex they have together as the film progresses.

BRETT: The marked-up ads are my favourite part. Here are textures of nihilism in conversation with each other. One was quite memorable because there were so many variations of marks on the same woman's face. I felt I was getting these thinly sliced versions of pessimism in a dance with each other, in these artistic iterations cross-hatched over this advertisement. At last there was some depth offered in shades and greys of despair in this dumb world.

I liked the warm jazz. The recording quality, the feeling of the record on the record player, you can hear

the needle. The city is worn down through neglect, but the old jazz feels worn because it's been handled and played so often that it feels beloved.

JASON: In one sequence, we see her with short dark hair and in the next we see her with longer blonde hair. Up until that point, the film felt like a gesture made over a few days or a season. But when I saw the hair change I thought that this could be footage from a year or two. I read that as a commitment and an invitation to see the film as evidence of an ongoing ritual practice, incorporating the camera into daily life. The sense of time provided an entry point, it endeared me and made me trust the film. They had a commitment to shooting that's part of a practice rather than a conceit for a film.

MIKE: There are many scenes of gatherings and parties.

BRETT: They help me locate some of the stakes, if there are stakes in a film like this. They're a reminder of an art world writ large that occasions excess, socialite life, public displays, performance. I didn't feel there was much more than that. The phrase that kept coming to mind is "left pessimism." After decades of activism and the promise of radical art, the 80s read as a time of turning inwards. What's the point in any kind of social effort? The rich indulge their selfishness in one way, but I feel there is a left pessimism that is its own version of retreat.

JASON: The term "retreat" feels unavoidable. It's impossible for me not to see them as "looking at," instead of "looking with." The first on screen party is an art opening with a pretty boy in a white coat carrying trays of champagne for everyone. One or two parties later we're in a private loft. The filmmakers were ostensibly invited, but the camera is in a corner looking on from a distance. The last on screen gathering is in a dance hall where we catch his oversize glasses in silhouette. He's literally merged with the environment in that image, his body blends into all the dancing bodies in the space behind him. It felt intentional that this is the last public space.

BRETT: I read the last time they have sex as happening in a public space. You hear the sound of the party.

JASON: The sound was overlaid but I think it was





non-diegetic. That strategy was used throughout, overlaying radio, TV and advertising sounds over other images.

MIKE: The film has a sense of time I remember learning in the 80s. It makes me wonder if most artist media has become unwatchable.

JASON: Why have our time commitments become so pressing we can't dedicate 80 minutes to watch a film like this? One of the places where my intellectual commitments meet my political commitments is in the sense that people are a lot smarter than they're given credit for. Audiences can engage in much more challenging work than programmers, commissioning editors and broadcasters often give people credit for. And yet at the end of a given day I tend to watch very digestible media because I'm exhausted.

One of the pleasures of watching is that I wouldn't have if you hadn't come over and said: watch this. There's also a trust. We've had zero conversations about the Birgit Hein project, but I trust your commitments. I'm interested in watching it, and wondering about your attachments to this film.

BRETT: The only place for this stuff to survive is in the classroom, the film festival, the microcinema, the curated in-person events organized under a banner of trust. Perhaps it's less about going to the movies and more about someone I know, or someone I respect, organizing something. I know who that person is and

they said it was worth watching and a lot of people agree so there is a collective pressure.

We're in a moment when people need, even want, to learn how to watch challenging work, durational work, poor image quality work. I show work like this in class and one of the things I say to students is: It's ok to be bored. It's ok to fall asleep or to think about other things while you're watching, that's part of the experience. The problem with contemporary media where no image lasts more than two seconds is that all you can do is interact with information the image gives you and pay attention to the plot. But something like this is about wandering away into your own preoccupations. I'm thinking a lot about left pessimism right now so I'm projecting that onto this movie. (laughs) Attention is something learned and we're not going to choose to test our attention spans on our own. We have to be invited by people we trust.





The Prolixity of the Not-True

STEVE REINKE

At first sight, the image does not resemble a cadaver, but it could be that the strangeness of a cadaver is also the strangeness of the image.

Maurice Blanchot, *Two Versions of the Imaginary*

Birgit and Wilhelm Hein's *Verbotene Bilder* (Forbidden Pictures, 1986) does not really contain that many forbidden pictures. Its transgressions are more subtle than advertised. (Most English language synopses begin "A room above a slaughterhouse." I didn't see any slaughterhouse, just a loft in an industrial building. A squat, perhaps.) It is a work that balances the centripetal

with the centrifugal. It pulls in around itself, a calm structured center. It also spins out of control, spewing images, some primal, some banal.

Does it want to free itself from the repressive forces of the superego, free itself from the chains of prohibitions and the realm of taboos? No, I don't think so. This



Forbidden Pictures



isn't a rid-yourself-of-your-repressive-masters type of thing. *Verbotene Bilder* is very much a product of the eighties. Prelapsarian bliss is not on the table.

The film follows a male protagonist who walks around the city but mostly spends time in his loft. Other scenes—a ball of writhing worms, boys looking at a book of photographs, etc.—might be his dreams, fantasies, or memories, but are most likely not. They seem to me not tied to a particular subjectivity (whether the filmmakers' or the characters'). Rather they are free-range pictures, pictures that emerge from the media landscape.

Forbidden Pictures is a rigorous feminist critique about how "pictures" (images) circulate through the

mediascape, penetrating us consciously and subconsciously before we spit them back out. (Before they spit us back out.) It is a punk version of Harun Farocki's *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and the Inscription of War, 1989).

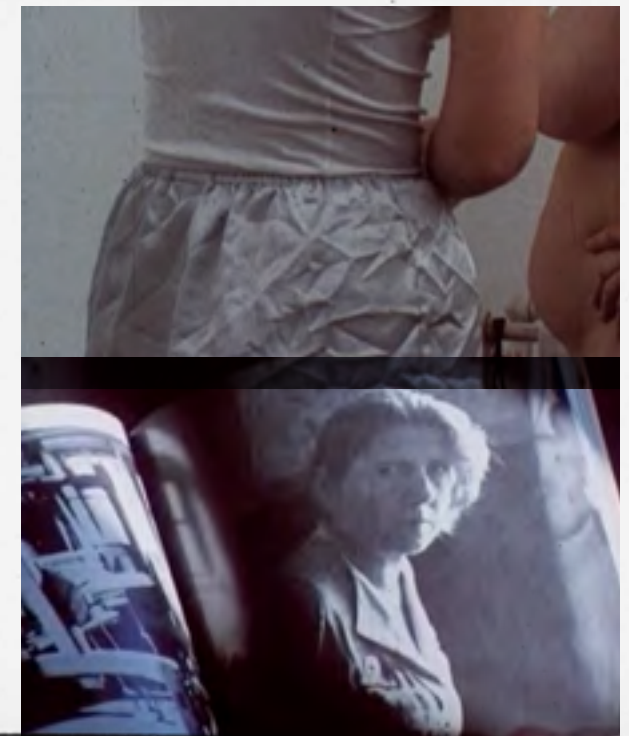
Our protagonist-above-the-slaughterhouse may or may not be some kind of artist, but he certainly cycles through a lot of mediums: cassette tapes, photographs, books, television (*Singing in the Rain*, a man beating a woman), magazines, projected slides, wall painting, taping up photos, naked selfies, dancing. Whatever else these forbidden pictures do, they circulate, endlessly, aggressively. They do not belong anywhere, they are never stable, their possible meanings have been both emptied out and postponed to some unknown future.

One could chart many paths through the labyrinth of *Verbotene Bilder*. I've chosen a simple one: two scenes (two images) that resonate directly with each other, forming a kind of axis. (Though, as I've said, there are many other paths/axes available.)

The first is, indeed, the first image—the only one appearing before the titles: an extreme close-up of an infant suckling at a woman's breast. While the image is not overtly romanticized (it is not in soft-focus, the light is not particularly diffuse and the extradiegetic sound/music that accompanies it is a simple, arrhythmic percussive track), it is undoubtedly one of the most

bucolic images in the film. The mother has no face, her body reduced to breast and nipple. But the baby suckles, and everything seems fine in the world.

Blanchot begins his essay "Two Versions of the Imaginary" with the question "But what is the image?" The Heins ask the same question. Blanchot continues "The image speaks to us, and it seems to speak intimately to us about ourselves... It is a limit next to the indefinite... which is to pacify, to humanize the unformed nothingness pushed toward us by the residue of being that cannot be eliminated. It cleans it up, appropriates it, makes it pleasant and pure and allows us to believe we are finding the transparent eternity





of the unreal.” This is the type of image Hein is fighting against: the insipid, sanctioned, comforting image. That this first image may pacify and humanize is not to be taken lightly; it would be difficult to make this claim of the images that follow.

A bit more than halfway through the film an image responds directly to this: in medium shot, a man sitting shirtless at a kitchen table attempts to suckle an infant. He doesn't try very hard, his nipples are tiny, he has an affable look on his face. The episode has a kind of flatness; it is not funny and it is not heavy. There is no dramatic or narrative import (the baby doesn't seem particularly bothered). It is a proposition, a response to the first image. (It also occurs between two scenes of male on female sexual violence.)

It is, I propose, a cadaverous image. And one that threatens to render the first image cadaverous. “The cadaver is its own image. It no longer has any relations with this world, except those of an image, an obscure possibility, a shadow which is constantly present behind the living form and which now, far

from separating itself from that form, completely transforms itself into a shadow. It resembles nothing.”

Blanchot continues, here explicitly comparing living body/cadaver to object/image (thing in the world to the image of the thing). “The image has nothing to do with signification, meaning, as implied by the existence of the world, the effort of truth, the law and the brightness of the day. Not only is the image of an object not the meaning of that object and of no help comprehending it, but it tends to withdraw from its meaning by maintaining it in the immobility of a resemblance that has nothing to resemble.” In this way, an image does indeed resemble a cadaver.

Blanchot then gives us two possibilities, “two versions of the imaginary,” “the choice between death as the possibility of comprehension and death as the horror of that impossibility; the choice between sterile truth and the prolixity of the not-true.” The Hein's images are forbidden in that they, in a punk manner, smash the sterile truth with the prolixity of the not-true.

Prolixity: unduly drawn out, too many words or, in this case, images/cadavers.



Reflections: A Conversation with Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, Gertrud Koch and Heide Schlüpmann about sex and their film work

W + B HEIN / KOCH / SCHLÜPMANN

Originally published in: *Frauen und Film*, December 1987, no. 43, *Sex in the Work Place*, pp. 27-36.

BIRGIT: I am convinced that you only have good contact with people where there is also a sexual current. Of course, you can expand that in your imagination, project it into relationships at work or cooperation. We've practically made our sexuality a work issue, which is of course an even more extreme step, but that has to do with the fact that people's relationships with each other are defined to a great extent by their sexuality. And even if they deny it, even if it doesn't take place officially at all, that doesn't mean that it has nothing to do with sexuality. Our problem is that we try to get a grip on our lives with films, our work ultimately, we try to clarify many problems we have through our work. And that's how it started. At first we were helpless with the emergence of the sexual problems that came up between the two of us. The way for us to deal with it and ultimately overcome it was to make a film about it. The first was *Love Stinks* (1982) and the second was *Verbotene Bilder* (Forbidden Pictures. 1986). Only, of course you catch yourself lying, you catch yourself cheating your way past problems. The third film, which is to be made now—which will show the female perspective—has problems with that. The work has

slowed down probably because I'm scared to death of what will happen. This risk...

HEIDE SCHLÜPMANN: Of what will happen in your relationship as a result of the film?



Birgit and Wilhelm in *Forbidden Pictures*

BIRGIT: I'm really afraid of it because I'm not at all sure whether I've mastered it, which is my problem. I could deal with Wilhelm just fine, it's basically madness. For example, in the film *Verbotene Bilder* I tried to slip into him, so to speak, to think in his thoughts, to take his images, to write in his voice. I'm not even sure if I didn't just slip a lot of fantasies in between all the death scenes that are in *Verbotene Bilder*. But at least I was trying to deal with him all the time, with what he produces. Now I'm sitting here and I'm supposed to analyze myself, bring myself out, and somehow I can't yet. It's very difficult for me.

WILHELM: It's also been an incredibly long process—getting to where we are now. We started making films in 1968 and it took us fifteen years to get to where we wanted to be. It took us ten years and we were also dealing with other works and people like Otto Muehl and others who were extremely concerned with sexuality. It took us ten years to dare to do that ourselves. Whether you deal with yourself, or use other people for it, it's a huge difference.

BIRGIT: I preferred to deal with Wilhelm rather than with me, ten times better.

WILHELM: I know, for example, from the first film *Love Stinks* (1982), where we have shots of Birgit, that was no problem at all for me because I recorded them. But it took Birgit almost half a year to look at those pictures.

BIRGIT: For example the picture with the menstruation. Wilhelm took it, was thrilled, and I wasn't able to look at it. Only now can I sit down in the cinema and say, that's wonderful, that's really beautiful. But in the end, I'm deathly afraid of sitting in the cinema when people comment on it.

WILHELM: This situation also has a great deal to do with the artistic process. What Oshima, for example, said about *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) in an interview: "It took me ten years to finally get an original fuck, that is, not to be faked." It was an incredible liberation for him. He already had it in his head. I notice immediately when something is wrong. If I had filmed Birgit and had any shyness it would have been impossible, that would have become clear immediately if you are sensitive to these images.

BIRGIT: In *Verbotene Bilder* I sometimes felt like someone who was exploiting Wilhelm, at certain points I had the feeling I was exercising power. For example during the masturbation which is a core scene of the film for both of us and which offends many people. That's where I did the camera. I feel I'm almost humiliating Wilhelm to the point that he's forced to do this scene. When you're filming there's also the moment when you rape the other person. The only question is how bad it is. I didn't do any harm to Wilhelm's soul at that moment, I forced him to do something he didn't want to do and he actually resisted anyway. But it was also clear that this simply had to be done for the film. When you

have sexual intercourse, that's also sometimes aggressive and violent. It's a mistake to say that there is no aggressiveness in sexuality, that it is only a gentle act of love, that is not true. One also measures strength by aggressiveness. I'm someone who needs that, and I enjoyed the moment I stood behind the camera and knew Wilhelm had to do it. I forced him to do it.

HEIDE: The pleasure you felt in being able to do it that way, does that come back to Wilhelm?

BIRGIT: He also needed me to overcome many things. It is always a two-way process.

HEIDE: You're not talking about overcoming something now, but the desire to use violence on someone. Can Wilhelm only react to this with desire?

WILHELM: When you're producing you have to go extremely far because then the tension is there. For example the slow masturbation scene in *Love Stinks*—that's just a problem for me now because the scene is too short—the film ran out.

BIRGIT: That's when the film in the camera ran out and we didn't have any more.

WILHELM: It would have been much nicer if it had been just one minute more. You can't reconstruct something like that, put in a new part because that's it, the tension is gone. You can artificially put yourself

in a situation like that, but it still means that you have to put the body in an extreme situation. During the recording it was freezing cold and incredibly exhausting. You could concentrate, the distraction was gone. That we can't work with other people is an infantile problem. Theoretically, we should be able to deal with other people, so why can't we? In the next film we have to get another woman, I can't put on a costume.

The joke is, when you've done it, you look at the shot two days later and you're just gobsmacked—not like Birgit who couldn't look at it for half a year. The shot is successful at the moment when you are ready to take it. That's the crucial thing. You can do that first of all simply with yourself, or you meet people who trust you absolutely because you can't take anything back. I can't say two days later: but we won't take this shot.

HEIDE: My question was whether this will become a new form of sexuality between you when you work with the camera.

BIRGIT: Certainly not during recording. I remember the last shot in *Love Stinks* was a real shag, and I was always thinking: I hope there's enough material. Hopefully Wilhelm will make it, hopefully he'll be done in a minute. It was really the very last of sex for me, I wasn't horny or anything there. I just heard the film rushing through the machine and I thought, damn it, I hope he makes it before this part is over. It's not erotic in front of the camera but there's an extreme tension,

for example, at the moment when I had to overcome myself in front of the mirror, it was like a meditation at the same time, you step away from yourself because you have to take the picture now. But I've never felt horny in front of the camera. There are people like Stephen Dwoskin who need the camera as a tool, but that's never the case with me at all. Of course this pre-occupation, this putting oneself aside, has given me enormous freedom and the possibility of voyeurism. This kind of confrontation through film has brought me enormously further in my sexuality, but in private and not in front of the camera. That's really the issue, that you make yourself aware of something by sitting at the editing table over and over again and not running away. That has tremendous personal development opportunities for both of us.

WILHELM: And also for self-confidence. When you show the film in public, let's say in a larger context and not in a private club, it's an incredible satisfaction, a pleasure.

BIRGIT: For me, it's a pleasure when people talk about it. That's why we like to travel with it so much.

HEIDE: It was a pleasure for you from the beginning?

BIRGIT: Yes.

HEIDE: But then it's also a masochistic pleasure, because people attack you horribly.



BIRGIT: It's exactly the struggle that you first had with yourself to make the film. In the end, you continue it with the other people—via the film. First of all, there's the private discussions that produced the film, which you continue... that's the pleasure of it, otherwise you probably wouldn't have made the film. When you notice that people are talking intensively, that's a great experience. It means you live with the film even after it's finished. I really enjoy the discussions. That's when people stop talking shit, they have to talk about something real.

HEIDE: Yes, but they have to talk about how you present your sexuality! They talk about you, your sexuality and your relationship. Where are the boundaries? You said earlier that you were afraid to make the new film about your sexuality and how that might affect your relationship. Aren't there limits to what can be portrayed



Wilhelm in *Love Stinks*

and thematized because you risk your relationship if you get too close to things?

BIRGIT: The limits exist only within us. Everything is representable. There are only the boundaries between us, there is nothing that is not manageable, representable. We have our own censorship, an inner one, not another one.

GERTRUD: Earlier you said that it is much easier for you to interpret Wilhelm and to say how he is or how you see him, to project onto him, than to see and understand yourself. Is this because it is actually something that Wilhelm should do? This seems to me a structural problem, that women have created a monopoly for themselves and are confined to it: to see sensitively, empathically, with great understanding, what buried feelings are going on in the man. Women

are confronted with a feeling of emptiness when they are supposed to perform this service for themselves. I think this is something they can't do on their own, people are incomplete beings who are always dependent on others. That's why I find your project exciting, to take the joint film as a piece of reciprocal projection. The way Wilhelm sees your menstrual blood, for example, which you can suddenly find beautiful what you previously found ugly, while you find his masturbation beautiful, which rather strikes him. I find this dimension, how it works reciprocally via a third mirror—which is the film—exciting.

WILHELM: When I'm in a relationship, I'm basically the new censoring authority. At first it was the mother or parents or friends. As a partner I now exercise the same censorship towards the other person. Just as the mother or father forbids the child to masturbate, whether that is real or in fantasy, now the adult forbids the other adult to masturbate. I am also an authority that I can surrender by recording, thank God.

I'm ecstatically excited by these images. It's not like these are fantasies of mine; some of my fantasies run in a completely different direction. There are all these death images that we haven't dealt with yet. My absolute infantile dream is to fuck a mute person, the next level is a dead person. But I need the other, I am not enough for myself, I need another body which makes no demands. That's not our real life, those are fantasies that start somewhere, they go through your head, you can't control it. That's how you get to the real images.

BIRGIT: The corpses have started to be selected by Wilhelm.

WILHELM: It's not by chance that these images of mute women are chosen. But then reality intercedes. For example, when I was in India, where I've now been for five weeks, I looked at a woman I liked, but when the voice was there, it was over. The voice rubs at everything, then everything becomes so trivial.

BIRGIT: The films don't really reflect reality, but the exciting thing is that you partly bring in fantasies. You work quite consciously piece by piece and say, I need to have this scene. But why you are now so fascinated or fanatically attached to the scene is not clear. A whole lot of your own fantasies are released with it, and that's the exciting process with the films. That's why, after a long initial struggle, I find it interesting to work with horror films and Trivialfilm, because in these films wishful fantasies are expressed unfiltered, which in the so-called A-film (as opposed to the B-film) are not allowed to occur. But especially in horror films, unbelievable fantasies are expressed—childish, naive ones that you have to struggle with.

HEIDE: You made *Love Stinks*, a film about your sexuality, where the images were attached to external forms of sexuality, not getting into the fantasy level, while the film *Verbotene Bilder* about Wilhelm's sexuality brings both together. You have greater difficulties in your new film which is supposed to work through your sexuality.

Wilhelm says that's your thing, you have to do that. On the one hand you can ask: why isn't he empathetically engaged in your film? On the other hand you can say: he's right because women have been overlaid far too much with male projections. I find it interesting that your first entry into the project is an examination of images of women in film, and you suddenly think, my fantasies are in the film, while that doesn't play such a role in the project with Wilhelm.

BIRGIT: It is difficult to say anything about this. The liberation process runs through these images. Out of helplessness, I now come back to the mother/daughter problem. Many things, such as my complete rejection of my body, must have a starting point in the mother/daughter confrontation. Now I want to play through this role with Mara (Mattuschka), if she does it, or maybe with someone else. That's something you can't really plan beforehand.

HEIDE: You have the role of the mother?

BIRGIT: Yes, although in the end it's not clear to me who is the mother or the daughter, because I also have a daughter. I'm a mother and a daughter at the same time and I think I'll be able to handle that with Mara. That's how we have always made films. Suddenly images and ideas come out of real life situations. I look for approaches where I force myself to lose the barriers that I have been holding onto.

WILHELM: This film is now being made without me. The point is: I can't comprehend these things at all. This is the utopia of some morons who think you can get into sexuality.

GERTRUD: I think it has something to do with the separations of body and voice that fire your imagination, maybe you can't stand female orgasm at all. The idea that this is a controlling voice, that it's not bearable to imagine that this body has a voice that's out of your control.

HEIDE: The barrier against getting involved with women, against empathic compassion, also has to do with the symbiotic relationship with the mother, which has not been transformed into an interplay of autonomy and relationship. This symbiotic relationship has not really dissolved, and possibly there are also the obstacles of not being able to empathize with women's sexuality because it lies under too much repression.

BIRGIT: It helped me to see that I have a sexuality. I always had the feeling that I didn't have any. But the problem is that now I suddenly notice the armour. The moment I am on the track and deal with it, I realize that there is a moment when everything in sexuality suddenly stops. It's like when a crate falls down or the clock or the electricity goes off. At a certain point, the feelings accumulate, and it's like being turned off. I don't see that as Wilhelm's fault because it was through

him that I found out about it in the first place. I think a lot of women might never figure out that it could be a problem. Who made me switch off before?

HEIDE: You just said that you will live and work together with Mara Mattuschka for four weeks, and that will be part of the film. That's very different in this project from the film that was about Wilhelm's sexuality, because there you did everything together.

BIRGIT: Wilhelm will be there. The films that are now finished were just as unplanned and uncertain beforehand. We always worked with foreign material. In *Verbotene Bilder* a lot of recordings were made, and later they become less and less important as you gradually get into the subject. You have to start, and the personal stuff comes later, as it progresses. Wilhelm will be there, of course, it's just new that we're bringing in someone else.





HEIDE: When you present yourselves and try to bring your sexual relationship to the public, when you go to the public with the films—where people talk about your films but also about you, you include them and draw them into your relationship in this roundabout way—very abstract and very protected—but you also include them. Now with the new film, as you pointed out, you're going to include someone during the shooting, which you see as a step.

BIRGIT: We started filming together because we were both new, we had painted before, and each had a troubled past. With filming you could start from scratch, that was very important. We both had to learn together but it turned out that we didn't learn various things.

For example I had a teaching job in 1973 and everything worked out wonderfully. Then I had to show a film and realized I had never put film in a projector. We didn't notice that because there was such a division of labor. Each of us had this experience. Wilhelm had to learn to give lectures. It was just as difficult with the abstract films as with the thematic films because you never know at the start what you're doing. You develop with the film material.

HEIDE: So it's a job you can only do in such a close relationship and not otherwise.

BIRGIT: People have often asked: who did that? You can never divide it up, because one idea follows from the other. One has the image, and then the other comes up with the technique. We came to the formal work, to the sexual, to our problems, because the problems we had dealt with before were not satisfying. That was simply exhausted at some point—the thinking, the possibilities, also the political moment. In 1968 it was very political to work abstractly. We had to establish making political personal films in Germany. This whole way of thinking, this new way of making films. In America it was different, this had already happened. We had to formulate the idea that film is not just an industry, and then we had to say radically: it's also film if I stick shit on the filmstrip. This extreme position had to be formulated once—then it was political. If I do this for the hundredth time today and win prizes for it, if I stick material on the film strip today, show the edge

holes, then it's no longer an achievement. For me, it's basically nothing anymore.

WILHELM: When we talk about work made in a partnership, it means that the one who is recording is capable of recording it in the first place. In a personal work, reception means readiness to receive. Though it may be that one partner is twenty years ahead of the other.

In *Love Stinks*, for example, I did the recording. Birgit had in her head ideas that had to do with her female sexuality and asked me to record. She said okay, I'll sit here naked, you sit behind the camera, and then it will be recorded. It looks very simple but it has to be set up correctly, you can't be nervous, you have to calmly move the camera to the left or right. That means there must be no taboo between what exists in front of the camera and what happens behind the camera. This always means a moment of happiness, which is now emerging as a reality in a two-person relationship, a partner relationship. But it is conceivable that, for example, a stranger could do this work just as well, as has been proven in film history. In the sixties, for example, Kurt Kren was capable of recording the actions of Otto Muehl because he had absolutely no inhibitions recording these things. No other person could do that. It is also conceivable outside of a direct two-way relationship.

HEIDE: Do you think your images are different because they were created in a private atmosphere?

BIRGIT: I think so. Muehl and Kren separated because their thoughts and goals were different. Muehl said, well, Kren leave that alone, I'll make my own films now. That was a very decisive point and the films became completely different. Kren said, I'll leave that alone because people only want to see what I've filmed and not what I've actually done. The tension between the two was quite obvious and continues today. They actually hate each other. People always loved something about them that is different than who they actually were.

With us it's more complicated. You need strength to endure what happens in front of the camera. That is rarely talked about. For example, many women say, which I think is absolutely right, that they can't work with other cameramen because they shoot the wrong thing. That is a very extreme point for us. In that respect, we can only rely on ourselves. I know that Wilhelm is shooting the right thing and Wilhelm knows I'm shooting the right thing. Mara says that she always puts herself in the center of the picture, so she knows what the picture will look like. If she has someone shooting her, like in *Parasympathica* (1986) or *Kugelkopf* (Ball Head, 1985), she had to be in the center of the picture, so whoever was behind the camera couldn't go wrong with the crop.

WILHELM: It's also a fear for people to have their private parts photographed by someone else. When we film people, we only choose people we like. Otherwise, you can't stand the pictures anymore, you can't even see the people after a while. You have to be able to show the film

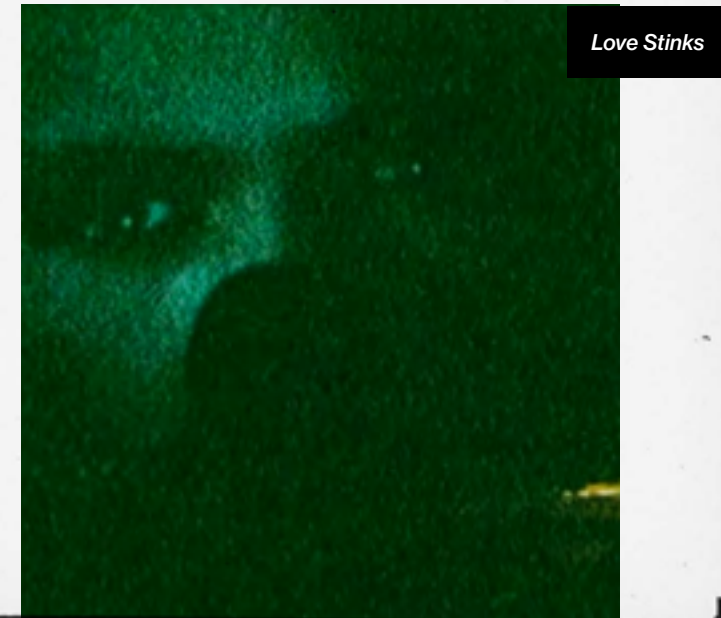
twenty years later. That is the most important thing for me. It's a love affair with objects and it's still a preliminary stage to what we ultimately want to achieve. It has to be able to go further and involve other people.

HEIDE: Are there no divergences around your images? I can't imagine that Wilhelm doesn't have certain images and fixations that are not identical with how you see or portray yourself. This also comes out in other remarks, for example, that he has the feeling he doesn't understand you at all, that he can't empathize with your sexuality. This has to be reflected in the way you are received. Are there any arguments between you?

BIRGIT: So far, Wilhelm has gone ahead and said: this is what we're going to do now. The next step can't be made yet. I can't say: now I have a script and someone will fly out of the sky. That's the difficult thing about applying for film funding because you don't actually know what you're offering them. Neither of us knows what's going to happen, and that's a big problem every time. You clarify things bit by bit, of course. But there is always a certain fear, a risk.

GERTRUD: The problem is how far you can get with a concept of radical authenticity and complete self-exposure? The courage to be honest is something Protestant which is quite ambiguous because it's simply a cultural form, and when you see it from the outside you ask yourself: what is the secret of these images? Birgit said that when you fucked together she

thought about the film material running out. What the camera captures in terms of authenticity could actually have been fear that something might break down—which is also a sexual fear. For me, these are overlapping stories. I no longer know whether the interesting thing about the film is what Birgit was really thinking in the situation, or what the images show. What kind of sexuality does it show? Is it what you recognize as your own, or are these images of a sexuality from a long cohabitation, something functional, like the way you have to eat every day. Perhaps these scenes show something you can't give up because they simply belong to life, they no longer have a charged or special dimension. I found these aspects very interesting. It's much more depressing than many other films, it has an eerie sadness.



Love Stinks

WILHELM: In our intimate relationships we always lie about something that gets buried until it comes up again in the next relationship. This compulsion to repeat is an incredibly regressive process.

BIRGIT: *Love Stinks* came into being relatively uncontrollably, from moments where it became clear emotionally that this must now be portrayed. It was not a process where we say, "Now we have A and now comes B and then C," but something quite wild. It wasn't logical, it was put together later. It was made very emotionally. After the film, the thinking and learning really began. *Verbotene Bilder* was made much more consciously.

HEIDE: That's why *Love Stinks* has more authenticity, not necessarily because this is your reality now, but maybe because everything is not so controlled, or that you are discovering what you want to do.

BIRGIT: If you lose your innocence, so to speak, you don't want to write a scientific treatise right away. Or it's about regaining innocence because you're entering new territory again.

HEIDE: The question is also: what can you achieve today by exposing yourself in front of the camera like that?

BIRGIT: You can try to tell the truth, to approach your work without compromise, which you can't do in all political situations. If you're not able to work politically

in a proper way, then film work is still the only place to keep my honesty. I can work on it as long as I want, I don't have to push for time, I don't have to do what people ask me to do. I can work out the issue until it's the way I mean it, and I don't have to make compromises. That's the value of this work in general.

GERTRUD: Did you ever consider making a film about sexuality as you experience it in a fictional form with actors?

BIRGIT: If we could, we would have done it already.

GERTRUD: That's interesting. Where is the leap between what you were talking about earlier, where Wilhelm says that Birgit has these images in her head which are then staged somehow? That should also be possible with actors.

WILHELM: Anything goes, only we can't do it. It is our inability, not the idea that stops us.

GERTRUD: You see only yourselves in your inner images? You don't transform yourselves into other configurations?



Forbidden Pictures

BIRGIT: The honest thing is that we can't tell stories in that form.

HEIDE: Somehow that can't be quite right because there is always such an impetus in your films to confront yourself with your own body. The inhibitions involved are also an impetus for your way of working.

WILHELM: There's also the question of how we try to include other people in our films. We extend ourselves from the one-way street of our relationship. In *Verbotene Bilder* there are a lot of other people who have been exploited quite unscrupulously. They didn't know what was happening to them, they just had to do everything we forced them to do and of course that's always criminal. We have not yet come far enough.

BIRGIT: We question ourselves fully every time. It's not always the case that the ideal corresponds to what we want, it's just a helpless approximation of what we actually imagine. You make the same film a hundred times, even though it doesn't look like it. There's always the desire to get the film right for once. That's a process, too.

WILHELM: The first shot of *Forbidden Pictures* is exploitation. We sat in that damn apartment for a day and a half waiting to see when the kid would be hungriest. Then we suddenly realized: very early in the morning. It's important that the nipple comes out because the nipple is connected to the penis—all these symbols.

If the child had been drinking at noon, it would have been for shit. We would have thrown the shot away. You have to be cool and ruthless with people in a situation like that. She had to wipe her kid's ass and she did it, though it wasn't clear to her what we wanted to do with it.

HEIDE: You said that you would like to make fictional films but cannot. It sounds like you are unfortunately only capable of doing things with yourselves.

BIRGIT: A film like *Deer Hunter* (1978) inspired us immensely. At that moment ideas come, you want to do something like that, you want to be able to make films in that form. That is not to say that we are not satisfied with the way we work. But it's a restriction if you can't express certain ideas. It's already the case that films like *Verbotene Bilder* are hardly ever shown. No festival has shown it after Berlin—that's a restriction.

HEIDE: Is that because fiction is the traditional cinema form or is it the subject matter? Perhaps you want to make a film that doesn't fit?

BIRGIT: You still want it to be shown. And then you think about whether the same content could be transmitted differently and be better understood. You ask yourself whether the barrier is not in your own inability. I want to convey this and that, I can only do it this way but why can I only do it this way? Maybe if I did it differently, I would succeed. I think it's too simplistic to

say that others are not so radical, that they don't push the content so far. Oshima, for example, took it quite far and his film can be shown in all the video stores. I find it a problem to have to practically beg for the film to be shown at all.

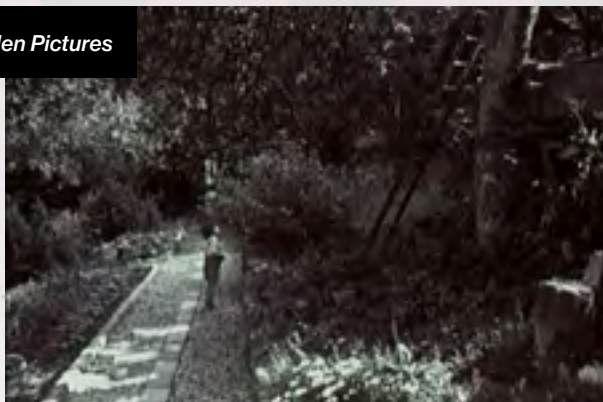
HEIDE: In fictional films you can portray insights about yourself or your sexuality, you can depict sexual fantasies, but you can't depict the process of making private things public, which is very strong in *Love Stinks*. How are you going to make that fictional?

WILHELM: Oshima said in an interview that he was jealous of his actor fucking. He used the man as a substitute for what he couldn't do himself on screen.

HEIDE: *Love Stinks* communicates something that usually doesn't come out in the open in two-person relationships, about sexuality in everyday life. You can't achieve that by separating it from your private life in a fictional story, then it gets lost.

BIRGIT: *Love Stinks* is showing now, but it was made five years ago, maybe *Verbotene Bilder* will arrive in three years. For us, it's not okay that the work is so little understood and accepted. What we learned in our performances is that things that come across, come across everywhere! Whether it's in a museum or a pub the reaction is always the same, no matter what audience you have. If these films fail, we failed, not the films.

Forbidden Pictures



HEIDE: But isn't that related to the fact that one of the gratifications you want is from the audience, how the films are received and what the films mean for your relationship? The process of making is also important; you deal with yourselves through the camera and later at the editing table. Wilhelm makes a recording of you which you can accept after half a year and that brings something to your relationship. You can't be dissatisfied with the fact that they don't achieve this effect in public because this is only part of your film work.

GERTRUD: Your films are more than a therapeutic video recording that one plays in one's living room for the purpose of discussing relationships. It depends very much on the creation of a public sphere that turns them into public images.

BIRGIT: That's precisely what doesn't work, that's the disappointment. The private works, but we are making art after all—the transition into public images doesn't work.

HEIDE: But is it possible under our structures of private and public to make films that on the one hand have the inward function and at the same time the outward function, where one really needs and wants both? Because that is precisely one of the themes of the films: the relationship between private and public.

BIRGIT: We believed that it would work and are horrified to discover that it does not work in this form.

WILHELM: And I think it can't work any other way.

BIRGIT: Wilhelm and I are very different in that respect. When there are defeats, I always hold myself absolutely responsible. Wilhelm says the others have to learn. That's a different kind of projection, for me every defeat is absolutely my failure, I have to learn.

HEIDE: After all, it's not a defeat. You can't say that you haven't created public images at all. Nor can you say that just because millions don't read Joyce, he hasn't found a public language.

BIRGIT: What we never talk about, what one never admits to oneself, and what for me is an incredibly big part of the work, is the horrible disappointment that it is nothing. The arduous task of keeping it up and not despairing that it's no good at all. For Wilhelm, that's not a problem.

GERTRUD: Objectively you are not without success, that can't be said. The fact that we are talking today shows to some extent how far your work and concerns have actually become public.

BIRGIT: Yes, but no one has discussed it with us. With every new film, thoughts revolve around the fact that it must be possible to make it somehow, though maybe it can't be made after all. But for me it already influences the thinking about the next film.

HEIDE: It's probably not just success or reaching a broader public, but the feeling that there is no adequate response to what you put into the films. You always have the feeling that you are in an empty space.

BIRGIT: So few people ask the right questions you have the feeling it doesn't really make sense.

Kali-Filme by W + B Hein

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN: VIPER FESTIVAL CATALOGUE 1988

Mysteries of the Clouds and Rain 10 minutes, 1987

Schwestern 12 minutes, 1987

Diner Au Motel, 16mm, 15 minutes, 1987

Kali: Frauenfilm, 12 minutes, 1987

Kali: Kriegsfilm, 7 minutes, 1988

Kali: Feuerfilm, 3 minutes, 1988

Ich Spucke auf Dein Grab, Dia-Performance,
20 minutes, 1987

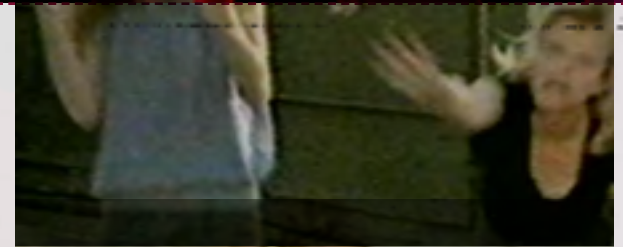
Kali: O-Film, 4 minutes, 1988

The *Kali-Filme* show fantasies of sexuality and violence that are taboo in official culture; but we can find them in the lowlands of the Trivialfilm.

Kali is a courageous goddess, a mother goddess from the Hindu mythology of the Old World. She is at one and the same time a mother and a castorting woman. Since time immemorial men have been afraid of her power. The *Kali: Frauenfilm* (Women's film) gives a picture of the Kali and other juices.

We deal with sexuality and violence in the Trivialfilm, or more precisely, in the horror and women's prison movies which differ markedly from the art film. Trivialfilme are true psychodramas, in which the originally repressed makes its return. We have to ask ourselves in every case what we want to see. We must always ask ourselves how these images of women are created and what they mean for men and women. We will use film clips to examine the validity of traditional gender roles, especially in sexuality.

(Note: This was an early version of the movie, it's still being presented in separate chapters, and as Birgit recounts in the interview with Daniel Kothenschulte, she later cut out the first part "Mysteries of the Clouds and Rain.")



Kali-Filme

JIM HOBERMAN

Originally published in the *Village Voice*, 1989

There's nothing particularly delicate about *Kali-Filme*, most of which is refilmed video of the most tawdry exploitation fare (porn, splatter, female prison movies, gruesome Third World actioners—the movies that Germans engagingly classify as Trivialfilm). As artists, the Heins are purposefully artless; more than any other filmmakers, they understand the power of bad photography. Watching this movie, one instantly senses when some taboo is being broken, but the grainy, shadowy picture quality insures that there will be a delay in figuring out exactly what the taboo is: you experience the image before decoding it.

Having suggested that the entire slash 'n'gash genre is the expression of displaced castration anxiety, the Heins give women a measure of revenge, with Dvorak's *New World Symphony* underscoring a succession of cat fights and female slugfests—the G-string mayhem ultimately escalating into a series of prison riots in which women attack their male guards. Then bloodthirsty Kali dances off to war: jungle combat, laughing killers, choppers over the 'nam. Increasingly dehumanized, the exciting "Eat lead!" confrontations segue into staged explosions,

burning bodies, and finally documentary footage of battlefield corpses, their faces contorted in terror.

Kali-Filme is at once more naive and more worldly than our homegrown example of "transgressive" cinema. The Heins are hardly self-aggrandizing. Rather, there's an anthropological sweetness in their enterprise—as though they've turned over the boulder of mass consciousness and found this festering *schmutz* beneath.



Kali-Filme
Stills

W + B HEIN













Kali-Filme Q&A

with Birgit Hein and Daniel Kothenschulte

HEIN / KOTHENSCHULTE

DANIEL: Shall we go over there to the stage?

BIRGIT: On the stage? Theatre? No way. (they laugh)

DANIEL: Let's talk about the goddess Kali: icon, image and myth.

BIRGIT: The interesting thing about her is that she's the god of both childbearing and killing at the same time. In parts of India she is worshipped as the absolute goddess of all. Kali was always connected to a lot of blood. Her red tongue represents menstrual blood and in traditional imagery she has chains around her neck made out of the heads of men.

DANIEL: I was just in India, and for a country that brought forth the Kama Sutra, sex is very much a taboo. It's surprising how in such a cultivated country there is so little known about Kali. But you've set out to change that with your film. Blood and sex have one thing in common, they're not depicted in life, but always in cinema, right? How did this project come about?

BIRGIT: *Kali-Filme* (1988) developed film by film until we had eight parts. In the mid-80s new laws about the depiction of violence in film came out forcing video stores to sell their films. We set out to buy as much as we could and made many discoveries, like Meir Zarachi's *I Will Spit On Your Grave* (1978). It's a very violent American film that shows a woman raped by four men. She makes a plan and kills them systematically one by

one. We shot clips directly from the TV onto film, the only one that suffered from this transfer was the slide sequence. Wilhelm photographed still frames from the monitor, severed pieces of women and other horrors. We refilmed the slides but they turned out a little soft.

My favourite section, which I regard as mine, is *Kali-Frauenfilm*, the women's film which is the eighth and final part. It's based on women's prisons films. This ignited enormous rage and disputes within the feminist scene. The argument was: this is not how women are. They are not as violent as they are being shown here. *Kali-Filme* was shown in festivals in 1988-89, and in women's festivals, and was enormously rejected. This happened at the moment of my separation with

Wilhelm, I really got my ass kicked. There is a lot of rage bundled in that film.

DANIEL: The women's prison movie is a genre unto itself. There are often female prison guards...

BIRGIT: Yes, almost always. Along with the utopia of jailbreaks. How to escape someone else's prison?

DANIEL: In this genre is there a "last girl standing" that ultimately survives?

BIRGIT: There is a play of stereotypes. The young innocent girl (the "young fish") falls victim to the prison



guard, usually a lesbian, who rapes her. The guards are evil. There is always a struggle for freedom, liberation, breaking out. This is an allegory for the greater feminist struggle which is a real fight, otherwise it wouldn't require such images. The genre is called WIP (women in prison) films, and it's very popular. Jonathan Demme directed one called *Caged Heat* (1974). I used some of that also.

DANIEL: That's an amazing film, a Roger Corman production. Did you enjoy watching those films?

BIRGIT: These Trivialfilm (exploitation films) were a completely new experience for me because I used to be afraid of horror movies. I didn't want to see these primitive horrors where women are cut into pieces. But after a while I was able to watch and they turned into something totally different.

DANIEL: I understand; Cindy Sherman is a great enthusiast of this type of stuff. Sometimes what emerges for artists is a fascination for the genre itself. Feminist film theory has mined this work in complex studies that show how unwanted and forbidden pictures have wound up in these low cost productions.

BIRGIT: *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931) was our starting point, the basis of everything. I wrote an article in *Frauen und Film* (feminist film journal) that opposed the (mainstream feminist) Alice Schwarzer campaign targetting the genre of women's prison films.

DANIEL: I couldn't help noticing the beauty of these images. A good image is very important.

BIRGIT: No shit.

DANIEL: Is that intuitive or intentional? There's nothing on screen that doesn't have also a formal quality, right?

BIRGIT: Yes. But after the war movies and explosions there comes a black-and-white film that Wilhelm put together. He spent months sifting through footage, trying to see if he could find real dead bodies in films. But even in Nazi times it was already forbidden. Like many others, Wilhelm's father was heavily wounded in the

war, but there was still a line between what you're supposed to see and what you experienced. We were the generation haunted by what they were unable to see. That's why this film sticks out from the others.

DANIEL: Most of the images are from American movies?

B: No, also German. For instance there's one scene which is mad. It shows horses standing in water, made by a German cameraman. It's impossible, like a surrealist film. But it wasn't really usable for war propaganda so this material disappeared into an archive. These images are in bad condition, though they're still good enough to be able to make out small flies.



DANIEL: In your work it doesn't matter how many generations the image has undergone, something essential remains.

BIRGIT: It depends on your goal. In *Die unheimlichen Frauen* I wouldn't have shown footage with different aspect ratios, or with so many large scan lines. In this film it works, the material allows every insult because the material itself is insulting.

DANIEL: You use late romantic symphonic music of the slowest kind which offers the project something very elegiac, heavy and death drawn. Particularly the music of Grieg. What else do we hear?

BIRGIT: Antonín Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 "From the New World." The *Kali-Frauenfilm* (Kali-Women's film) has an incredible sadness that needed orchestral music. Dvořák fit perfectly, except for a tiny piece of trumpet that I cut out, but the rest of the procession fit perfectly, as if it was written for the film.

DANIEL: You are not the first to use classical music in this way. In Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975) he uses Handel's *Sarabande* which touches you regardless of what is shown. You've always been careful using music and passed along these concerns to your students. But found footage works are sometimes carried by music. I feel quite a reserve and hesitation using music that makes everything work.

BIRGIT: True, it is quite dangerous with this music. And the Grieg gets on my nerves nowadays, the loops and repetition.

DANIEL: You could do a recut.

BIRGIT: No way. That particularly doesn't work because this film has been signed under both our names (Birgit and Wilhem Hein).

DANIEL: So change is taboo.

BIRGIT: It's not going to be touched. Though I did it once. I cut ten minutes out of *Kali-Filme*. (laughs)

DANIEL: Questions from the audience?

AUDIENCE: Are the *Kali* films always in this particular order? Were they conceived together? Are there other, newer ones?

BIRGIT: They were conceived individually, but each provided a context for what followed. We made the war film, and the explosion film came after. They were all compiled into one big reel for a festival, and they will stay like this. Nothing will be changed except the *Kali-Frauenfilm* that I had already uncoupled and played individually. I cut off the beginning of one the eight pieces. And the very first film I don't want to see



anymore so I took it out. It was just too simple. That's why it's ten minutes shorter. The *Kali-Frauenfilm* is an individual film that I've shown several times in connection with my other work. But altogether as one thing, I haven't shown the *Kali-Filme* in ten years.

DANIEL: It's all on video, not 16mm?

BIRGIT: Tonight it's shown on video. Originally we transferred all the footage to U-matic to edit precisely, then we filmed this off a monitor on 16mm. I just gave my 16mm film prints to the Deutsche Kinemathek because the risk of damaging them at a screening is too high.

AUDIENCE: Francis Ford Coppola also used elegiac classic music and it works on both an intellectual and emotional level.

Daniel: I think you set up a hierarchy of pictures. You didn't want Hollywood, you wanted B movies. But you still used *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

BIRGIT: We didn't find enough explosions and wanted this nice final image with the helicopters and fireworks. Other than *Apocalypse Now* it was all B and C movies. Today I might not do that because of copyright. On the one hand you don't have rights anymore, and on the other people upload everything without asking. It's crazy how extreme it's become.

DANIEL: As soon as you take an image it changes, if you change the context it produces a different meaning. When I watch the film with the stills the question automatically arises: where is this from, in what narrative context has this come into being? When I see a found footage film I always play "guess the movie." I want to connect clips back to their source. But in your *Kali-Filme* I stop this inner game and I'm quite happy about that. How important is that for you?

Birgit: It was never a concern for us. We avoided images that were iconic.

AUDIENCE: Did you make choices based on copyright?

Did you feel that using B or C movies meant that this material was alright to use?

BIRGIT: We couldn't give a shit about that but nowadays it's more complicated. The clips are very short and fall into this citation/quotation category. In the late 80s we didn't give a shit, it didn't interest us. This work doesn't make money so no idiot is interested in it. But the moment it shows on prime time TV hell would break loose. Marcel Schwierin was a student who wanted to make an entire film using only excerpts from Nazi films. He made an intensive study over a period of years. It would have cost him one million dollars



for the rights. But then the law changed and he was allowed to make his film under very specific conditions.

I heard it's the porn producers who make the most trouble. With them you have to be hellishly careful. You don't have to look like that at me. The porn phase of XSCREEN was 40 years ago.

DANIEL: I know I know.

BIRGIT: We wanted to use porn in the *Kali-Filme* so we bought it. The opening film is from a roll of 16mm Turkish porn from the 1930s. We also purchased a *Faust* film, black-and-white porn from the 1920s.

AUDIENCE: Did you contact Werner Nekes who collects film? He also collects porn.

BIRGIT: No, though of course we knew Nekes, we were in Duisburg and he lived in Mülheim. We showed together at the Knokke-le-Zoute Festival but didn't have a friendly relationship. We were rivals.

AUDIENCE: How did you come across this Turkish porn?

BIRGIT: I don't recall but I would also love to know how we got it. In the 60s we ran XSCREEN in Köln and started to illegally screen porn in the big cinema, it was the cause of gossip all through town. We were incredibly hot to get old-style porn. But where did we get it?

AUDIENCE: Where did you find the black-and-white war movies?

BIRGIT: Those were selected from TV documentaries, then carefully and pedantically clumped together. Very little of this kind of material was available, in the IWF (Institute of Scientific Film) there was basically nothing. But after reunification in 1990 hundreds of hours of footage emerged, the doors opened.

DANIEL: Then there is amateur footage. If I was looking today, I would go on eBay. I once bought a camera that had been mounted inside an airplane with film still in the camera. They automatically filmed bombs

as they were dropping. I also bought a film made by a soldier on the front without knowing what he shot. If you have war footage someone will buy it. Der Spiegel is a magazine with its own TV channel that does nothing else but finding new war footage and publishing it.

BIRGIT: Spiegel also publishes DVDs and I bought them all. I have several DVDS on Goebbels and collected other material for my film *Kriegsbilder* (Images of War) (2006).

DANIEL: What I find difficult about buying work from a collector is that the context is disturbed, sometimes even erased. For our work we need to know where the



images come from, if they were made by a political party or as part of a propaganda campaign for instance, or if it's amateur footage.

BIRGIT: In the 70s film scholars already remarked that the same Second World War material was used by Marxists and capitalists, but in different contexts.

DANIEL: Would you have ever thought that found footage would become such a popular genre in the art film today?

BIRGIT: It beckons, it offers itself to your control. If you're not a narrative filmmaker that wants to realize



images that don't exist, then the first step, if you're fascinated with images, is to choose the ones that talk to you. That's how we started. It took us ten years to begin shooting film ourselves. A film like *Baby* wouldn't have been possible in that time. Found footage work began in the 1920s and 30s, it's not such an innovation, it runs throughout film history. But before taping off the TV, the accessibility of found footage was dramatically limited. As soon as you could tape documentaries on video, everyone created their own collection.

DANIEL: That's the amazing thing about Bruce Conner films from the 1950s and 60s, everything was done with film.

Birgit: Matthias Müller said his students love VHS because of the way it looks.

DANIEL: So they consciously choose bad quality?

BIRGIT: Yeah, now everyone also loves super 8, that's also ok. This aesthetic has a very specific value.

AUDIENCE: How did you come to approach film in this particular way?

BIRGIT: With this one? Well, I had already made films like this for twenty years. It developed piece by piece out of that work. *Kali-Filme* is like *Rohfilm* (1968), I don't see any difference, I don't see any kind of dramatic change or a new quality. The new step for us was

in 1982 with the film *Love Stinks*. We made the images and put ourselves in front of the camera.

In *Kali-Filme* we used narrative films, for a long time that was not our interest at all. In the 1980s we were drawn to B pictures because they dealt in a more direct way with sexuality and violence. That fascinated us.

DANIEL: Those films were rarely shown on TV, they became visible only when the video market emerged.

BIRGIT: That's true. Let me tell a story about my former student Peter Zorn. I made a seminar with him called *Violence in Media*, and with this beautiful title we received good funding. (laughs) Students brought their favourite horror movies that we watched and talked about together. Everything that was forbidden to show at the beginning of the 90s was shown in this seminar. They were able to access the forbidden film *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) because someone found a cassette in a Turkish corner shop for vegetables. They were incredibly successful in searching for material in the underground. *The Evil Dead* (1981) was also long forbidden. There were a couple of horrible ones. I already had a thick skin back then for these kind of splatter movies. This was one of the most popular seminars, everyone came with complete passion.

DANIEL KOTHENSCHULTE: Guilty pleasures. Well, I guess we've answered all questions. Thanks very much Birgit Hein. (applause)

Radical:

Steve Anker interview

STEVE ANKER



STEVE: I only had a few encounters with Birgit Hein in my life. The first was when I had just moved to San Francisco in 1980. My predecessor at the San Francisco Cinematheque, Carmen Vigil, had invited Birgit and (her husband) Wilhelm out to show a program of short films. The two of them reinforced each other's toughness. The films were very austere, formal, strong.

It was 40 years ago but I have a vivid sense of seeing their "structural films." Artists like Michael Snow and Ernie Gehr who wore that label hated the term. But a lot of English filmmakers named themselves structural filmmakers. I remember a touring program from the mid-to-late 70s of English structural films that were almost by the book, made with the ideas that P. Adams Sitney had in mind when he coined the term.

I remember being impressed by Birgit and Wilhelm's work, it had a power I didn't see in a lot of material-based films. She was very tough, they were a team and bounced off each other's energy. There was an audience of 25-30 if that, that was pretty common at the Cinematheque in the late 70s/early 80s.

Steve Anker divided



INTERNATIONAL EXPERIMENTAL FILM CONGRESS TORONTO 1989

From left to right: Bart Testa, David Rimmer, Howard Guttenplan, Jules Engel, Christine Panushka, Annette Michelson, Tom Graff, Kathy Elder, Doina Popescu, Mike Hoolboom, Jim Shedden, Gamma Bak, Christoph Janetzko, Petra Chevriar, Noël Carroll, Holly MacKay, Kathryn (Kate) MacKay, Vincent Grenier, Barbara Sternberg, Judy Gouin, Fred Camper. Photo by Bill Stamets

My second encounter was at the Experimental Film Congress in Toronto in 1989. It was a contentious gathering. One of the main criticisms was that there were not enough voices involved that didn't represent the Bruce Elder/Stan Brakhage "big corner" of the field, there wasn't enough minority representation and young voices. I was supportive of the renegade energy, I believe in that, especially in the field of radical art making. Looking at the catalogue recently I was surprised that, in fact, there was a lot of representation by younger and minority artists as well as programs with political themes.

There was tension throughout the entire event and then Birgit Hein made her presentation. I remember the effect it had both on the audience at the show and on the entire event—she turned it on its head, not easy to do in a situation where everybody's already looking for a fight. (laughs) It was a film program on beautification, the racket of women being made beautiful and what that meant in reality. She showed a number of surgical study films for medical students. One showed a woman after she had an operation on her face with her scars and abrasions. It was so intense and physical.

There's only one other program I saw in my life that had the same kind of visceral physical impact. It happened at the Collective of Living Cinema in New York in the early-to-mid-70s. It was a show of really hardcore porn from the collection of the guy who started Screw Magazine. People left crying. Birgit's show was a comparably intense physical experience, and challenged, among other things, the world of film art. None

of these films purported to be art, they were indifferent to aesthetics and were not made by artists. They were really about closing the gap between viewer and screen. It was calculated not just to upset people but to challenge our safety in our seats, and to show how these illusions could be as powerful as a slap in the face.

It was also a confrontation between society's ideal of beauty in women and what was really happening to women's bodies through the process of this beautification.

MIKE: In the frame of the Congress it must have challenged ideas of who was or wasn't an artist, blown up ideas of categories and territorial pissings, and asked how these outlier films could create experiences that were more vivid than anything coming out art/film schools, not to mention the established canon feted in Toronto (the Congress was framed by retrospectives of dead fathers Jack Chambers and Hollis Frampton.)

STEVE: Exactly. And it was determined to pull back the curtain to show what was really happening to women. It would be interesting to reconstruct that program, looking at different points of the constellation being constructed. Birgit's presentation was defiant, but her defiance was good-natured. There are many filmmakers who loved to challenge and confront, and they would frequently do it in a very belligerent way. Chantal Akerman, Ken Jacobs, there are plenty... I remember a Chantal Akerman show where she was yelling at the audience. Someone like Michael Snow

was not like that. As someone with that stature and influence he was an exception.

Birgit looked like she was enjoying herself. She was up there almost with a smile on her face. And it wasn't a fuck you smile, she was having a good time stirring the pot. I was amazed that she could be so cool in that circumstance and relish not upsetting people per se, but enjoying the phenomena that she had unleashed.

On the one hand I was shocked and physically and emotionally upset, but at the same time I was amazed and marvelling at what she had done. I remember there were people who walked out, some were angry, but everything else about that week had to do with the world of avant-garde film and people positioning themselves within it. This was a very political moment at the fringes of this fringe activity. She came with something so real, the kind of thing in a Brakhagian sense that one would never get to see. It was like taking a camera into the morgue.

There was a range in the evening's program, it wasn't one movie after another of the same character. But it was all about the illusions we create and our physicality as creatures, as beings. It was ultimately a performance that put us in a situation that was totally out of our control. It was astonishing.

I spent some time with her that week in Toronto. I was compelled to talk with her and she seemed so approachable. It wasn't like omg, I'm risking my life by going up to her. I don't know how many people wanted to talk to her, but I got to know her as much as possible in a week.

Not long after I invited her to the San Francisco Cinematheque to show *Kali-Filme* (1988). It uses a recognizable technique, collage filmmaking using found footage. If I remember correctly a lot of the material was from exploitation films, pretty seedy stuff, and it created a faux narrative about women using violence as retribution against violent men. Once again she was throwing something powerful right in our face, it was a real polemic. People were outraged and fascinated and pretty shaken up. She presented with the same aplomb, she was totally present and immersed, but her ego was not on the line. She had a job to do and she was doing it and she relished it.

Years later she came back and showed *Kali-Filme* again, along with some of her later films. You couldn't meet anybody more direct. Her presentation and work is as vivid as the most physical Michael Snow film, which is like comparing apples and peaches because they couldn't be more different, but the point is she

From left to right: Joyce Wieland, Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann



really understood how to burst through the screen and the fourth wall.

There are many figures of her generation who I became friends with, and while we were never close, I always enjoyed seeing her because she was so present and had a vitality that I found infectious. It was very appealing. I never got into a fight with her. I have no stories about her as a fighter but one can only imagine she was tough as nails when she had to be. You don't put yourself out in the world like that and not encounter harsh responses.

She wasn't the kind of person who was stewing. My sense is that she saw herself as a provocateur,

amongst other things. Joyce Wieland, Valie Export, Carolee Schneemann and Birgit all rebelled against what they saw as a male-dominated field. They delighted in pushing buttons and taking stabs at the status quo of experimental avant-garde film.

Birgit loved the stage. She relished being in a position where she could make whatever twists and turns she could possibly do to confront. She clearly took delight in challenging. There were certain artists who did that by nature—Jack Smith, Luther Price... we're talking about such different artists—and it was as natural for each of them as breathing. She delighted being the ring master who could pull the chair out from under you.

I got to know most of the key figures who were "our elders" so to speak, along with the majority of artists who emerged at the end of the last century who made significant work. There have only been a small number of artists who had equal power in their work and in their public lives to totally transform an observer's perspective. Stan Brakhage, Barbara Hammer, Ken Jacobs and Schneemann had that ability. Birgit was another. She came to life when she was put in a situation where she could affect perception and deepen the understanding of what's at stake in being alive. She was a true radical.

Rose Lowder and Birgit Hein, International Experimental Film Congress 1989, photo by Bill Stamets



Works of Young Europeans: Erotic Films by Women

W + B HEIN

SATURDAY JUNE 1, 5PM (1989)

The worst form of oppression which women have to suffer is their sexuality. The repression goes so deep that many women even willingly relinquish sexuality. To win back desire, to show it in its totally diversity and to break existing taboos is for me the most important task for contemporary women artists.

B. Hein



between by Claudia Schillinger

The Sinking of Titania by Mara Mattuschka

W + B Hein

In the last ten years experimental film has been established as a broad movement in Europe. As opposed to the seventies, where the structural film dominated the movement, now all kinds of “styles” exist parallel to each other, nearly as many as there are personalities. There are so many young talents, and of such diversity, that it seems to be impossible to make a choice of 120 minutes of European film without performing an injustice.

We decided to select a program of erotic films by women from Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Great Britain, because like this we can present at least one very important current of contemporary work properly, and we can engage in a necessary discussion with these films.

Until the end of the 60s avant-garde filmmakers were mostly men, while women were most often the objects rather than the subjects behind the films. But since the beginning of the 70s women filmmakers have come to the forefront of the avant-garde in dealing with sexuality.

In 1972, Valie Export made her film *Man & Frau & Animal* in which she shows real masturbation in a

bathtub and pictures of a vagina with blood and sperm. In the same year, Ann Severson completed a revolution in imagery with her film *Near the Big Chakra* where she fills the screen with one vagina after the other in close-up. Both films break the greatest taboos of pictorial presentation; even today they have not lost their power and impact.

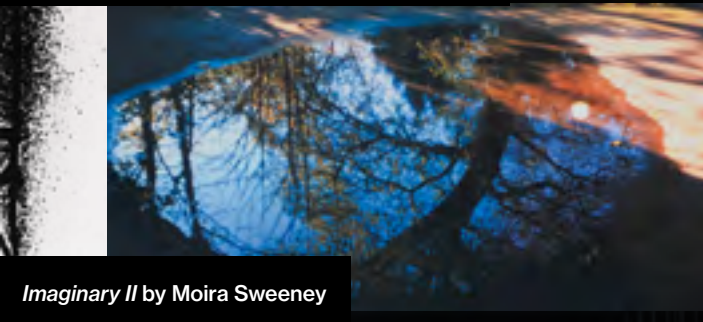
In 1973 Value Export refers to another aspect of women's sexuality in her film *Remote...Remote...* Repressed aggression leads to compulsive masochistic acts such as biting her fingernails until they are raw and bleeding. In 1974 Chantal Akerman made her wonderful film *Je, tu, il, elle* which ends with a vital love scene between two young women.

It has been a long way from the angry presentation of the tabooed female genital area at the beginning of the seventies to the expression of female lust and desire like in Cleo Uebelmann's *Mano Destra*. It still takes courage, for even today the SM area is taboo.

All of the women who are presented in this program work in a unique personal style. But there are also



Es Hat Mich Sehr Gefreut by Mara Mattuschka



Imaginary II by Moira Sweeney



Mano Destra by Cleo Uebelmann



Parasympathica by Mara Mattuschka

W + B Hein

similarities. We found that the “Doppelgänger-Motiv,” that is, the split into two or more personalities, is frequently encountered in many experimental films by women. Usually, the division is also related to black-and-white (masculine and feminine). Nearly all of Mara Mattuschka’s films deal, for example, with a divided personality (always played by Mara herself): Titania hears voices; in *Kugelkopf* her image doubles in the mirror; in *Pascal-Gödel* she plays chess with herself in positive and negative; in *Parasympathica* she divides her body in a black and a white half; and in *The Musicians* she is man and woman in one person.

Cleo Uebelmann performs her two sides in *Mano Destra* where victim and domina present the two sides of her self. In her film, the black and white contrast is an important element of form: the white flesh gleams in the black clothes, in the dark room the white ropes shine, the metal parts gleam on the black objects.

The divided personality is often connected to masturbation. Claudia Schillinger performs this directly in her film *between* with her “masculine” part, her artificial penis.

It seems that women are very much concentrated on their own body, even in the most destructive acts, like the operations in Regine Steenbock’s *Vel* which penetrate the skin.

But there is also the look at the male body: revealing his androgyny like in Orlagh Mulcay’s *Narcissus’ Pool*;

celebrating it as a neoclassical sculpture, like Moira Sweeney does in *Imaginary II*; and finally in a murderous fantasy, as in Angela Rodiger’s *Schrumpfquartett*.

- Untergang der Titania*, Mara Mattuschka (Austria, 1985, 4 minutes)
- Parasympathica*, Mara Mattuschka (Austria, 1986, 5 minutes)
- The Musicians*, Mara Mattuschka (Austria, 1987, 5 minutes)
- Es Hat Mich Sehr Gefreut*, Mara Mattuschka (Austria, 1987, 2 minutes)
- Mein Kampf*, Mara Mattuschka (Austria, 1987, 4 minutes)
- Mano Destra*, Cleo Uebelmann (Switzerland, 1985, 53 minutes)
- Vel*, Regine Steenbock (West Germany, 1987, 15 minutes)
- between*, Claudia Schillinger (West Germany, 1989, 10 minutes)
- Imaginary II*, Moira Sweeney (Ireland, 1989, 6 minutes)
- In Narcissus’ Pool*, Orlagh Mulcay (Ireland, 1988, 12 minutes)



Vel by Regine Steenbock

Birgit Hein interview

by Gamma Bak

HEIN / BAK

Toronto Experimental Film Congress, 1989, part of Summer of Innovative Film I+II by Gamma Bak and Penelope Buitenhuis, 1989

GEMMA: Do you want to say something about the young generation of filmmakers?

BIRGIT: Of course you have to differentiate. There is one I like very much, and that's the super 8 filmmakers who want to start anew, completely outside the system, making their new works under anarchic

production conditions. There are also the academic artists, we have quite a few here at the Congress who don't interest me because they repeat the same formal structures from the 70s. They didn't develop these structures themselves, they started making films according to systems, that's terribly boring. The worst thing about the Congress are the programs of



Birgit Hein, 1989

outdated avant-gardes, while the vibrant, new and important artists are hardly represented.

GAMMA: You're one of the people who came up with structural film. Can you talk about the difference between repeating and invention?

BIRGIT: We developed forms of films which were important for us at that time, discovering the visual qualities of the film material itself. Later on, theories based on formal processes or systems were added. But that was not the starting point of our work. When I look at *Rohfilm* (1968) today, for example, it's basically a personal film. There is a lot about our life at that time. It was then considered a structural film, it was included in that category, but you could also say that it doesn't fit in there at all.

GAMMA: What about the kind of initiative you're working with now? What's it about? What about sexuality?

BIRGIT: Yes, that's quite interesting. Annette Michelson asked me why we have changed our work like this. From radical formal work we've turned to radical work in terms of content. That has to do with the change in one's own life. I think it's important that you react to your life with your artistic work.

We realized that we were facing problems that could not be solved formally, that's why the films had to change their content. When we were sitting on the sofa

in New York and didn't know what to do next—how was this supposed to continue—we started to react to it cinematically. The films always deal with struggles in one's own life.

GAMMA: Could you talk about the excerpt from *Verbotene Bilder* (Forbidden Pictures, 1986) that you chose? Is it an example of this new direction?

BIRGIT: I wanted to find images that provoked a confrontation, for example, the scene where the bird is being stomped. That is where the most protest came from ecologists and the Greenpeace folks. They didn't understand that we basically support them with this scene. It's about facing aggressive tendencies so that you can deal with them.

GAMMA: Can you talk about the role of money and income in artist's media?

BIRGIT: There are many forms of oppression our society has created. One is economic. When you work with films, it involves a lot of money. That alone means censorship, even if it is not pronounced. That's why it was quite clear that the filmmakers who wanted to depict their own problems had to reach for super 8.

The point is that super 8 has made it possible to make films by practically anyone. Due to this the censorship of money, which plays a big role in the industry, has disappeared. It's also quite harmonious, a new film



scene has emerged in Germany of people who make super 8 films. They care about their own problems, and aren't concerned about where it could be shown, or how it will become part of a market.

Super 8 films made in the 80s are not protests in the same way as we were in 1968. That's not a drawback for me at all because they simply try to be very direct and honest. New and original thoughts are being expressed. It's not just Schmelzdahin, it's Michael

Bryntrup, Anarchistische GummiZelle, Stiletto. There is an incredibly broad movement of young people who have grown up with film, integrated the medium into their lives and reflect on it.



Head Cold

GAMMA BAK



I have a powerful friendship story with Birgit, which I have not shared yet.

She was the person I chose to discuss my options around my project proposal when I started making *Head Cold* around 2000/2001. The film was very different and new in its idea, at the time.

I went to Braunschweig and stayed with Birgit for two days and we went over the question of whether I should write the initial proposal including that I am struggling with mental issues, or whether I should pretend that it is a more general quest on psychiatric problems and not mention that I am afflicted at all. We did not like the second path, holding back the truth and strength of the film, but considered it might be the route to raise money.

The reason I went to see her was that we were both fully aware of the *dynamite* the autobiographical approach brought out in the open with this kind of topic.

And indeed, we spoke at length, over and over in those two days, and I decided on the personal POV. To be open and forthright from the start was the better

approach for me and I wrote the first texts. And yes, I had immense problems getting any money together to work on my modest movie! While many people have ailments and health issues, funders and colleagues do not say “because of this the person is not trustworthy to make a film.” In my case the stigma was so strong that it even surprised me, though I was used to a lot of messy stuff around the topic.

Birgit and I had gone over a lot of what to expect, yet it turned out even tougher than we had imagined when we were discussing the approach.

The film was completed in 2010 and was and is very well liked. It has also been important to open up the discourse on mental health diagnoses and issues, lend empowerment and agency and show a kind of route to recovery. Only friends, family and myself speak in the film.

(It is in distribution with Moving Images in Vancouver)





DIE UNHEIMLICHEN FRAUEN



THE UNCANNY WOMAN





You Only Live Twice

MIKE HOOLBOOM

How rare and delicious to receive a second chance, even if the term implies catastrophe, that some hope has already died. When Birgit and Wilhelm Hein split in 1989 they did so as a public couple who had run a screening series and appeared at a hundred festivals, waged war against other filmmakers who they found wanting, and made deeply personal films together, subjecting some of their most intimate moments to the same ruthless truth serum that was so often on display at their post-screening fireworks.

Birgit's second act was one she would be forced to perform alone, both as an art academy professor, and as an artist who would create work with too many eyes looking over her shoulder. More than a few wondered what she had been responsible for in the works made with her husband for the past two decades.

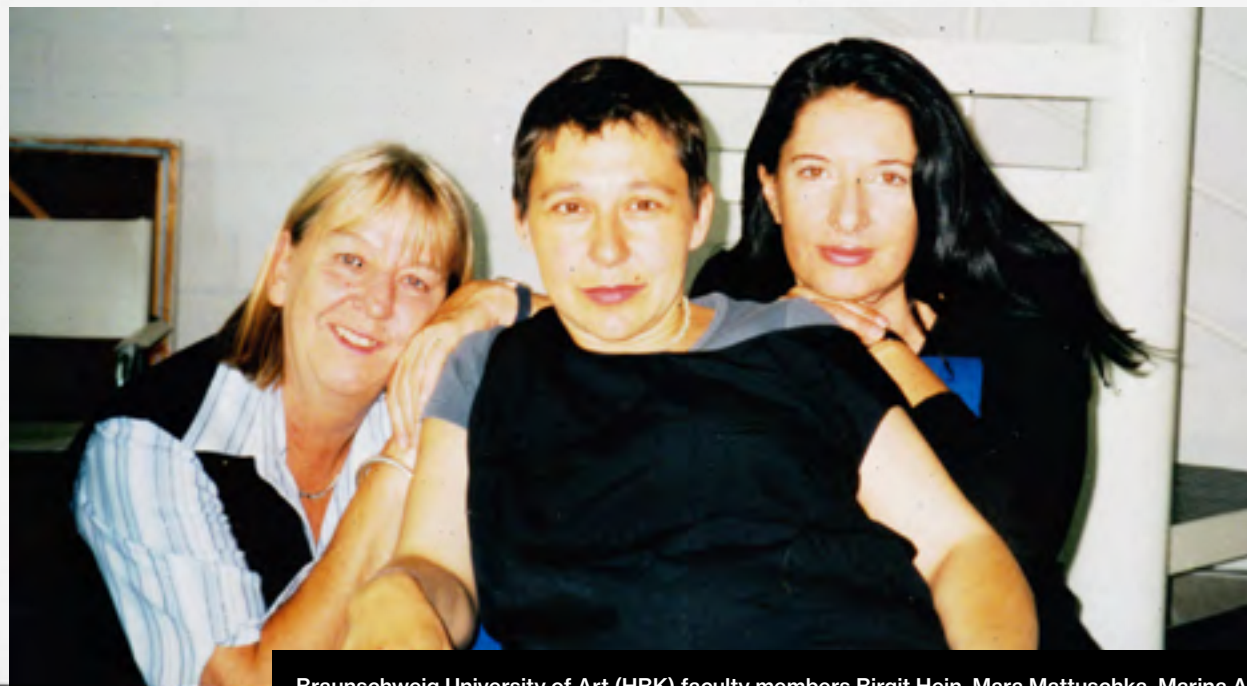
In 1991 she released her first solo effort, the feature-length experimental essay *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women). Let's look at the opening scene, the establishing shot of Birgit's new life, an eight-minute prologue she named *Muttertag 1989* (Mother's Day). At the beginning of every new life is a mother.

The scene features 30-year-old Austrian fringe

moviemaker sensation Mara Mattuschka. Six years earlier, in 1983, Mara entered the University of Applied Arts Vienna and discovered Maria Lassnig's class in animation and painting. There she began a series of incendiary short films rooted in the frontal camera performances of early video art, where artists used their own bodies as material, biting or kissing it, hurling it against walls, walking in clown circles, crawling across broken glass. Mara kickstarted camera performance 2.0, deploying animation, dramaturgy, sets and sound

to create a new feminist imaginary. Birgit was an early convert, programming her work at international fests, and eventually muscling her into the art academy in Braunschweig where she held a full professorship.

In the most fearless artist interview I've ever read, Birgit and Wilhem Hein, on the verge of a split so deep they would hardly say a word to each other again, talk about the sex work they performed for their feature-length essays *Love Stinks* and *Forbidden Pictures*.



Braunschweig University of Art (HBK) faculty members Birgit Hein, Mara Mattuschka, Marina Abramović



They both felt they needed to stretch their practice and include others in their intimate work. The plan was for Mara and Birgit to spend a month together. Once the frame was set, the rest would surely follow.

BIRGIT: *“Out of helplessness, I now come back to the mother/daughter problem. Many things, such as my complete rejection of my body, must have a starting point in the mother/daughter confrontation. Now I want to play through this role with Mara...”*

In order to analyze the problems of society and the problems that pictures carry, the artist begins with the frame of her own body. What doesn't she find there? Not just the socialization of “how to be a woman,” but also the silence that is kept by her mother, and the rest of her mother's generation, about the roles played by citizens under National Socialism. And how these performances inevitably left their residues, marks and traces, on her own body.

BIRGIT: *“Suddenly images and ideas come out of real life situations. I look for approaches where I force myself to lose the barriers that I have been holding onto.”*

The barriers, the forbidden zones, the radioactive places within our own experiences. This is the place the artist travels to in order to touch the roots of her practice, where the old struggles lie. Again and again she would teach her students how to access this place in their own lives, digging into their family traumas, uncovering the primal hurt, so that they could underpin their work with what really mattered to them. It didn't mean that everyone was busy making diary films, there were austere formalists in her big tent, alongside every form of refusenik, but her hope was to help nurture art that was singular and alive; and that would require more than virtuous ideas. Every artist would need to face what could not be faced. The old adage still rings true: the wound is the path.

In the first scene of her first film... The lighting is flat, the interior setting offers little in the way of support, though there is a mirror perched beside the subject, ensuring that every gesture is doubled. The sound is a field recording of frogs at night, deliberately played too loud in the mix, a harsh percussive croaking that offers a soundscape forever in motion while nothing changes. In keeping with the Heins's artless, anti-aesthetic style, Mara Mattuschka appears unadorned and unsupported.

The opening title is not the title of the film, but instead, the title of its prologue: Mother's Day. What is this mother busy with on mother's day? With a nod to Eve's fall from grace she begins with a bite of an apple. Mara wears a stiff, black wig and begins to hack away

at it with a large pair of blunt scissors. She glues wig shards onto a fold-out paper box that has a crude face and a wide mouth of teeth printed on it. What to do with some of the left over hair? Attach it to her breast of course. She smears her chest with glue, has another slug of coffee, bares a breast and begins to cover it with hair. She takes a tube of lipstick and applies it to her nipple, her mouth, and then to the box, which appears as a model/stand-in for femininity, but also as another double. It seems that in this playroom of mirrors and identities, Mara is modelling how to be both mother and father.





Opening her white vinyl coat further, Mara reaches down and cuts off some of her pubic hair before gluing it onto her chest. She goes back to the wig to hack off a bit more hair and rubs it on her face, producing a kind of mustache, though hair is scattered and sprayed across her face in a rough and playful way. She looks into the camera with modest bravado, as if it too were a mirror. She lowers her pants and eventually the camera jerks down to show her lower body. Lipstick in hand, she rouges up her vagina, then draws a line up to her navel creating a faux caesarian scar. She smears lipstick across her eyes with a confidential smile (aren't I fabulous now?).

In this playful and irrevert episode Mara appears as Birgit's double but also the double of her ghost husband Wilhelm (with chest hair and a new mustache). She grants her body the freedom to become other bodies, to get messy, to disturb masculinist ideals of women as nature. Here nature is transplanted and re-oriented, the map redrawn, the performance of gender triumphant, sexy, ironic.

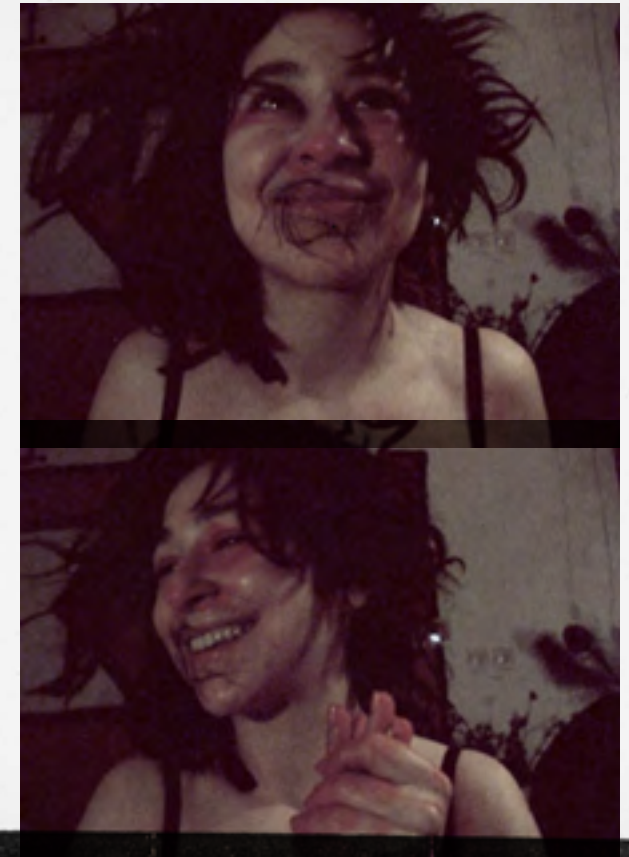
Much ink has been spilled about the Heins' celebrated

turn away from structural film in the mid-70s. They had been amongst its foremost proponents after all. But while it is often cited as a moment of recognition, an acknowledgment that they had struck a dead end, the artists themselves declared that they were in search of a new kind of conversation. This long opening scene is a bracing reminder of the conversation Birgit might have had in mind—a naked address direct to camera, where a woman has turned her body into a playground just for herself, for her own pleasure and delight. Never mind a room of one's own—and the middle-class status owning a room implies—here the artist begins with a body of her own, a body that has already been doubled, forced to examine itself, as if were at once jailor and jailed—but in place of the tired master-slave relation she substitutes a childlike abandon and invention. As Viola Di Grado writes in *Blue Hunger*: “There was no part of her body that she was ashamed of, nothing that could be used to punish her.”

This was the opening note of a new movement in Birgit's life. Unimagined encounters lay ahead, haunted by war, all of them driven by uncommon women who were able to “stay with the difficulty,” to stand in uncomfortable places and learn the unwanted truths that waited there. The core of what made Birgit remarkable was her appetite for this setting, which most take every pain and drug and distraction to avoid. She did it in public, creating movie provocations and then standing in the firing line night after night. Her mission was to break the silence—around the war and around

women—because as American activist/writer Rebecca Solnit notes, “Silence is the universal condition of every oppression.” No one in fringe movies stood up to it so often, or so fearlessly, as Birgit Hein.

Quotes from: “Reflections: A Conversation with Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, Gertrud Koch and Heide Schlüpmann about sex and their film work” originally published in: *Frauen und Film*, December 1987, no. 43, *Sex in the Work Place*, pp. 27-36.



Fearless: Nanna Heidenreich, Heike Klippel, Florian Krautkrämer interview

HEIDENREICH / KLIPPEL / KRAUTKRÄMER

NANNA: There were two reasons Florian, Heike and I made the *Film als Idee* book (2015) that collected some of Birgit's writings and interviews. We were all working at the HBK Braunschweig where Birgit was running the film class and she was about to celebrate her 70th birthday. We wanted to acknowledge her contributions and to publish writing on experimental film. It may be surprising to learn but there isn't much of a tradition of writing on experimental film in Germany. Birgit's book *Film im Underground* (1971) was a singular text.

HEIKE: We all had it, it was one of the few things available. There was the *Film as Film* catalogue (1977), and Ingo Petzke's *Das Experimentalfilm Handbuch* (1989). Those were the three books on experimental film.

NANNA: Birgit was key in many areas. She wrote texts, she taught and invited many artists to show their work, and she brought film into the art world.

FLORIAN: And she made films of course.

HEIKE: *Rohfilm* (1968) was a strong provocation when it was made. I last saw it at HBK Braunschweig

just before the pandemic. The room was full of young students and we all felt this was a historic moment. Everybody freaked out because it was so beautiful, that we were part of an unheard of and unbelievable thing. It was like being in church.

FLORIAN: I wouldn't use the term "beauty" about any of the Hein films. I would say there is no beauty in *Die unheimliche Frauen* without meaning that negatively. There are conventions of making pictures and she is anti-convention. In *Die unheimlichen Frauen* sometimes she doesn't read the script properly, normally you would make a new recording, but instead she restarts the phrase and she leaves the mistake in. It's the same with *Rohfilm*, part of the aesthetic is to be anti-conventional, to see the marks, to show how it is made, to see the roll bars on the TV screen. It's easy to make these roll bars disappear, it's just a little switch before you plug in the camera, but she wants to include them.

NANNA: Now her work has become canonical. Even XSCREEN was remounted as a gallery exhibition. You can't repeat a moment in history, you canonize it, you put it on display. Works are seen differently.



Nanna Heidenreich



Heike Klippel



Florian Krautkrämer

MIKE: In the Q&A sessions that followed her often confrontational movies, Birgit had an uncanny ability to “stay with the trouble,” as Donna Haraway put it, to provoke heated reactions and then respond with great presence and precision.

HEIKE: She was not playing the stubborn monument like Kubelka who said, “I’m an artist, my film is a work of art and this is a highlight of the twentieth century.” Birgit would discuss and defend her position.

NANNA: She liked disagreement and conflict.

FLORIAN: She liked the fighting but didn’t hold a grudge. You could have an argument and the next day everything was fine.

HEIKE: She often said to me, “What do you know about film? You know nothing.” With others I might take offense but not with Birgit. Florian, you were in her class, I assume there were many confrontational discussions. Did it happen without people taking offense?

FLORIAN: No, of course not. We were students. When you’re presenting a personal film or a piece of art, and if Birgit had a bad day or wasn’t paying attention, she could be very direct. There were students who didn’t take that well, but at the same time, you had to know what to expect.

HEIKE: She didn’t destroy people. This is what I heard from students in other experimental film classes. That teachers built new students up and supported them and were enthusiastic about their work. Then in the third year they destroyed them. Perhaps there’s a system behind it?

NANNA: It’s not a surprise. It’s the concept of the genius artist, the idea of pushing people over their boundaries as some sort of necessary rite of passage, while also not wanting them to come too close to your own genius position. I think there are many examples of this kind of teaching. It is part of the power structures in the fields of art and academia.



Die unheimlichen Frauen



MIKE: In *Die unheimlichen Frauen* Birgit offers a lineage of feminist resistance. There are women soldiers in Hungary, Indigenous fighters, Mongolian women on horseback. She's been criticized for flattening historical periods, offering them up as if they were parts of the same struggle. Is the critique unreasonable?

HEIKE: I felt that all the criticism was justified and I also had discussions with her that I do not like this idea of violent women.

FLORIAN: I saw it just a couple of weeks ago and was a bit shocked at the language she used about "primitive cultures." It's not a language you would use anymore. I was also surprised that I wasn't shocked the last time I saw the film. I found it interesting how the film has changed over the last few years. It's a very violent film, even in the way she treated the images. And the images she films herself (of her masturbating or pissing) are violent in a way that resonates with the violence in the found footage.

NANNA: She insisted on radical honesty. She was unflinching in her conviction that radical subjectivity is political. Now that we live in neo-liberal times where everyone is invited to harvest their subjectivity I'm not so sure. I learn more from her fearlessness than accusing her of lacking complexity in her feminist stance.

HEIKE: I didn't like *Die unheimlichen Frauen*. Now I can say it openly. It is not the film for me, not at all. Its claim that women can be violent and threatening,

that they can do anything men do but worse, pushes an idea of femininity to an extreme in order to provoke. I preferred Birgit in the way she discussed other's work, how she emancipated herself from the work of Wilhelm, how she manifested herself as a filmmaker, how she acted at our school which was mostly run by men, especially in the fine arts where she worked, there were only men at that time, all elephants. She stood up to all of them. What a great example.

MIKE: There are long scenes showing German women on trial for working in the concentration camps. She said, "My childhood and youth were defined by the question of what I would have done had I been in such a situation... Would I have been capable of murdering and torturing?" Is this the central question for a generation of German women?

NANNA: I think it has to do with being a child born during WW2. The non-acknowledgment of fascism and National Socialism included the general exemption of women from any of those discussions. That's why Birgit introduces the overseers of the concentration camps. It's crucial to acknowledge that this racist, murderous violence was carried out by women.

After the war, filmmaking, film studies and criticism were erased. Jewish artists and theorists, critical thinking, everything was gone. The Heins were part of a generation that weren't just rethinking cinema, they were rethinking cinema in a post-war situation of 1950s productions and their weird, cover-up restorations.



HEIKE: Wasn't Mike's question: could I have participated in the atrocities? I wouldn't say so.

HANNA: That would require an acknowledgment that everyone was involved. Most people wanted to point fingers at crazy Hitler.

HEIKE: The decisive question for Birgit's generation was: how could a whole collective of people do what they did in the Third Reich and then claim nobody was there. What can we (Birgit's generation) do in order not to fall into the same traps?



NANNA: There was a mixture of inter-generational silence and forgetfulness.

HEIKE: And denial.

NANNA: You ask people and they all say, “We didn’t know, how is it possible, my parents didn’t do anything.” That’s how they are.

MIKE: Was the generation of 1968 dedicated to the project of breaking that silence?

HEIKE: Absolutely.

MIKE: Why does the film end with a scene of birth?

NANNA: I think it’s much more hopeful than it seems, but it’s also very violent. It continues the motif of blood. It’s about technologies of gender and demonstrating the violence of birth without any kind of mother goddess rhetoric. I think she acknowledges the strength required to give birth.

FLORIAN: The closing title dedicates the film to her daughter Nina.

HEIKE: It’s not *Window Water Baby Moving* (Stan Brakhage, 1959). There’s been a lot said about the violence of giving birth. I never saw a birth in real life only in the movies.

NANNA: I found myself wondering why I was responding so strongly to this scene, since I have been present at real births. It felt like something was being done to the woman giving birth. Which is odd—but I think it speaks to Birgit’s editing.

HEIKE: I always thought it was something that should not be filmed or photographed. You don’t film people dying. Why do you film people being born?

NANNA: I disagree. I think the Friedl Kubelka film of her mother about to die (*Mutter*, 1997) was really important and I want to see that. I’m thinking of Candice Breitz who did so much work around giving birth. I have no issues watching that. Our society has a strange relation to birth and death.

*What would happen if one woman told the
truth about her life?
The world would split open.*

– MURIEL RUKEYSER

DIE UNHEIMLICHEN FRAUEN

I feel as if I was buried alive. I live but my life is over. Roaring laughter. A broomstick is good enough for this old cunt. It stinks like rotten fish and old piss. You must not put a poisoned finger in her poisoned slime. From one day to the other I have become an old woman. From now on sexual desire is regarded as obscene and indecent. Yet I am permanently horny. I can't think of anything else but fucking. The cunt has become my eye. I only see what it tells me by getting hot and wet. Compulsory fixation on every man I see. I can't help looking at the trousers. It's too obvious what I'm thinking.

DIE UNHEIMLICHEN FRAUEN

Die unheimlichen Frauen

JEAN PERRET

The exhausting images of women reduced to the role of victims. Black-and-white archive images show the arrest of Nazi auxiliary forces in Germany. They are all women. They come out of concentration camp barracks where they are searched, numbered and lined up in tight rows. Time is slowed, shots repeated, women with absent eyes seem to want to escape the camera fixed on them. This sequence arrives a third of the way through the film, welcoming these unheimlichen frauen—these frightening women.

It is an important step in the film's rich progression. Birgit Hein feels the urgency to ask herself the traumatic question of whether she herself would be capable of torturing as these women have done. Her voice-over, which runs through large parts of the film, makes it clear that these women—who undergo a second, slowed-down and looped, stunned cinematic investigation—were involved in medical experiments.

Birgit Hein asserts that some women were more perverse than men during surgical manipulations. She insists—it has to be said—that where men in white coats

flinched, women carried out heinous experiments. The filmmaker also enjoys showing comic book heroines whose sexual violence literally penetrates the bodies of tortured males. Kali and Medea are cited as mythological figures, but so is the mother who kills her two young children with kitchen knives, while milk slowly overflows from a pan on the stove. The filmmaker repeats the fear that this question inspires in her and in women in general. Am I, are we, safe from such violence?

Birgit Hein adds that official histories of the Second World War ignore women who were active, armed soldiers and activists occupied with the work of killing. They were not all wearing first aid armbands. One thinks of Svetlana Alexievitch's admirable book *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women In World War II* (1985) which profoundly altered the patriarchal Soviet narrative of the world conflict. Documentary images of female soldiers in different eras and regions of the world underpin the film's argument at several points.

A recurring image shows a television on which a film is playing—is it Nagisa Ōshima's *Merry Christmas*,





Mr Lawrence (1983)?—in front of which a person is lying. We can see only her legs and bare feet, surrounded by empty beer bottles. It must be Birgit Hein or her understudy! The state of drunkenness alone allows the director to challenge her mother. What she resists above all is the hated expressions of submission. This mother, however loving, is hated by her daughter, who says she will never again be satisfied with the theatre of affections and constraints offered by established social values. With impressive sincerity, she gives free rein to her sobs with an energy that borders on orgasm. The filmmaker says that she wants to tear the armour that corsets her to pieces—and to exclaim how much she remains a prisoner of herself.

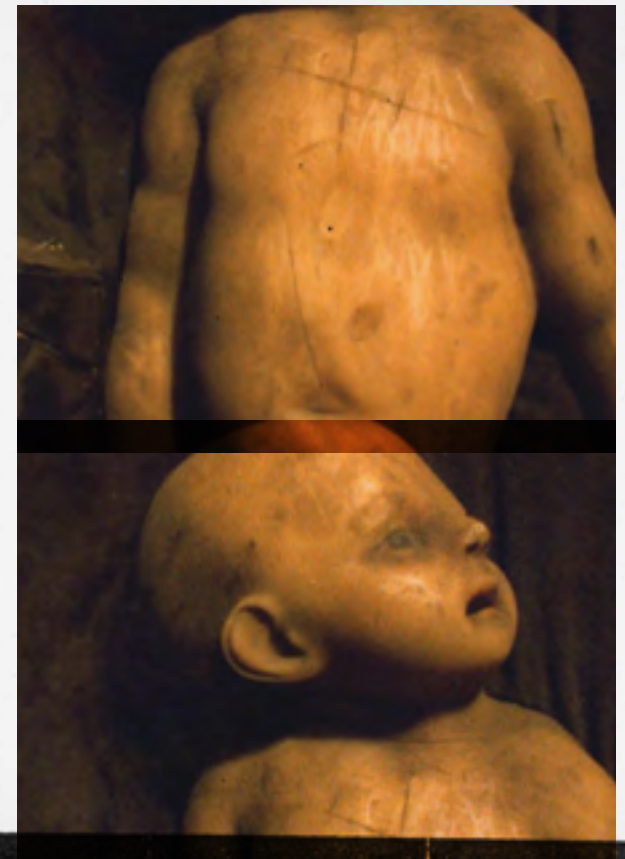
This film is a palimpsest which brings together in its strata fragments of archives, documentaries, films captured on television screens, personal shots and exuberant stagings. The soundtrack is an integral part of the dramaturgy. In the opening sequence a woman gradually strips off her body in a hairy performance!

With the hair she cuts off her head, and on her pubis, with lipstick smeared on the tips of her breasts and her face, she exaggerates her femininity until a strangely masculine image emerges with a moustache. From the outset, the film is provocative, it shakes things up and creates an enigma and unease about the meaning of this symbolic mutilation. But the viewer cannot help but hear the polyphony of croaking frogs under the images with a smile, coupled with a popular song whose refrain can be heard in praise of the Mother.

Is this the end of film? Certainly not, tracks are available to experience pleasure and displeasure at the same time, that is to say, there is a discomfort to be invited, to step into sync with the elements gathered in this vortex. Its textures are heterogeneous and exciting and confront us with unbearable situations. The story of the circumcised girls and all the atrocious practices aimed at denying female sexuality instill a sense of urgency that Birgit Hein describes with lucid insistence. Her voice is a real narrative thread that gives her film a remarkable level of erudition and documentary detail, it tells us how feelings of threat, fear and guilt have undermined women's existence for so long.

The last two sequences of the film are hyperbolic, necessarily provocative and generously reassuring. A pregnant woman strokes her sex in search of an orgasm, close-ups of her sex and her hands appear in smoky black-and-white. Later, a woman in labour, perhaps

the same woman, is filmed facing her spread legs. In partly very close-up shots, a child is miraculously born. The womb, the sex, the woman offers a little being to life. Sighs of pleasure are mixed with breaths of pain. The soundtrack amplifies emotions with undoubtedly African songs accompanied by throbbing percussive rhythms. This musical and choral presence is intimately part of the film. It gives access to a temporality with mythological dimensions in a landscape whose anthropological roots are complex and in which Birgit Hein's voice traces a path...





The end of the film, again, I mean its culmination, is not accompanied by any credits apart from two cards: "Birgit Hein 1991" and "für Nina." No references are given, the images, sounds and voices belong to the public domain. I-film and autobiography, we-film and collective. The ambition of this essay (in the fullest sense of the word) takes the indispensable risk of circumscribing a large-scale problem, with dimensions of scandal and infinite suffering, concerning the spirit and body of women who have been domesticated, humiliated, and made to feel guilty by the totalitarian values and practices legitimized by the patriarchs and, to a lesser extent, matriarchs across time.

These unheimlichen frauen, and Birgit Hein among them, may be over thirty years old, but today they are eternally young. The energy of this film is a shared drive to deconstruct the values that haunt our memory and, at the same time, to build a world populated by admirable, loving, loved people. In a world consoled and seeking harmony.



Birgit shooting Die unheimliche Frauen

ULRIKE ZIMMERMANN





Die unheimliche Frauen Berlinale premiere

Q&A with Birgit Hein (excerpts)

BIRGIT HEIN

Delphi Theatre, 1992, Copyright Arsenal - Institut für Film und Videokunst

AUDIENCE: I was very impressed by the ruthlessness and openness of the images and words. I liked the film very much.

BIRGIT: The criticism I've heard is that the film doesn't make clear statements. I've always wished that life was so simple but the older you get, the more

difficult it is to come to such positions. Women would like to think that they are not cruel. There's an image, this wishful thinking, that suddenly there's a better person standing there because it's a woman. And that is really not so!

AUDIENCE: Did your mother see the film?





BIRGIT: The film was shown for the first time today. She couldn't see it. But of course I don't want her to see it. The voice-over in the film says that when I sit with her, I get drunk so that we can be nice together and I don't want to do that to her.

AUDIENCE: Is it men's desire that women should be good or is that also the desire of women?

BIRGIT: Well, that's what this damned oppression is. It's so convenient that women are supposed to be good. That's why I don't think women should accept that stupid role. They should first enjoy being bad, that's what we are entitled to now, to be the absolute bad ones for a few hundred years.

AUDIENCE: The film hopes for a certain liberation of women, that's why women should be armed in the military. Did I understand that correctly?

BIRGIT: You can't say what is a woman and what is not. You can't say that a woman isn't aggressive or that

a woman wouldn't take up arms. For me, it's first of all about taking stock, so that you can be clear about what I am as a woman. I realized my aggressive potential had been tremendously suppressed, it had to turn against myself in the form of illness. The discussion can't be about whether women or men should have guns, but rather: should you take up guns or not?

AUDIENCE: inaudible question

ULRICH GREGOR (moderator): The question was about the imperfection of the footage, that for many of these scenes one could find technically better footage, of a birth for instance, or of female soldiers.

BIRGIT: The imperfection is intentional of course. I shot the birth myself, I think it's the most beautiful one I've ever seen because of the way I shot it. I videotaped it because I thought it would take so long, and then we found these pieces, these flashes of hands that I really liked and that's why I incorporated them. The black-and-white material, the footage from the Second World War, I don't find that imperfect at all. Of course you could go through archives for years to see if you could find something better. But for me these recordings are so incredibly exciting and beautiful, I can't imagine anything better. The whole film, all the images, everything in it, I cut together according to an aspect of beauty.

AUDIENCE: I thought your film was very good but I'm missing the female orgasm. You say that the

experience of crying is deeper or more comprehensive than an orgasm. But its absence was a bit of a shortcoming I'm afraid.

BIRGIT: You're right about that. The next film will be one big orgasm.

AUDIENCE: The film was really great. I always have one question about the violence of men against women. Why doesn't the woman defend herself? Why always this victim attitude? When a child is attacked, she scratches out the attacker's eyes and bites his throat. Why not use this violence for her own life? I thought it was great that the film showed violent woman for once and gave them a kick in that direction.

BIRGIT: I grew up with powerful women. Of course, that was only in the family, it wasn't like that outside. As a result I grew up with an unbelievably ambiguous life experience that certainly plays a role in the film. I have always experienced women as strong, but they've



been controlled from the outside and not allowed to show their strength. I think we can change that now. It will be terrible, but we have to go through it.

AUDIENCE: I have a question about the sound which is a kind of montage. There are your reflections alongside quotes from literature. But it's all spoken by you. What kind of reasoning is behind that? Or is it connected to what you said earlier, that this is a film about yourself? It's a bit irritating that it's all so mixed up.

BIRGIT: At some point I had to appear in the film myself and I thought no one else could speak it. I'm not into those well-trained television voices that read every message the same way, so when it rains they're sad, and when the sun shines the voice is happy. It took an insane amount of work to do it myself but I think that's an important aspect for the mood of the film.

AUDIENCE: I don't find the film particularly beautiful, nor all the things that were said. But I find it very courageous and important. There's one small thing that's not clear to me at all. I find many scenes exciting, but why do they last so long?

BIRGIT: I think that's the relativity of perception. One thinks it's too short and another is sure it's too long. The feeling of length or timing is always tailored to the author and it's hard to give reasons for that.

AUDIENCE: I liked the film very much because I felt it was a personal revelation that became a revelation for the whole audience, that is, a social revelation. I also like the way the montage was done. However, I must also say that in a few places it pushes the boundaries of good taste or aesthetic understanding for me. I wondered if the fear of women, or their uncanny nature, is simply about keeping them away from power.

BIRGIT: The feeling that I was perceived as sinister was the starting point of the film. Where did this come from? It was the fear of a man in front of a woman. This question occupied me very much. How was it possible that women have been so oppressed for centuries? I haven't found an answer to this day. But all the measures to suppress women are about not letting this power, this uncanniness, come out, because that would break down all the dams, so to speak. There exists through all cultures an unconscious image of women. I started from this feeling in order to make this film, then I looked for visual material and found these texts.

AUDIENCE: I have a question about the scenes where you see only legs on red fabric with a TV surrounded by beer bottles. I can't put the pieces together. The title of the film is *Die unheimlichen Frauen* but on the TV there is one of the very few films I know in which there is not a single woman (*Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence* by Nagisa Ōshima).

BIRGIT: So first of all, the feet are mine. And this scene should be called I'm drunk.



AUDIENCE: I understood that too, but I can't get the film to go with it.

BIRGIT: The madness is that it fits so well, though at the moment I recorded, it was the only video cassette I had. It couldn't have been a better film to have on TV. Every time I see it, I realise it more and more. That's also typical of this kind of filmmaking, that in the end, even if you don't think about it at all, things fit together.



AUDIENCE: I think a very important point is missing, especially because you discuss fears about women and sexuality. Where are the lesbians and the taboo of being a lesbian?

BIRGIT: Yes, the problem is that I'm not a lesbian now, then I would have done much better, of course. When it comes to erotic films, there are a lot more homosexual films than about lesbian eroticism. I regret I couldn't provide that. But it's always subliminally present in the film, for example in the photo of the two Israeli female soldiers. I mean, if not that, then what? If it was my sexual preference it would be clearer, I admit.

AUDIENCE: (unintelligible)

BIRGIT: I said it's missing but that's clear too. That's better than me delivering some uptight shit because I can't do it.

AUDIENCE: For me the film comes too late. For six or seven years the image of this strong woman has been on

everyone's lips. Even in Hollywood, films are being produced by women who present tough, intelligent women who go their own way. You say yourself that as a society we have to "go through it," and recognize women as equal. But what do women really have to do? What you're portraying is just another story of women's suffering.

BIRGIT: The call has already been made, you're absolutely right. In the *Kali-Filme* that I made with my husband the uproar is already anticipated. Tonight I'm presenting a much deeper version of the same issues. I wrote the first article about women's prison films in 1987, when I saw for the first time that this image exists in the Trivialfilm. That was an important source of inspiration. In the Trivialfilm, images reflect what's going on in society earlier than in official cultural films, like this one.

AUDIENCE: I felt that women are presented as forces of nature whose qualities of aggression and violence are glorified and essentialized so that every form of violence appears the same. For me there is a difference between attacking and defending. There are different motives at work. There are different historical situations, they are not the same, they can't be reduced to a single theme of women's biological power. I profess pacifism in both man and woman as a humane goal, not simply that women can strike out violently in the same way as men.

BIRGIT: My basic point was to make clear that women

can also be violent and aggressive. I can't say that there are only the partisans, that every violent woman is also a good woman. When I deal with the subject of violence the first thing is to make it clear that it is universal, that it is just as possible with women as with men.

I also use quotations demonstrating that women can not only be just as cruel, but even more cruel. I directed that against myself a little bit. It hurts me and makes me uncomfortable. But that had to be said, to make this statement really strong. When you have established that, then you can discuss what cruelty is or is not. I took as a basis Marilyn French's book *Beyond Power*. I found it easier to read than Simone de Beauvoir, it's more contemporary but follows pretty much the same line.

What bothers me immensely is that even in precise historical accounts, ideology suddenly appears, suggesting that women don't want to participate in power. I think that's a lie. If I'm going to have a career



I didn't get here by being meek. Those presented as examples of successful women are not judged successful because of their so-called feminine qualities.

I grew up with an image of how I should behave. Stockings, hair bows, not getting dirty. It tormented and oppressed me until I was finally ready to develop my own ideas about myself. You can't pretend that socialisation didn't exist.



AUDIENCE: I would like to congratulate you on this film, it's really fantastic. I also grew up in a strong women's community but without silk stockings, without any clothes. My only criticism of the film is the words "barbarians" and "primitive." The word primitive is Latin and means "a beginning phase of life." Here in Europe the worst barbarities come from Christians.

BIRGIT: I'm really glad you brought that up. These are 19th century texts I quoted by Robert Moses. I did the translation myself and it was clear to me how many connotations there are in these terms. But what was important was to show that there is a continuity of behaviour. I don't see a break in certain behaviours between us and women 2000 years ago. The 19th century used words like "primitive" and "barbaric" to describe certain societies. I wanted to quote this text with a certain innocence, the way it talks about the Tartar women and so on. I wanted to get that into the film as a mood. I completely agree with you but I believe that in 19th century literature, or the work of Scottish anthropologist James Frazer, it doesn't yet have this pejorative position.

AUDIENCE: These two words are repeated incessantly and used for people who are considered less than human. Less than Europeans. I understand what you mean, but many understand it differently.

ULRICH GREGOR: I'd like to ask about the music and sound. What are these rhythms? Where do they come from and how do they function?

BIRGIT: I was in Morocco at the beginning of the 1960s and we drove through the desert and whenever we passed them, women let out shrill, bright screams. That's what I really wanted to have, and I looked for a long time. I eventually found an ethnographical tape of Mauritanian women.

AUDIENCE: Where is the image of the father? The relationship with the father?

BIRGIT: I never thought about it before, not for a second. You're the first person to point it out to me. Did I take on the role? Yes, partly. I am the father. I think and act. But I'll have to think about it now.

AUDIENCE: Many of the images in your film were interesting not just because of the ideas they portrayed but that they gave the spectator the chance to feed these pictures with our own backgrounds. But there was one special image I'd like to know more about, the first sequence of the film with the woman cutting her hair.

BIRGIT: This woman is Mara Mattuschka and I admire her very much. She is a filmmaker from Austria who makes wonderful films and I had always had the idea she would be one of the *unheimlichen frauen*. We

made an agreement and I came to her in Vienna. We spent the day together and I had nothing to offer her about what she would do. It was Mother's Day and she invented this performance on the spot for the film. Afterwards it was obvious to me that this couldn't be included in the film. So for me it's a kind of short film before the film starts. What she did is she made herself a huge cunt, or a huge mouth, or made her mouth a cunt. I think it was a wonderful idea so I just separated it from the film, put it in front, and started the whole story after it. This is how it was made.

ULRICH GREGOR: I would like to ask about the picture of the solar eclipse.

BIRGIT: It is a black sun. I thought about calling the film Black Sun. It's a reversal of ratios, the light turning into darkness.

ULRICH GREGOR: Thank you very much. I think this film will have many more echoes and generate many more discussions.





BABY I WILL MAKE YOU SWEAT

Introduction to *Baby I will Make you Sweat*

FLORIAN WÜST

Filmspotting – Explorations in the Film Archive of the Deutsche Kinemathek. Kino Arsenal, August 29, 2022 (text excerpts)

Speaking about Birgit Hein on the occasion of her 80th birthday just a few weeks ago is a great honor—and for me personally also an emotional moment. Without my encounter with Birgit at the Braunschweig University of Art in the 1990s, I would not have become an artist AND a film curator, and I would not be here to give this introduction.

[...]

Baby I will Make you Sweat from 1994 is an intimate travel diary in which Birgit describes her aging, her frustration at being alone, her need for sex and tenderness in the context of the experiences of two stays in Jamaica. The train ride through a winter landscape at the beginning of the film corresponds to the freezing of the body. Then the snow turns to fog—or is it white smoke? Finally, the sequence ends with the fireball of the setting sun over a palm tree beach.



Florian Wüst, Transmediale, 2019

Birgit records her impressions and encounters with three young Jamaicans on a Hi8 camera. Later she films the video images on 16mm, creating an analytical distance to the personal narrative, an almost “haptic visuality” that is reinforced by blurring and fragmentation. Unlike in *The uncanny Women*, *Baby I will Make you Sweat* largely avoids historical material and found footage.

The images, accompanied by the grinding music of POL, are wistful, in the truest sense of the word “physical.”

“At the same time, this complete engagement with a subjective bodily search, with which the desire of an older woman is thematized, requires at many points the fading out of external circumstances, for example the different economic conditions,” writes Anke Zechner in her article *Auf der Suche nach der eigenen Wahrnehmung. Anmerkungen zur Befreiung des Blicks in Filmen von Frauen* (In Search of One’s Own Perception. Notes on the Liberation of the Gaze in Films by Women). Later, the differences come to the fore, from then on her second Jamaican companion sees her as a white. Her relationships fail, turn violent or suffocate in the haze of drugs. The differences are stronger than the feelings for each other. “Better to burn shortly than go out slowly,” are Birgit’s last words in *Baby I will Make you Sweat*.

When I spoke to her on the phone recently, she told me how much she loved the *Baby* screenings, the conversation afterwards with the women in the audience. The voyeurism and racism, inevitably inherent in the project of traveling to the Caribbean as a white privileged woman seeking sex and tenderness with young black men, always came up. Birgit had been fully aware of this problem. But the positive side was how enthusiastic women were about the subject of age and sexuality. “At last someone is dealing with that,” she heard again and again, as Birgit told me on the phone.

Language is losing its meaning. My senses are becoming sharper, reception more intensive. I'm beginning to feel what's happening and what others think and feel. Sex with him is like having an intimate conversation.

BABY I WILL MAKE YOU SWEAT

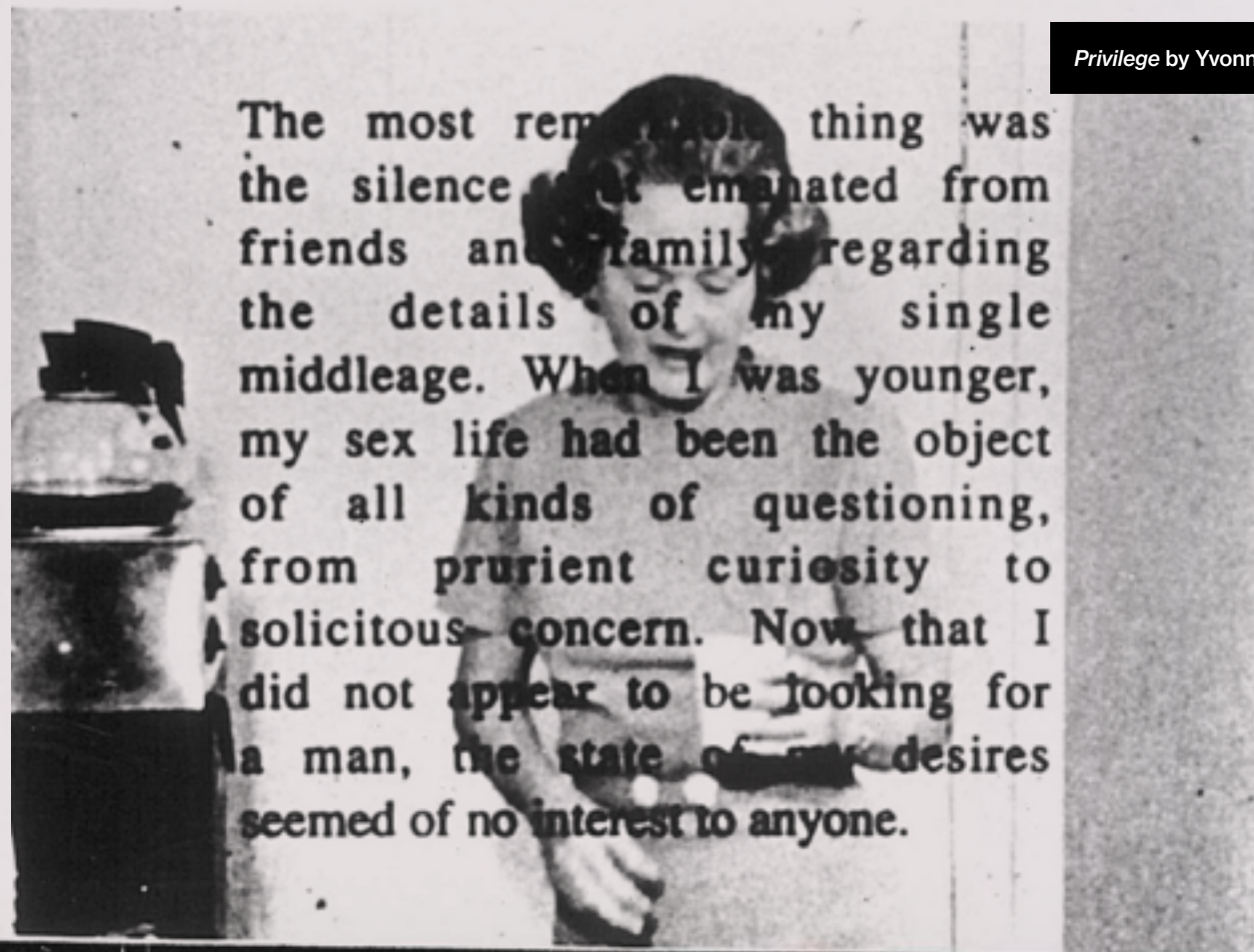
Stray Dogs

ANNETTE BRAUERHOCH

Originally published in *Millennium Film Journal* No. 30/31, Fall 1997

At the beginning of Yvonne Rainer's examination of menopause in her film *Privilege* (1990), text is superimposed over the image of a housewife. The image clearly denotes a manner and style reminiscent of the

1950s. It is immediately associated with a repression of female sexuality, a repression marked by an obsession for order and propriety, a rigidity upheld in moral and physical attitudes. One aspect of this repression was



society's assignment of middle-aged women to a sexually purged, "neutral" realm of sterile domesticity or conventional motherliness, and the relegation of the physical manifestations of menopause to the medical sphere of an illness which remained unspoken. Across this image of the decent, "curbed" housewife, Rainer superimposes an observation which comments in autobiographical terms. "The most remarkable thing was the silence that emanated from my friends and family regarding the details of my middle age. When I was younger, my sex life had been the object of all kinds of questioning, from prurient curiosity to solicitous concern. Now that I did not appear to be

looking for a man, the state of my desires seemed of no interest to anyone."

One can regard Birgit Hein's film *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1994) as a response to the silence which Yvonne Rainer's film counters with analysis. In contrast to the detached, multi-layered critical discourse of *Privilege*, Hein deploys a radical subjectivity, intimacy, and emotionality. *Baby* confronts the audience with a desire which society has made taboo and joins it with two further transgressions: loving another skin colour and loving younger men. There is a concentrated rage in the film as well as energized determination, sad reminiscence and quiet melancholy. A language which is mercilessly revealing and unsentimental in its exposure of a self suffering from societal mores, is accompanied by images which bear the tenderness contained in the director's words. They also convey a nostalgia, which is her own, and are simultaneous witnesses to and poetic expression of the limitations inherent in the adventure which she seeks and is in any case imposed by external conditions.

The film is defined by a clearly structured narrative. Events are recounted in the filmmaker's own voice-over, in a chronological sequence of diary entries. The images are alternatively metaphoric, documentary, or associative in character. Multiple recopying from video to film and vice versa, and meticulous work on the optical printer give these images a grainy quality and poetic mood. In some sequences slow motion produces a dream-like feeling, lending extended weight to its

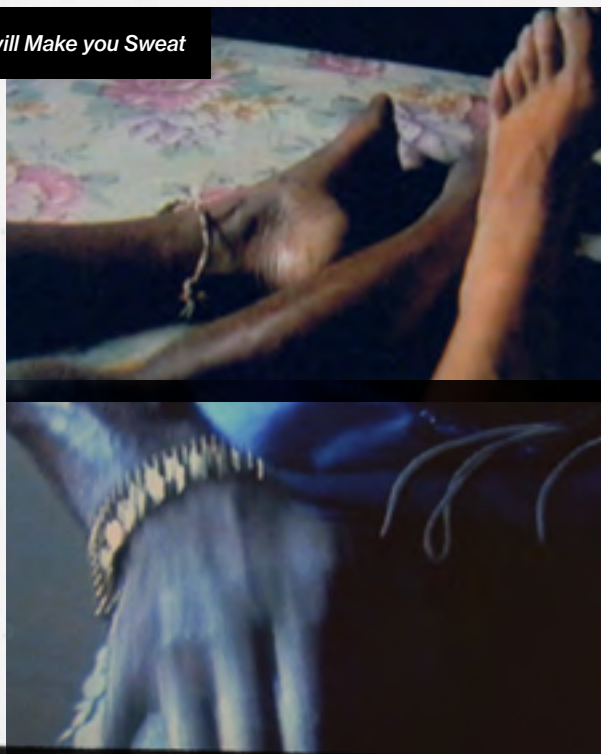
scenes of lovemaking. The spare use of original sound is contrasted with electronic music dominated by a distinct leitmotif of longing.

Bitterness and hurt underlie the first images of her journey from Germany to the Caribbean. The external movement of the train corresponds to an inner sense of leave-taking and turmoil, just as the bleak, snow-covered winter landscape stands for the country from which the filmmaker comes and its way of dealing with emotions. The landscape reflects a frozen inner state, numbed by an external frost. Angled shots in a white-tiled public toilet reveal the filmmaker as chronicler and first-person narrator.

Her voice-over begins with an imperceptible cut from the white of the winter snow to the white stream of the damp jungle mist. "Alone for ages, no sex for ages, how on earth can this life go on? My body and I no longer fit together. Growing old is like an illness which isolates me from life. A love story in the cinema makes me weep with longing. I read personal ads."

She flies to Jamaica. The wintry white now changes to the rich, sun-drenched green of a flora that doesn't exist at home. But this landscape is not presented simply as a positive counterpoise, rather a number of quick cuts between "foreign" scenery and German winters situate both as equal spaces that involve movements of the body as well as the mind. A threatening, hovering, synthetic note, which swells and fades, now buzzing

Baby I will Make you Sweat



sharply, now echoing wistfully, contributes to connecting images originating in different geographies. The connection, however, also lies in the filmmaker's state of mind, which the sound carries outward, alternately conveying the impression of a tension before a lurking jump and then again of a long-drawn-out pain. In the alternation of snow and sand, the elements that make up the environment do not merely become a metaphor but are the medium and objects of an environment sensually perceived in movement.

The filmmaker's first steps outside the well-guarded hotel complex, in which she doesn't know whether she's in Europe, America, or somewhere else, immediately leads to sexual propositions on the street. She relates an encounter with a young man. She rejects his offer, but quotes him saying, "Here the old women really like to take young men and we are glad to help them." She muses to herself in voice-over, "What have I got to lose... Here I can become active and decide." As is suggested by an interior shot of a cheap hotel room in which the filmmaker is shown lying in bed lost in thought, becoming active implies an inner change which sets free the external one. Only then is the gaze drawn outside, to individual black men and fishes underwater, which, gliding gently, move in a dreamlike fashion. Freedom of movement in a strange land which still feels quite unreal. Soon enough she will move through the new medium "like a fish in water." The film's relationship to the feelings of the filmmaker corresponds with the transparency of the aquarium pane to the fish inside.

Sexual desire, which in these surroundings is no longer subject to social ostracism and consequently to a sense of humiliation, sets free activity without fear of discrimination. In this section of the film, the new culture confronts secretiveness and silence at home with an open expression. Although she later states that language increasingly declines in importance, it does make the first step possible. It leads to a pleasantly arranged, well-organized one-night stand. "For the first time I'm going to sleep with a man whom I've picked for no other reason and whom I shall not see again... We fuck with an incredible physical power and impetuousness. I am drilled, punched, thoroughly kneaded like dough."

In discussions about the film, Hein has been criticized in a fundamentally moralizing and aggressive manner because sociological reflections on economic imbalances, power, and race relations are absent. The accusation prevents a large part of the audience from engaging with the film, even though taking account of it might have produced nothing more than a "balanced" TV feature. Hein's attempt to assert her right to sexuality, a right deemed indecent by many, is not deflected by the indecency of economic conditions. She is not concerned with political correctness, but with something which is extremely incorrect. There is no reflection on the unstable displacements of power which arise from changes of locale in the encounter between affluent white woman and impoverished black man, nor is any attention paid to the feelings of black



women. Objects of desire and interest are exclusively black men, rendering the film scandalous. Its refusal of critique is determined by its motifs of breaking through, of a demand for expression, figured here as the consequence of a long period of self-denial and isolation. The cinematic form should be regarded as a celebration of freedom of movement and sensuality regained, rather than as sober analysis. The film has opted for one-sidedness—for radical subjectivity.

After the one-night stand we see a couple—a white woman and a black man—doing push-ups on the beach. He begins, she watches, curious, uncertain, undecided. Under his encouraging nod, she joins in. This sequence may be regarded as a metaphor of the previously portrayed

situation, friendly, shared “physical exercise.” It is not yet about tenderness, but about sex as a show of strength. It leads to shared exhaustion, but not to shared interests. But it does permit a harmonious, smiling leave-taking. Hein’s “critical” commentaries are registered in a low-key diary fashion. It becomes clear at many points that pleasure also leads to the humiliating or at least uncomfortable position of being the “appendage” of a man. Although economically dependent, in social intercourse the man remains the man. However, the ease of the brief episode produces both curiosity and a readiness for more. This is represented by the longer episode with Joe, which develops during a second visit to Jamaica.



Upon her return the shooting moves further inside her subject. To the tourist’s hedonistic pleasure in light, colors, and bodies, is added the confrontation with everyday life in the hinterland. As the sex becomes deeper, it is accompanied by images suggesting death and mortality: dead fish, a stray dog rooting through garbage and tugging at a rotting carcass, bones, burning grass, crashing aircraft.

The story of the first night with Joe, already a kind of reminiscence, is accompanied by the image of heavy rain on thick greenery. The memory bears the traces of an emotion which has developed in spite of all initial functionality (first experienced as a liberation). This feeling is also accompanied by a sense of loss and an awareness of transience. Just sex turns into closeness and intimacy, which, paradoxically, now produces a real sense of alienation and helplessness, motivating a search for representations in the external world. A young dog looks up at the camera, a timid cat crouches on the ground, everyday objects stand forlornly on a table. Now the “simple” existence of “pure” nature becomes the mask and projection surface for deeper meanings—yet just like sex with the stranger, it remains a puzzling, external object, despite an inner feel of closeness. Between slowed down images of tenderness and sexual intercourse, the filmmaker interpolates pictures of blazing fires, empty streets, and the description of a wake, as well as the sinister nocturnal barking of dogs, frogs croaking, the crowing of cocks. Analogous to the sensual body losing its

boundaries, nature itself becomes both animate and an expression of a “higher” process.

Against the poeticization of nature, Hein sets a very concrete everyday language: “I can hardly believe it, such a great feeling, the two of us alone, naked in the forest.” The tender sensuality of gentle skin contact is sometimes interrupted by a grating sound more suggestive of the scratching of a metal surface than the silent caress of skin. The voyeuristic fetishization of individual movements and body parts of anonymous black men are slowly and somewhat shyly extended to the actual partner.

To the accompaniment of unsteady pictures of green nature, of birds flying up into the sky, the voice recounts the beauty of her nights with Joe: “It’s what I’ve yearned for, all this time... This warm physical contact with a man in bed for hours on end. Waking up together in the morning.” Happiness produces an aesthetic view and a symbiotic closeness with the beauties of nature. Social interaction, on the other hand, is more difficult to shape. Buffalo and a shrill, grating soundtrack herald sources of friction. The filmmaker cannot follow Joe’s conversations with friends, nor can she share his political views. The sex is ultimately bought, one way or another, symbolized by the room of a convenience hotel, in which the couple spend a whole night having hard, uncommitted sex. In the face of the social realities which surround them, a conflict breaks out which explodes into irreconcilable violence. The man who

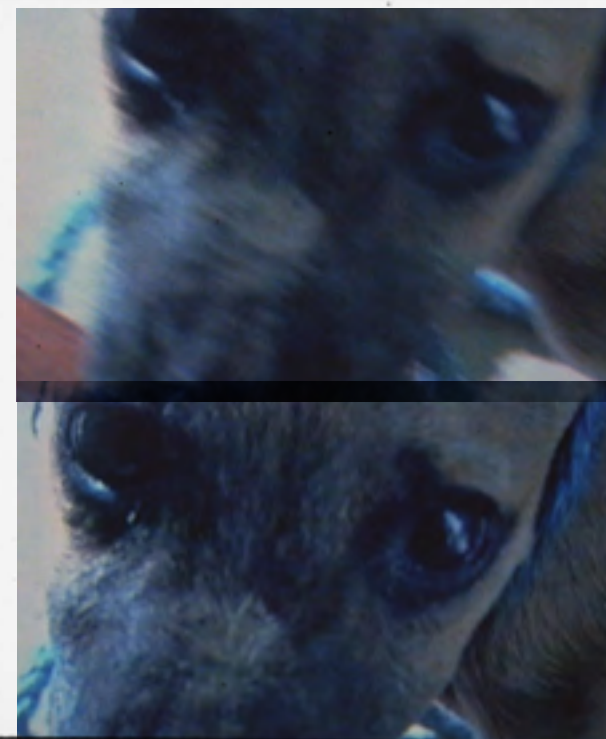
has been turned into an object attacks the instrument of his objectification, the filmmaker's camera. The promise of reconciliation on the sexual level—"Baby, I will make you sweat"—is opposed by the unbalanced power relations and conflicts of interest between two people from different worlds. The 'solution' is brought by the flight home.

Another visit to Jamaica leads to a relationship with Ron. This time conflicts are avoided. Now, familiar with conditions, she immerses herself. The images observe everyday tasks, never straining for symbolic effect but reflecting instead an empathy with her surround. "Simply let things happen, don't force, organize, plan anything anymore. Enjoy your time, don't wait. Waiting causes unhappiness. The other, German world is so far away, as if it didn't exist anymore. I live here, as if everything were going to go on like this forever. The kisses, the gentle embraces, the casual pressure of hip against hip, his cock is already hard, a brief caress—it could fill my whole life—I am addicted to tenderness. I have a new body again, a golden one, one that is looked at with desire... Here my age doesn't matter." If her fantasy has been realized, it remains split from her everyday world, creating a chasm of status, education, race, and sexuality. She poses a last question, again formulated in a personal way: "To come alive once or twice a year, but at what price?"

The soundtrack however, incorporates and expresses some of those splits and chasms. The musical motif of longing that dominates the film is gradually developed from synthesized or synthetically processed original sounds and, analogous to the filmmaker's emotional approach to the distant land, rises to a sometimes nostalgic intensity that draws on connections to ambient, TripHop and Trance. In these 'cold' music styles of the nineties, although they originate from a syncretic mixture of Afro-Caribbean, Afro-British and Afro-American elements, these quotations get lost. "Germany" and "Jamaica" are brought together in a "cooling" of the Caribbean rhythms. The leitmotif is at the same time reminiscent of jazz loops, of the former rhythms of dub or reggae, which, had they been quoted, would have celebrated an originality that Birgit Hein and the group POL wanted to avoid. While the images mark an insurmountable difference between West-Germany and Jamaica, the haunting soundtrack manages to "cross over," creating a ring of echoes between Cologne, Kingston, London and New York. In this respect, it is the bearer of a reflective-critical as well as utopian moment.

The critical awareness seemingly dismissed from a conscious level nevertheless creates its own coded space in unconscious images. There are repeated shots of stray dogs eating carrion, and vultures at work. The camera maintains its steady glare as they tug and pluck

at flesh, as if the censorship of all that must not be thought were registering itself threateningly in these pictures. In this image, in which life and death, eating and being eaten meet, the roles involved—man, woman, and Jamaica—can be deployed and swapped at will. The result is always discomfiting. This discomfort is the filmmaker's private expression of disquiet at what has been left unsaid and repressed, whereas the displeasure of a part of the audience was directed precisely at what is expressed—the desire of the older woman—which, in the face of the film, can no longer be ignored. To have shown that desire in all its energy, its potential for pleasure, as well as for conflict, is the poetic and radical merit of this beautiful film.



Joe and I have a huge argument. He shouts that he would like to chuck me straight out of the car. He races through the night like a madman. Not a word is spoken for the rest of the ride back. Back in the hut he goes crazy. He wants to see what I have filmed. How can I film other men? He takes the video camera and throws it across the room. He screams "You whore" and hits me. I hit him back. He wants me out. He can't spend another night with me under one roof. He rips up my notes. Then he takes my camera case and says he's going to throw it into the bush.

He goes out and comes back almost immediately. He has the case in his hand, blood everywhere, he stepped on some glass. We go to sleep fully clothed. That night my old fears return, fears of being left alone again.

Next morning he says, "You can stay until your plane leaves." Then we don't speak to each other any more. That afternoon I hear him singing "We can give it one more try baby. Baby I will make you sweat."

BABY I WILL MAKE YOU SWEAT

Questions:

an interview with Yann Beauvais

YANN BEAUVAIS

YANN: There is something strange I should say first. In the 70s there were divisions in the French experimental scene, you had on one side Dominique Noguez, a theoretician and writer who was closer to body art, and Guy Fihman and Claudine Eizykman who were important filmmakers, they were a couple who worked in the Vincennes alongside the philosophy of Jean-Francois Lyotard. Their type of work was somehow set up against English materialist film and some German structural films. There existed a kind of soft conflict, it wasn't really spoken about, but as a young filmmaker I could feel it was very present. I know it sounds a bit strange but the antagonism of this intellectual situation made it difficult for me to access some works and filmmakers.

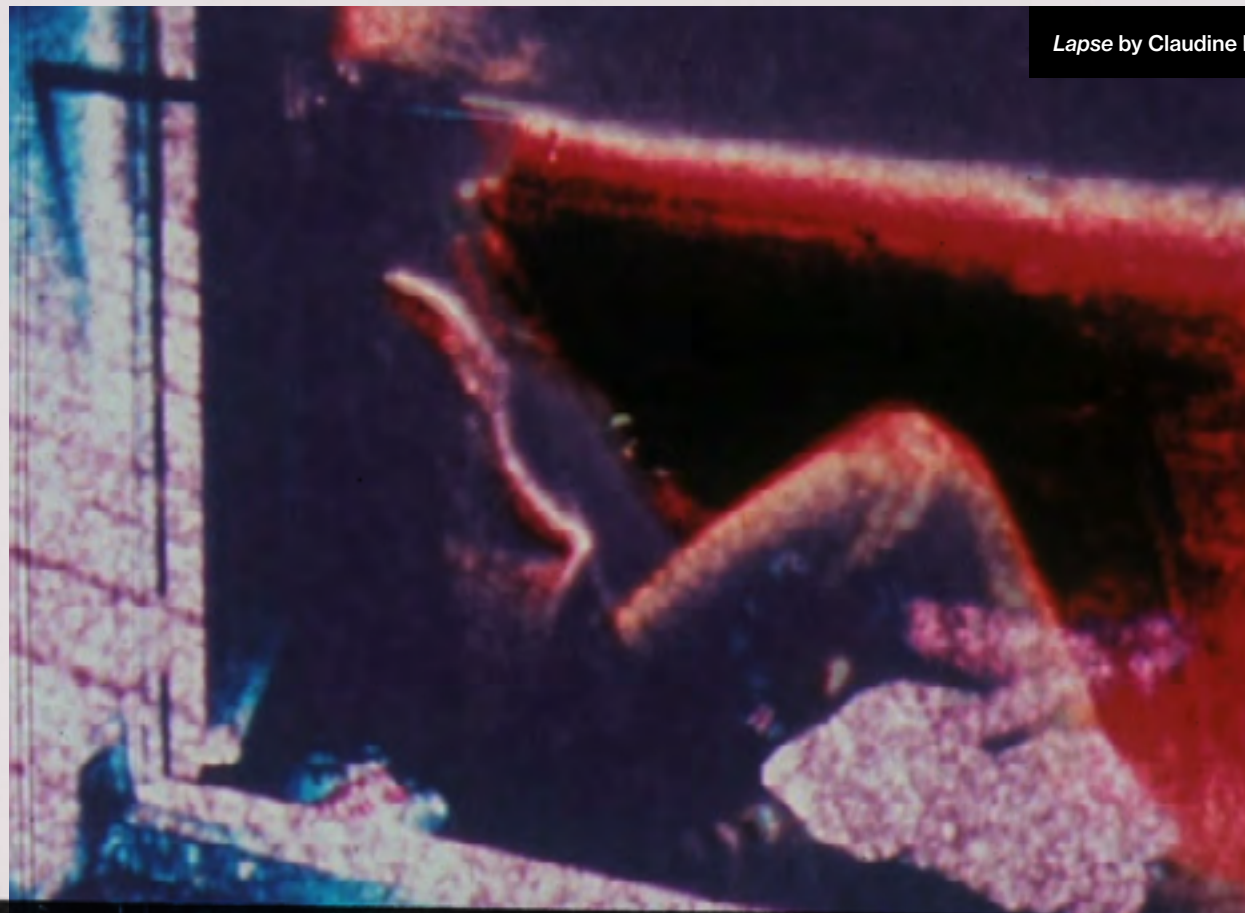
MIKE: Was it difficult for German experimental work to be shown in France?

YANN: There was an assertion by the English and Germans that nothing existed in France. Stupid art world competition. The work of Birgit and Wilhelm Hein was classified as being extremely materialist and violent, not only visually, but in the content. In later years,

for a French audience, the Heins's shift in content, away from structuralism, was difficult to understand.

The first time I saw the work of Birgit and Wilhelm

Hein was at the Festival D'Hyères (if I remember correctly) in the late 70s, or maybe within "Une Histoire du Cinema" (the exhibition curated by Peter



Lapse by Claudine Eizykman



Kubelka for the Centre Georges Pompidou in the mid-70s). I was really surprised at the corporeal nature of the film they showed because I thought they were doing strict materialist work, not dealing so much with sexual representation and physical violence. It seemed

there had been a turn in their making which took me a while to grasp. They succeeded to make a link between Viennese Actionism and structural film. The figure that helped me understand this relation was Kurt Kren.

When I came into a relationship with their films I had the handicap of not speaking German, and being a young French artist, quite vulnerable and timid at that time, so I didn't dare to address them. I would have the guts to do so only after I met all the younger generation of younger German filmmakers, and with whom I was much closer, such as Matthias Müller, Jürgen Reble, etc. It was strange because I was a friend of Malcolm Le Grice who was speaking of Birgit and Wilhelm Hein quite pleasantly. But I didn't succeed to connect immediately. It was just at the moment that I could destroy the figure of authority they represented, that both of them decided to end their relationship. Though I had met them a few times, their separation made it easier. I had more of a problem with Wilhelm than Birgit because of his hetero-domination. There was a certain kind of macho domination I could not stand.

After they separated I got in touch with Birgit. I discovered her film *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1995). That was a revelation because suddenly an artist who was known as an activist with filmmaking, a pedagogue to younger generations, someone extremely generous through the distribution and exhibition of other's films, she was now exposing herself. It was not a representation with distance. She was at the core of the film and at the same time not denying anything

that she had done. I have to remark that in this year I was trying to do something a bit similar. How to articulate the personal with the formal? The big step for me was *New York Long Distance* (1994) where I could speak with my own voice but at the same time not deny formal concerns.

Discovering Birgit's film I thought wow, she's gone really far and made herself naked. She's dealing with issues that no one had touched except for maybe Barbara Hammer at that time. Hammer dealt with this issue of an older woman making love, her desire. I felt a connection between the two filmmakers. There was a concern about getting older but that didn't mean you had no sexuality. To foreground this was quite powerful. But not only that, she was putting herself in a strange location which had to do with exoticism and neo-colonialism. She dared to do something that no white, hetero man has ever dealt with, when they do this type of sexual tourism. Whether hetero or homo, it's rare that this issue is dealt with. She was pointing out the fact that yes, she goes there to find a man to fuck, and she knows that this is a relation of power and she's showing all of that. But she's not Trinh T. Minh-ha. She's not dealing in the same manner with the issue of race, but she's aware of it. That was extremely powerful because she had the guts to put herself in the middle of a tornado. Every one of us as viewers feels uncomfortable in relation to her, in relation to what she's dealing with, and that discomfort is amplified because most of the audience is white.

MIKE: Most of the audience in the screening you presented in Paris was white? Or most of the audience for the film period.

YANN: At that time audiences in the alternative film world were mostly white.

MIKE: When you remark that the film puts the viewer in an uncomfortable place, is that aggression?

YANN: It's not aggression. What I found remarkable is that she opens herself to criticism. She is at the mercy of anyone, as if she were opening a wound and lets it be



Baby I will Make you Sweat

Yann Beauvais

there without trying to hide it. The fact that she dealt with these issues and put herself at risk meant I had to revise everything I thought about her films. Clearly some of her earlier making dealt with personal issues I had failed to notice. I'm really slow sometimes to apprehend the work of someone and to understand what is at stake. It's strange that this film is not really appreciated.

MIKE: In today's cancel culture, isn't it hard to show and celebrate a film like this?

YANN: Maybe, but that's a pity. I like the fact that she goes up to this contradiction and wears it. I don't know if you've read books by Brandon Taylor, a young African American gay writer. He speaks about the relation of someone who is black and gay in a white world. He's speaking about how the whites interact with him, and how he has to deal with their guilt, and a lot of problems that they project on him. Birgit is trying to find a way out of that circle of guilt. I don't know if she succeeds. But she tries to discover if there's a way for a woman of a certain age to be able to recognize her desire, to be active as a sexual partner, and not only to be the subject of desire. For this she goes to a foreign country. For this she goes to see a black African in Jamaica. This introduces other levels of commodification as she enters a territory that is not easy to deal with.

MIKE: Do you feel that Julien Topeyz and Basmore Honeyghan, her two black partners, have a voice, a subjectivity?



American author Brandon Taylor

YANN: There is a subjectivity but what is really painful is that the author, Birgit, is always wondering: do I leave space for the other? This is not a space that I give, but that he has. It's like the silly question of Jean-Paul Sartre. You can't give liberty or freedom to someone. They have to take it. The fact that there is this possible contradiction within the film is interesting. In fact, what I like in the film is all the questions that arise from it, all the issues you need to think about. It's not a film that stages a finished argument. It's a film that authorizes you to argue. To think. That is what is most important in filmmaking.

MIKE: Answers can be a way of throwing away beautiful questions. When you have an answer you never have to think about the question again. But to allow a question to endure, to sit in the space of a question, means opening to the possibility that it could change you.

YANN: I agree. After the screening we had dinner with Birgit and I discovered *une femme vulnérable*, how do you say that?

MIKE: A vulnerable woman?

YANN: But it's not pejorative. She is someone who is fragile and extremely strong. It's like a crystal and that I liked. I liked this person from that day.

MIKE: Her vulnerability was surprising to you.

YANN: Yes. I think I didn't see it because of the relation between her and Wilhelm which was like a screen.

MIKE: Could you talk about the Paris audience reaction to her film? It's a very different kind of movie than what you would ordinarily show there.

YANN: It was a bit incomprehensible, out of reach for most, too personal to address such questions. Cultural studies, gender studies and race studies took a longer time in France to become dominant or of interest. In

1995 I was programming at the American Center and showed people like Trinh T. Minh-ha. Many of those artists were not understood. For French filmmakers, the essay film had to follow more traditional forms that weren't so personal. There were difficulties setting up a common territory: where and how to speak. Birgit was quite aware of these problems, she explained that she was keeping a certain kind of diary, like the diaries of the sexual encounters of Curt McDowell who cruised boys in San Francisco and brought them to his house. But this was not a diary of nostalgia and remembrance, of forgotten and fascinating pasts. This was something that challenges you.

There are some exquisite images in the film, like when she goes into the sea. There are some attractive visual motifs which can help people share some of the issues she's dealing with. But for a French audience it was not easy to understand.

MIKE: Does this gap replay what Peter Wollen described as the two avant-gardes? The political versus the formalist experimental avant-garde?

YANN: I'm not sure if I would take Peter Wollen as a reference here. What I had in mind is the idea of the essay film. I know that Hans Richter spoke about this early on, but let's imagine that Chris Marker met Barbara Hammer and they made a film together. What was subtle was the fact that Birgit dares to join things that don't belong together. This is an extremely personal quest about being a woman who has desire, it's



Confessions by Curt McDowell

a feminist quest that embraces sexual tourism. This is something you do, but don't speak about, you don't expose yourself. Everyone watches pornography, but no one talks about it.

It's a different politics than those described by Peter Wollen. It's the politics of the body within the tradition of feminism, but at the same time acknowledging that these politics can realize themselves only outside of Europe. This is very disturbing. It means that in Germany she has no sexuality.

MIKE: Feminists in Germany critiqued her for that.

YANN: That's why I thought it was a strong position to take, knowing that she would be totally massacred.

A Tale of Love by Trinh T. Minh-ha



Ecstasy is Important

BRIGITTA BURGER-UTZER

I started being heavily interested in experimental films in the 1980s and as a woman at this time very soon one of my role models and heroines became Birgit Hein. For me her contribution in writing and her strong activities as a presenter and promoter of independent films at the beginning was especially rewarding. “Film as Film” was an important and treasured reference book. The screenings during documenta 6 and the following exhibition “Film as Film—1910 until today” that Birgit and Wilhelm curated together with Wulf Herzogenrath and which toured extensively were positively mythical.

In November 1990 I first met Birgit Hein when she was one of the speakers at a symposium in Vienna, the title of her presentation was “Vom Opfer zur Täterin—die Sexualität im Avantgarde-Film von Frauen” (From Victim to Perpetrator—Sexuality in Women’s Avantgarde Film). She showed a film by Lydia Lunch and spoke about her thesis that now female artists also want to depict their own sexual lust, including aggression and violence. She was extremely tough during the symposium as the film—where you see the rape of a woman—was a scandal and she came under fire from

many (mostly male) participants. But I also recognized her vulnerability, she was attacked and misunderstood and I saw that she really felt violated.

Some years later we invited her to present her newest work *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1994) which is one of the most touching and poetic essay films I know. Ruthlessly she talked about her fears of getting older, missing love and sex and finding erotic satisfaction with a younger black man in Jamaica where she travels often. The imagery is not pornographic or voyeuristic at all, but again the film was not accepted without harsh critique. I felt with her and tried to defend the great film and her honesty but time was not ripe in Vienna for such beauty and the right of women for creating art combined with their desires. Luckily Kurt Kren with his humor was present and some of us together with Birgit met again in the evening in his apartment. For Birgit it was a meeting with one of her closest partners in crime after many, many years. There I got to know the young spirit of Birgit when she was already 54 years old. For many hours we talked, drank and smoked a lot. Ecstasy is an important part of our lives. Birgit Hein assured this with her personality and art.



Brigitta Burger-Utzer



six years of sixpackfilm: Kurt Kren, Birgit Hein, Hans Scheugl, 1996

Unprotected:

Annette Brauerhoch interview

BRAUERHOCH / HOOLBOOM

MIKE: You were central to the film *Fremd Gehen: Gespräche mit meiner Freundin* (Going out: Conversations with my Girlfriend by Eva C. Heldmann, 2000), which has been compared to *Baby I will Make you Sweat*. I wonder if you could talk about your contribution to that film, and if you feel these two films are related?

ANNETTE: There are of course similarities. Both films are about female protagonists that actively pursue their sexuality in alien territory. Eva's film is scripted and I lend myself to her and open up to somebody else's camera. Both films expose female desire and the fixation on specific sexual objects. Birgit's film uses her subjective camera. It's a very radical, uninhibited and unprotected exposure of herself in that situation. So is ours, but it is not an autobiography with the same kind of immediacy and urgency that Birgit's camera transmits.

This kind of uninhibited exposure led to audience discomfort and the same kind of accusations that Birgit met with her film. We were charged with not discussing or addressing racism, economic relationships, power relations. Both films neglect these aspects in order to focus on the auto- or the biographical, on the intimate relations of a woman "of a certain age". I'm

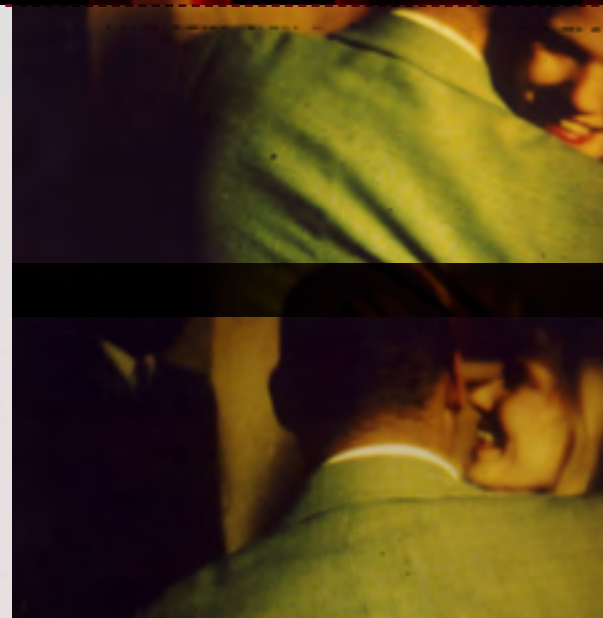
67 now, I was just 42 then, but already considered an older woman. I was actively pursuing sexual interests which at the time were focused on what you could call a fetish: black soldiers in the American army stationed in Frankfurt. Birgit focuses on black men in Jamaica. Both of us are exoticizing a certain type of man and racial relation. That's one similarity. Another is our age.

MIKE: In *Baby's* voice-over Birgit talks about aging as being exiled from her body, from sexuality and from the possibility of being in a relationship.

ANNETTE: I did not feel exiled from my body at all. I felt exiled because I did not wholeheartedly identify with academia. I was working on my postdoctoral thesis to qualify as a professor, and teaching, I was part of an elite in a way. That made me an orchid, an exotic exemption in the circles I moved in, the US-American bases in Germany and the so-called *fräuleins*.

MIKE: What are the *fräuleins*?

ANNETTE: The *fräuleins* were those post-war West German women who consorted with American soldiers.



Fremd Gehen: Gespräche mit meiner Freundin



They were considered traitors and an insult to the defeated German men. There were of course so many German women who were *starved*, not just for food, but fun, lust of life. American men had a very different physique from the German men of that time, and a coolness that

was totally unknown to German culture. The same perception still persisted in the 1980s and 90s. Even feminists who hated the fact that these men were soldiers and representatives of the US felt they were cool. Particularly the black soldiers. You could go out with a black soldier even if you were a feminist because they too were exiled from the hegemonic American society. That made them secondary citizens just as feminists felt women were secondary citizens. This is where we came together.

Birgit's situation was very different. For Birgit it was really about liberation. I felt liberated all the time. I had no inhibitions and no problems with my body whatsoever. The filmmaker Eva Heldmann used me to

pursue an idea that I was a feminist who took liberties and whose lifestyle could be considered masculine. I had many parallel relationships without being emotionally involved. I just loved having sex.

MIKE: Can you talk about Birgit's journey of liberation?

ANNETTE: Birgit begins by leaving home as an experiment, feeling uncertain and fragile. Once in Jamaica she changes locations from the international hotel because it's nondescript, she could be anywhere. In order to get a better feel for the local culture she goes to a cheap hotel and this is where, all of a sudden, men become present because they offer themselves to her. They start the dialogue.

She opens the film in a wonderful and radical way. The language is direct, it hits you in the face. "So long alone. So long without sex. How long can I go on like this?" She makes the question of having or not having sex a question of life or death. A life worth living. She moves from cold Germany to hot Jamaica but treads on this new dangerous ground with reluctance. This is how she starts out. Reluctantly. And it's step by step. What's wonderful is that she lets you experience her journey. She tells us: I'm going to have sex for sex's sake and I know it's not going to lead to anything. It's going to be a one-night stand.

I was never married, Birgit was married. She's from a different generation in terms of the 1950s repressiveness which is something she really struggled

with. She had a strong impulse and used drastic means to rebel against this.

MIKE: Some of the 50s codes seemed formative. Many friends reported that she hoped her marriage would last, no matter how difficult it was.

ANNETTE: Birgit was very happy with the idea that here was a partnership, let's say like Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre. Two artists joined forces and discovered a whole world of making films in a very different way from what had been the convention until then. This was particularly true in Germany because it had no contact with international film culture. And there we are, mid-60s, they were both initially painting and then making films. It's exciting to make films together about these intimate things, their sexuality. It's running a risk, it's daring, and takes the notion of "the private is political" very literally.

MIKE: Do you feel their personal approach closed off the politics of their work?

ANNETTE: It confronted the audience with two people in the process of exhibiting and exposing their sexuality. Thus their work does not aim at presenting film as the product of a process of reflection. Most films allow you to gain a certain insight that is not just individual. I don't think that was their interest. I think their interest was really in confrontation. They performed aggression. The language they used was vulgar. It's a

Fremd Gehen: Gespräche mit meiner Freundin



language that snobs or academics would denigrate as proletarian. They adopted it with relish. Shit. Cunt. Fuck. It put many people off. But it was part of their insistence on confronting people with their bodies, their physical realities. That brings you back to the personal, and it's political as a gesture, but is it political in a sense of transgressing or taking this into another realm?

MIKE: Birgit says in her voice-over: "We walk through the jungle-like park. He tells me the names of the plants. He wants to ask me a question. My knees get weak, even my voice fails me. I just manage to say yes." Is it necessary to lose a voice to gain a body?

ANNETTE: You are making a dichotomy between mind and body, the voice being the representative of the brain, and to be fully in your body you can no longer apply your voice. But the voice is also the medium of orgasmic cries. I think body and voice are very much one. I don't know whether you've read the interview with both Wilhelm and Birgit where Wilhelm talks about his fantasy of fucking mute women, women who have no voice. There is an instance of men's fear of expressive women, and particularly their sexuality that expresses itself in cries and sighs of ecstasy and pleasure.

MIKE: Birgit in voice-over: "I have been given a new body, a golden one. One that draws looks of desire. My skin is smoother, water pearls on my shoulders. These glances, overt, explicit, follow me. My age no longer means anything here." Did you feel your body

was different in the military bases with the black American GIs?

ANNETTE: No, because for me it wasn't an exotic adventure. If you spend weeks in the sun and sand and the salt water your body does actually become golden. I can feel that. To be in the open air and having sex the whole time. Drinking and being on vacation. In my case I lived my quotidian life. I stayed in Frankfurt, went to bars and discotheques. It's only that having sex with different men, sometimes in one day, gave me a feeling of exuberance and fullness and really indulging. I didn't have a golden body but one that was very satisfied.

MIKE: It didn't make you feel like you'd found a fountain of youth, an infinite freedom?

ANNETTE: No no no. I felt very guilty because I thought I was using sex in a very consumerist way. I saw myself going to these bars and clubs as if I was going to a supermarket.

The difference between our films is that ours, Eva's and mine, is very self reflexive. I'm constantly talking and criticizing and reflecting on myself. Reflection, however, was not Birgit's intention or interest. She wanted to fully explore her experience. At the time that we were filming I was writing a book about American soldiers and *fräuleins*. Nights in the clubs, days at the computer.

We were totally brash. Today, with all the discourses around colonialism and racism, this film would

no longer be made in the same way. It was very naïve. A privileged white woman has sex with underprivileged black men. It simply wasn't reflected in ours nor in Birgit's film. This is where the two films can be compared. The exclusivity of white woman and black men in a hierarchy that was financial, cultural, educational. There's a German artist, there's a German academic, both of them screw black men and find happiness in that. Well... tainted happiness.

MIKE: Birgit says in her film: "To come alive once or twice a year, but at what price."



Baby I will Make you Sweat

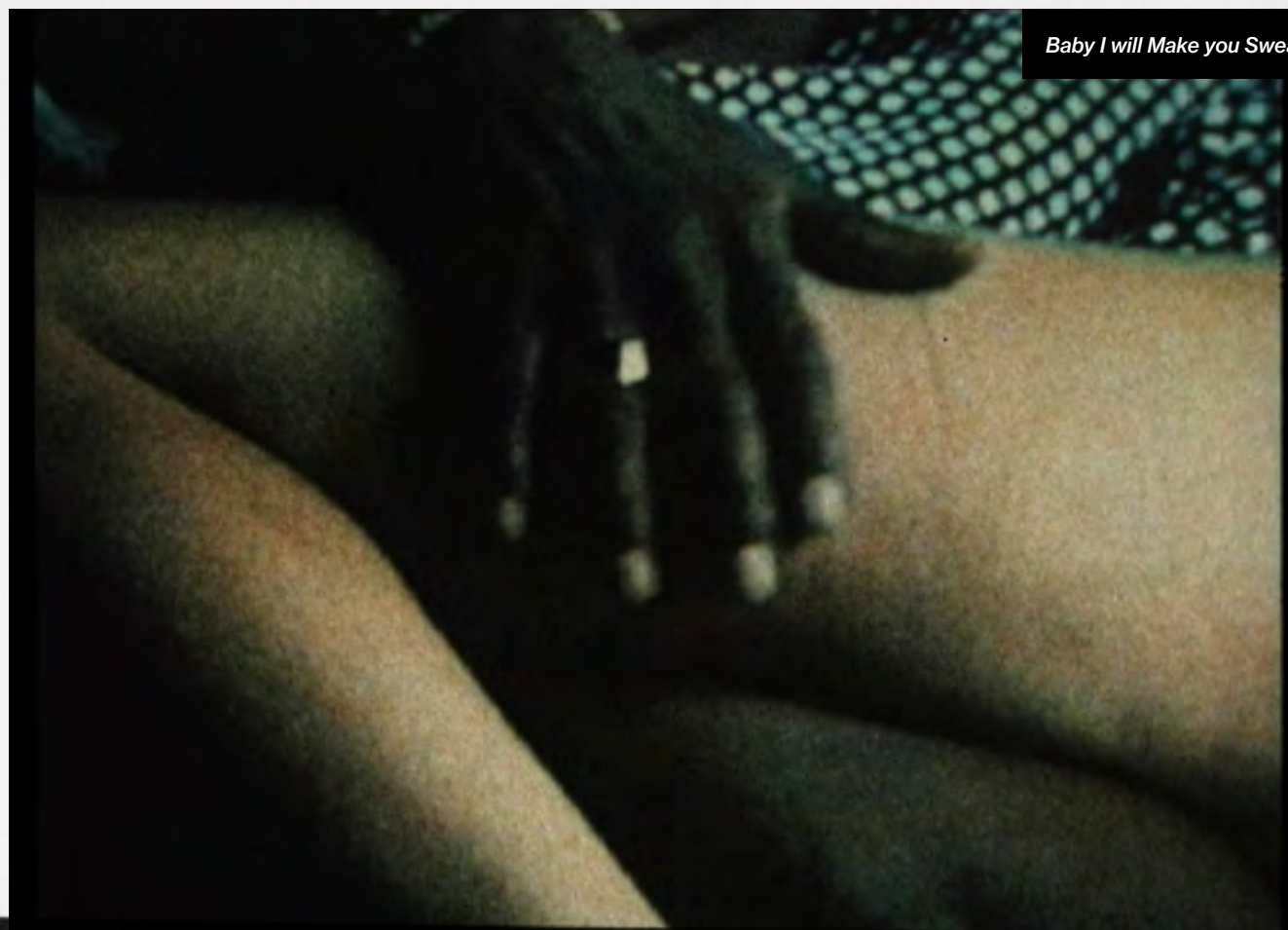
ANNETTE: You have to take an airplane to go to Jamaica, this is not an everyday situation. It's totally separated from the rest of your life. You don't have your friends there, your workplace, your culture. The guy is not integrated into your daily life, that's the price you have to pay. Ron came to Germany but it didn't work. Of course not. The price is the disparity and exile.

MIKE: She uses a complicated soundtrack by POL with a threatening undertone that works against the sunny beaches and beautiful bodies on display.

ANNETTE: It is very well thought through. It's not often grating by accident, it totally undermines the project of trying to find fulfillment and harmony. The soundtrack throughout the whole film is the critical instance. It expresses doubt and offers a reflection that her voice-over does not express. She worked together very closely with POL, and they consciously mixed all kinds of American, British, Jamaican reggae fusions with jazzy elements and then thwarted them. Can you imagine that film with reggae? It would make you puke. Images of beach and beauty and then you have reggae? Impossible.

MIKE: The sex scenes are very lyrical, perhaps the most beautiful scenes she ever shot.

ANNETTE: Absolutely. There are moments of extreme happiness in that film. But there are always premonitions of something else. Images of vultures, death, dogs. Birgit wasn't naive, she probably doubted her own happiness as much as she felt it.





Baby I will Make you Sweat



Baby I will Make you Sweat



Baby I will Make you Sweat



Baby I will Make you Sweat

Eintagsfliegen (Mayflies)

RUTH SPITZER

Mayflies are insects that develop in fresh water and live only for a few days. In German “eintagsfliegen” can refer to ordinary events or even people. You could say that someone who is *eintagsfliegen* is not very special, a common person.

Eintagsfliegen (1997) is a half-hour portrait of the painter Gabriel Kutz. It looks like it was shot in an afternoon in the artist's studio. We see her prepare and stretch a canvas, then she displays many canvases by hanging them on the wall for the camera. But we never see her painting. An interesting exclusion.

The subject of the paintings are ordinary objects: postcards (“life is too short for a...”), maps, calendars, hotel stationary with a half scribbled note, grocery lists, airmail letters, writing on beer coasters. Numbers often appear, added up in columns, dates accompany brand names, stamps. These everyday objects carry a personal touch, they appear worn with handling.

For decades, the artist has been collecting everything in writing (that refers to her own life): Streetcar tickets, shopping lists and much more... The search for traces, for individual signs of the past is a central element of her work.

Dr. Petra Römer-Westarp

The paintings are always viewed up close, you can see the brushstrokes and layerings, they fill the screen. Very often, because of the framing, we see only part of each painting, a fragment in close-up. One follows another as she hangs them on the wall for the camera to record.

There is a single short pause in the voice-over, but mostly she speaks at an unhurried pace about her life. In the opening scene she recalls being asked: Are you still painting? She wonders what people really want to know. How many days am I supposed to paint? How many hours per day? How many strokes of a brush? She breaks everything down into sums and accounts.

In two days she's going to give away her two cats. They came from her fourth major relationship. It ended not



Gabriel Kutz in *Eintagsfliegen*

long ago, and these cats are the only living things she ever got out of any of her relationships.

Her voice is flat and without any expression, fitting perhaps for this impersonal text about her personal life. She had four main lovers, 30 affairs, she enumerates the non-lovers and the flirtations. Everything turns into math. We had eight beers together. I cycled 400 km in total to see someone I never got to know properly. Every encounter is marked by disconnection. She sounds alone even when she's in a relationship.

Gaby Kutz paints things that are associated with stories, but do not tell these stories themselves, but can only lead to them.

Dr. Petra Römer-Westarp

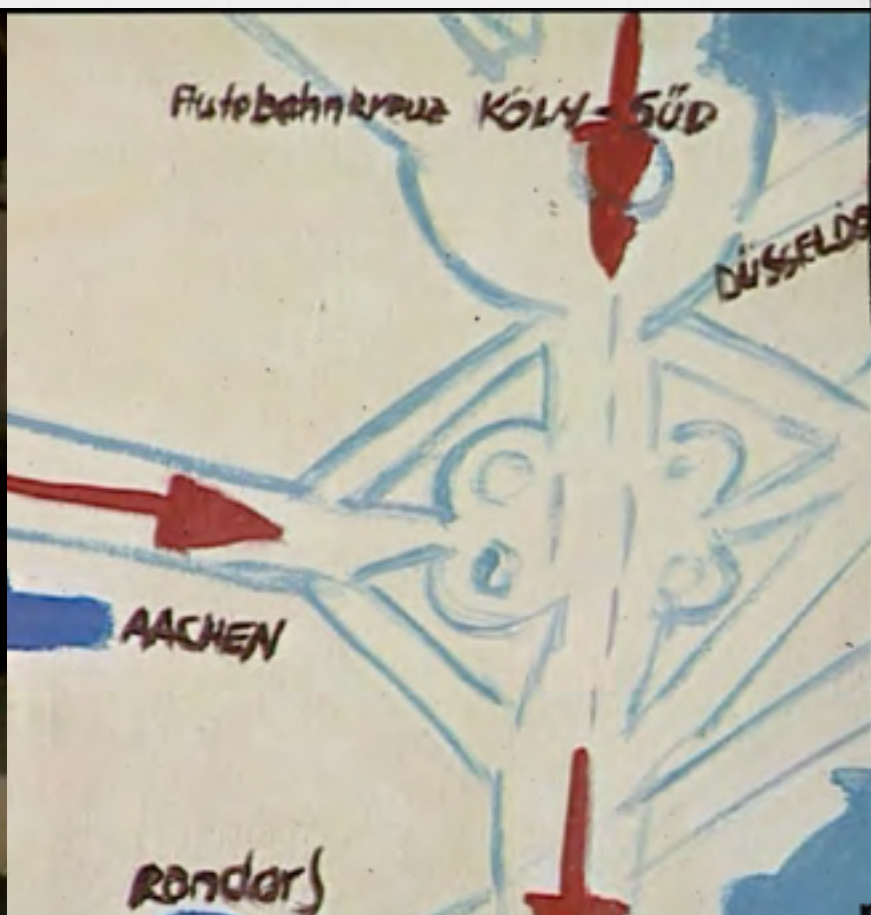
A lot of the movie is about her partners. It's as if you walked through your apartment and described everything numerically. The hallway is 15 meters long and 1 meter wide. It has 78 tiles of wood. This is how she describes her life.

Each painting is like a lover. It's a taxidermy, a bit morbid, almost like a cadaver, showing bits of dead material. Memory arrives as a numeric ordering system. The paintings gather like all of her ex-lovers or wished-for lovers coming together.

Viewers are asked to move between close-up visuals and a distant monologue. Perhaps her character is a reflection on digital life. Computers can answer questions but you never know how the machine works,

what it's experiencing. Her machine-like voice-over is all about reasoning, but painting isn't reasoning, it can never be objective.

Birgit excludes almost everything you would normally see in a biographical movie about an artist.



Mathias W
19.70
Leben ist viel zu kurz
für ein ganz normales Bier



Mathias W
19.70
Leben ist viel zu kurz
für ein ganz normales Bier



Eintagsfliegen

Brief notes on Birgit Hein's *Eintagsfliegen*

MATTHIAS MÜLLER

As a portrait of a female artist, *Eintagsfliegen* (1997) is a solitaire in Birgit Hein's oeuvre. At a much younger age, she had already produced a short portrait of Jack Smith with Wilhelm for WDR television, but here she submits completely to the image and imagination of her portrait subject for some 25 minutes, the painter Gabriele Kutz. I had never heard of this film before.

Gabriele Kutz, who studied at the Düsseldorf Art Academy until 1993 with Michael Buthe, a friend of Birgit's, works figuratively. She is interested in painting everyday objects that bear witness to her own existence: diary pages, tickets, postcards sent to her, receipts. She has also written a novel and a radio play.

Karl Heinrich Weghorn's mostly static shots serve to document the paintings. Birgit's unobtrusive montage of them is intercut with a few studio shots showing Gabriele Kutz stretching a canvas. It is underlaid with short prose texts spoken by the artist herself. In this voice-over she reveals herself as an artist who lives in precarious circumstances and earns so little that at the end of the month she has just 17.80 DM left for a tube of opaque white. She seems to wait tables in a pub for minimum wage.

Confronted with the question "Do you still paint?," which she experiences as humiliating, she launches into an eloquent, breathless cascade of responses, the severity of her words contrasting with the harmlessness of her pictorial motifs. She takes stock, and she does so with the meticulousness of a payroll accountant. However, it is impossible to say whether or when her real self merges into a literary one.

"So far I have had 4 great loves, 7 less-great-loves, 38 short-term loves, 53 loves that were only thoughts in my head, 15 loves that were one-night stands. And 1066 times I did not love." This number, she informs us laconically, is that of her former johns, later on followed by the casual remark that it makes no difference whether she serves men scrambled eggs or her body. Sex she sums up as "the pressing of bodies against each other."



Gabriele Kutz in *Eintagsfliegen*

The assessment of her relationships is consistently disastrous. She was neglected, disregarded, went through the agonies of unrequited love, experienced the ordeal of being just one of many women in one of her partner's life. Her lament turns into mockery, unleashed attacks, a litany. She may have little, but she has the word.

Her dry statistics reminded me in its pedantic accounting of relationships in Michael Bryntrup's *Loverfilm* (1996), an Excel spreadsheet turned into a film that

chronologically lists the filmmaker's former lovers. Though as Kutz's narration unfolds, it turns into a tragedy of self-confessions reminiscent of Anne Charlotte Robertson, who in her film diaries spoke so frankly about the pain caused by her unrequited loves, for example a TV host she never met. Similarly, at the end of Gabriele Kutz's balance sheet there are also omissions, losses, failures.

"Making my diary has literally saved my life," Anne Charlotte Robertson once said in an interview. The same may be true of Gabriele Kutz when she obsessively translates personal notes and diaries into painting. Asked why she does so, Kutz replies: "Diaries are the sum of the years you have lived... Painting the image of a diary cover is like painting a portrait of that person, whose story it conceals." She paints these everyday objects as a way of securing traces; in her literary recollections, however, she goes far below the surface. They are illusionless glances back at the repeated collapse of an idea of romantic love. "Love Stinks." W+B Hein's provocative film title comes to mind.

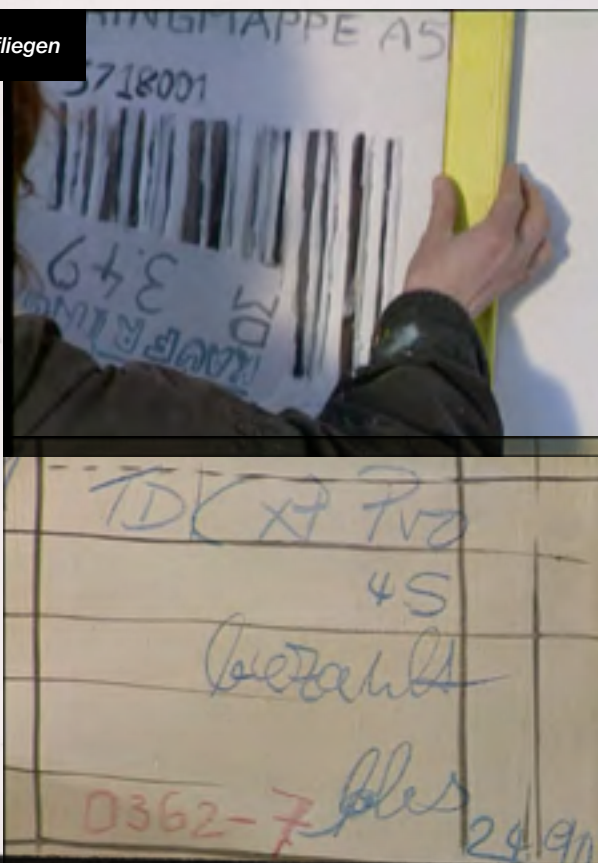


Anne Charlotte Robertson

As a director, Birgit Hein is conspicuously restrained in this film. She leaves the stage to the portrayed. Gabriele Kutz's urgency of personal expression, her unwavering reactions to private crises with artistic means and her forceful tone, far from sentimentality and self-pity, have obviously allowed Birgit to find a counterpart whom she did not have to work against, but whom she could meet with respect and sympathy.

At the end of the film, a laugh directed towards Birgit's camera is savored in slow motion.

Eintagsfliegen



La moderna poesia

RANDALL HALLE

Excerpted from: *Visual Alterity Abroad: Hegel through Birgit Hein's Baby I will Make you Sweat and La moderna poesia*, Film: *Philosophy* Vol. 14 Issue 1, 2010

La moderna poesia has a similar background to *Baby I will Make you Sweat* except the journey is to Cuba. The experimental aesthetic quality of the film is defined here less by a process of abstracting the image and more by the editing. Michael Stoeber describes it as a “kaleidoscope, in which the narrating eye blithely leaps between times, places, and persons, in a manner that is only familiar from dreams” (Stoeber 2004, 46). As during the earlier trips to Jamaica, the narrator describes how Hein arrives in Cuba from Frankfurt, spends a bit of time in a tourist hotel in Havana, until she meets a man, L., who offers to serve as her companion. With him she moves away from the polished facade of the beachfront that separates the tourists off from the “real” Cuba. She becomes fascinated with the images of Che Guevara that dominate the tourist side of the façade, while noting that the revolutionary icon is remarkably absent from the rest of Cuba. After a number of visits to the Museum of the Revolution, Hein proposes to L. that they travel around the island visiting all the Museums of the Revolution and in doing so also visit L.’s friends. The majority of images are drawn from this journey.



There are numerous similarities to *Baby*, however the story of this journey, in as much as there is a story, takes up a different form of provocation. The trip to the interior of the island denotes a refusal to participate in a leftist romanticism vis-à-vis Cuba and Fidel Castro. Central to *poesia* is the question posed in the voice-over, “Was ist aus uns geworden?” (What has happened to us)?

She provokes her spectators to consider the cost of their utopias, she challenges them to look further and find out at what cost to the Cubans has the tourist enclave

been built. From the beaches that are now popular as tourist attractions, especially appealing to old leftists, Hein poses this question to the generation of 1960s radical revolutionaries. Where the initial question of *Baby* was posed to an individual subject, "How long can I" (emphasis added), in *poesia* it is a collective we to whom the question is posed.

Thus *poesia* expands the concerns beyond the individual subject to larger communities. In *poesia* the subject investigates; it poses a question to a collective we of which it is a part and yet also different. From outside of Europe, *poesia* reflects on self and other, individual and community, history and autobiography and on the mark of a life in that history.

Both films are directed personal filmmaking, a camera in the hands of a filmmaker subject, a recording eye/I.





Disco al final: Reading Birgit Hein's *La moderna poesia* as a post-revolutionary road movie

JUTTA BRENDEMÜHL

Cuba, in the European imagination, always seems to have been more of an idea than an actual place; a dream, a projection, a longing, a socio-political lab—or a foil or deterrence, depending on where you stand politically. German experimental filmmaker Birgit Hein, in her late 50s when she visits Cuba to make the observational documentary *La moderna poesia* (2000), is firmly rooted in the left but approaches the post-revolutionary island, its people and herself, in mid-life with open eyes and a curious criticality. Accompanied by Hein's economically interspersed, pensive personal voiceover, we cross Cuba alongside a newfound local companion and in the constant presence of Marxist icon Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

Che is *La moderna poesia's* north star and our guiding beacon—albeit upside down the first time we see him half a minute into the film. He is both uber-revolutionary and the brand helping keep the Cuban economy afloat with T-shirt sales. One could nearly approach the film as an attempt at a restorative posthumous biopic of the charismatic leader and counterculture idol, traced along roadside billboards, monuments, museum artefacts and the omnipresent merchandise. Che

Guevara or Jim Morrison, cap or key chain, closing sale of the revolution. But Hein uses this surface Cuba to dig deeper into "real existing socialism," as well as larger personal and global political considerations.

Early on, Hein succinctly states her premise and self-set inquiry: "I did not go to Cuba out of nostalgia for socialism, but because I wanted to participate in life again. But now I am unsure. What has become of Che? And then I have to ask myself: What has become of us?" The *us* refer to her community, the *68er* as they are called in German, a generation of radical students and artists in Germany, France and other Western countries.

Hein came to Cuba in 2000, pre-Guantánamo detention camp, pre-Fidel's death, but post many other myth-inducing historic events: Columbus, Spanish-French-Dutch-English-American colonial interference, slavery, then revolutions and a near-nuclear apocalypse. A Russian commentator adds the particular German-Cuban connection: "Cuba and Berlin were links in a chain, a fuse lit at both ends. Somewhere in the middle lay the interests of America and the Soviet Union. The fuse kept burning, only cut during the Cuban Missile



Crisis.” Hitchcock’s spy thriller *Topaz* (1969) is sampled (as is Chris Marker’s left-wing survey documentary *Le fond de l’air est rouge*, 1977) with an eery quote about the delivery of Russian assault weapons.

The visual material is dense and full of signs, signals and signifiers of Cuba’s diverse (sub) cultures, arising out of the overload of seminal moments in world history on one small Caribbean island that Hein criss-crosses with us in an hour. Don’t blink and you’ll miss a clue as Hein tries to conjure up the invisible with her images.



The film opens with distorted, mediated images of Cuban society in Hein’s Varadero hotel room, oddly fallen out of time and/or place like so many things in Cuba. *Disco al final*, the TV promises (or threatens). Minutes later, Hein spies the tourist resort’s all-inclusive surveillance cameras. This montage and a myriad of other quick juxtapositions coexist in the film. Her tender and a bit mournful stocktaking and revision of Cuba includes ration cards and leisure, prompting questions in the viewer’s mind, just like *el Máximo Líder Fidel’s* voice next to Hein’s wet towel on the bathroom floor. Tourists want (an image of) Che. Cubans want Nike. Is the lesson that our dreams will likely remain dreams, our ideals eventually diluted, deflated, tossed out; or that the (real or imaginary) grass will always be greener on the other side?

The Cuban idiosyncrasy or irony Hein is fascinated with manifests itself in the country’s attempt at conserving, preserving, re-serving the revolution. She visits every “revolution museum” along the way, providing much fodder for a media artist to analyse stasis and change, conservation and progress. This sympathetic but detached German visitor gives (and has) no answers on how to reconcile hero worship and destitute reality, past and present, what’s left of post-World War II attempts at a fresh start—in Cuba and Europe—with a settled, post-1989 capitalist world. Her probing but respectful perspective invites the viewer on a meandering road trip along her train of thought (and towards the end of the movie during actual bus and train trips).

Experiencing Cuba through Birgit Hein’s camera is a masterclass in holding contradictions and multiplicities without definitive judgment. What German Arts Academy co-member Wulf Herzogenrath said upon her death in 2023 is demonstrated here: “Hein was not just concerned with the subjectivity of the optical reproduction catalogue, with artistic processes and the reproduced reality, but with the functioning of physical perception itself.” (Tagesspiegel, 27 February 2023).

An added layer to her archeological storytelling is the intercutting of uncredited and unmarked archival footage. I seem to make out (or fill in?) radical student leader Rudi Dutschke in one protest, sometimes referred to as the “German Che,” who named his son Che, before he was fatally shot by a neo-Nazi in 1968.

Ever aware of her position and role, seemingly dispassionate and passionate at the same time, Hein soaks up everything, always filming, nearly manic, as she self-analyses. She does not ingratiate herself with Cubans (or viewers), knowing she is a visitor, an on-looker. Hein is with them but never part of them. The woman Rosa’s long gaze back into Hein’s camera is as revealing as the director’s gaze onto Cuban life.

Thus toggling back and forth in time, Hein interweaves historic international protest footage with glimpses of Cubans going about their daily lives, whether Afro-Cuban Santería rituals or casual parties with Havana Club and Coca-Cola that might as well be in Miami or

Baltimore, as a man's Orioles baseball shirt suggests. As we leave the cities, it is difficult not to interpret the fleeting images of yellowish agricultural countryside taken through a shattered and patched up car window as a metaphor of the island's state of affairs. The entire country seems languid, as if in a holding pattern. Hein's journey is as tedious as it is spirited: power outages, oil leaks, repairs, smoking, waiting; no comment.

Hein does not condemn tourism nor Che's exploitation for (much needed) dollars, she merely presents a fairly unbiased—and when not unbiased than mostly consciously biased—inventory of a country four decades into the socialist experiment, a few years after its failure in Europe. She holds the delicate balance of contradictions, aware of the Other but not Othering. This way, without interviews or truly discernible conversations, she gets (us) close to people, their circumstances, maybe even their souls.

Hein's well-honed situational awareness uncovers yet another cultural layer, a parallel universe of animals (dead and alive): dogs, bugs, a turtle, a duck, roosters crowing, chicken wings being weighed, animated vultures dancing with a TV Mowgli, real vultures feasting on roadkill—as well as her precise analysis of language—steady and anchor the viewer in a sea of grainy, handheld camerawork. While focussing on the cheeky little lizard crawling through a book on Jose Marti, the national hero of the early independence

movement, Hein addresses the relevance and staying power of revolutionary thought. The titular *La moderna poesia* (Modern Poetry), by the way, is the name of a bookstore in Old Havana. Seeing a ubiquitous *Tu ejemplo vive* (Your example lives) billboard, she speculates about the familiar tone of the slogan: Is Fidel speaking to Che directly, apologizing even for his demise? Hein questions how and what our eyes see: “What is more real, the taxidermied horse or its moving image in the museum monitor? How long does the aura stick to objects before they revert to what they were?” With Hein, *ceci n'est pas (jamais et seulement) un cheval*.

At the same time as *La moderna poesia* was shot, Wim Wenders' music doc *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) came out, shaping a more nostalgic global image of Cuban culture for decades to come. Birgit Hein's film brims with music as well, but here it is a discordant diegetic soundtrack of mostly (illicit) American R&B and rap. When we hear the hotel band play Carlos Puebla's 1965 eternal hit song *Hasta Siempre* (that goes on and on throughout the film, just like its message), Hein trains her camera on the disinterested passing tourists as well as the lingering local staff.

Watching *La poesia moderna* in 2023, while Russia is waging a war of aggression against Ukraine, includes ominous hindsight moments, for example when Hein perceives the decorative Russian tanks as passé toys, “just like the Russian tank on the *autobahn* outside of Berlin that seemed to shrink with each passing year.” In



2006, Hein pursued the military thread with the found footage montage *Kriegsbilder*, and again with the 'raw video' compilation *Abstrakter Film* in 2013. History still marches on. Hein has me, a generation on, look back at what's left of my own political (anti-nuclear, anti-war, Green) coming-of-age.

Towards the end, getting off a long night train journey, Hein quotes from the international Che Guevara conference that took place in Berlin in 1997, letting Cuban Communist leader Armando Hart Dávalos



synthesize the many contradictions we have just witnessed: “The current crisis is not Cuba’s, but the crisis of Western civilization. If there is no common cultural basis in which the ethical, the so-called superstructure values, are laid down, then there is no way to solve the world’s problems in humanity’s favour.”

So what about *hasta la victoria siempre* (until victory, always)? What remains of Che’s vision besides persistent party phrase-mongering? Is there any relevance to reclaiming his essence, reverting his aura into action? 25 years later, I also wonder how the film, shaped by the experience of a 20th century social movement, might reverberate with the current generation of activists trying to affect change in the face of ever new incarnations of the cockroach of capitalism, and—just as during the Cuban Missile Crisis—the clear and present danger of human annihilation.

Back to the hotel lobby and Che, to Buenavista Social Club big band sounds and American ads for cars no one can buy. Fidel, infamous for his never-ending speeches, is still talking, but Birgit has neatly hung up her towel. Castro, as it happens, is on to the topic of film, condemning Hollywood’s corrupting focus on sex, drugs and violence and deploring the decline of quality cinema, especially in comparison with his beloved Italian classics. One final cut to Berlin in the ‘60s with placards of Che framed by Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg at a protest. Marx is still relevant, we hear in a final German quote from 1990, as long as there is

inequity and oppression. Hein decides to illustrate this statement with her final image, of a surreal “spaceship” (actually a pyramid-shaped illuminated hotel pavilion). *La lucha continua*, the fight continues, wherever you are.

Personally, I am left wondering about the woman Birgit Hein and what state of mind and heart she was in at 57 that she felt she needed to travel across the world “to participate in life again.” With *La moderna poesia*, she questioned her own path at that midway point, participating in life between ration cards and nightly dance parties (also harking back to her trip to Jamaica a few years prior and the resulting film *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1994), describing her Cuban adventure as an out-of-body experience: “It is as if I am freed from my body and exist only in consciousness.”

Disco al final, we party to the end with *Hasta Siempre*:
We learned to love you/ from the heights of history./
You beat death/ with the light of your bravery./ Your
revolutionary love/ leads to a new venture,/ where they
anticipate/ the strength of your liberating arm./ We’ll
march forward,/ like we marched with you./ With us re-
mains the clear/ and beloved translucency/ of your dear
existence,/ Comandante Che Guevara.

Jutta Brendemühl is an arts programmer and writer based in Toronto.

Everyone understands a Hitchcock film: Birgit Hein interview by Daniel Kothenschulte

HEIN / KOTHENSCHULTE

In 2012, Daniel Kothenschulte curated a Birgit Hein retrospective at the Videonale Scope Festival in Cologne and Bonn where several discussions were documented.

DANIEL: Was there a deeper understanding of avant-garde film in the 60s, when you were one of the founders of XSCREEN, than today?

BIRGIT: No, certainly not. In the 60s an understanding had to be developed. Understanding today is much broader because film plays a much greater role in the visual arts through video. It's taken much more seriously because of that, even though it's far from what we might hope for. In the 60s it was still uncharted territory.

DANIEL: Where did you find more understanding back then—among people who came from the visual arts or among cinephiles?

BIRGIT: Basically, greater understanding came from film people. They found it rather interesting and dealt with it. You have to know that it was Jonas Mekas who stood up for Andy Warhol with an energy that no one in the art world would have mustered. At the big Warhol retrospective in 1989 in London and Cologne there was no film at all in the exhibition. The British Film Institute, on the other hand, did a big symposium on Andy Warhol's films. Without people from the film world Warhol would still be unknown.

DANIEL: In the first half of the 1970s, as an author, you did a lot of theorizing and created historical classifications. Has all this remained without effect?



BIRGIT: At the time it had little effect, now there's been an insane reconsideration. You have to imagine it. My book *Film in the Underground* has become a classic, a book that is still used because there is nothing else. It seems the myth has grown slowly over time. When the book came out I was just put down and told how bad it was.

DANIEL: When you go to art exhibitions today you get the feeling that film is valued only as an ephemeral medium. There's a lot of it, but it makes rather small demands on the patience and time of the visitor.

BIRGIT: Chantal Akerman made a compromise I find objectionable. She divided her films up into separate

monitors; what a film requires in terms of concentration is abandoned. They were originally long films, but as a concession to the art audience that conception was abandoned. If I cut up my films just so they could be exhibited... I don't think it's right.

DANIEL: I remember the presentation of a Birgit and Wilhelm Hein film at the big Fluxus retrospective at the Kölnischer Kunstverein. There you could also say that the film projector set up as an installation led away from the pure film experience. Now, one could also fear that the art world's current interest in film is just a fad. When you curated the film program for documenta 6 in the seventies, it had no effect at first...

BIRGIT: Showing Fluxus films in a gallery is relatively unproblematic because they are so short and conceived as anti-films. But you can't show an Andy Warhol film that lasts over an hour as a static object. You have to sit down and watch it from beginning to end.

DANIEL: You can't expect that in the art business?

BIRGIT: Only with difficulty. In Wolfsburg, for example, at the exhibition "Andy Warhol's Factory," they offered a plywood box on which you could sit, but hardly stay for sixty minutes. These conditions would not be tolerated by anyone in the cinema who wants to concentrate on what is happening on screen. In the art business the idea hasn't arrived yet to provide even the minimum conditions that film requires.

DANIEL: At the last documenta there was a cinema where you could see Steve McQueen's latest work, though viewers were only admitted between screenings. Do you think exhibition visitors want to go to that trouble?

BIRGIT: I didn't see that presentation, but I did see Ulrike Ottinger's and found it inappropriate. The viewer is not prepared for the seriousness of this work. The fact that a film demands specific conditions has not yet been understood.

DANIEL: But there are also beneficiaries. Let's think of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, who was never noticed in the film

Bordering on Fiction Chantal Akerman's D'Est, February 23-May 27, 1997. The Jewish Museum, NY





field she came from. Doesn't the art business offer new opportunities for avant-garde filmmakers?

BIRGIT: Yes, if you can reconcile that with your work. But if it's done by accepting compromises, as with Chantal Akerman, then no. I couldn't make such compromises.

DANIEL: When you hear the nostalgia around XSCREEN and the bygone Cologne film culture—isn't that also a bit of fantasy projection? Wasn't it more a party culture than a collective excitement about rare opportunities to see structural films from New York?

BIRGIT: At that time specialized artist's work was shown to a general public. People were participating in a process that was still "in-the-making" and this triggered unexpected and uncanny emotions. The underground explosion of XSCREEN was unusually aggressive compared to the art world. Some of the work was incredibly aggressive.

DANIEL: Aggressive in the debates, too?

BIRGIT: Yes, of course, there was the fight in front of the Kunsthalle where things got very heated. Should it be stormed or not? What excited people was the fact that they were taking part in something vital.

DANIEL: Now the Kunsthalle has been torn down and hardly anyone was upset about it. Can't we just say that interest in art in general has become more moderate and uncritical?

BIRGIT: I would never dare to say that. It's simply a different stage. At that time many things simply came together, the student revolt and an upheaval in art. They fed off and reinforced each other; times like that don't always exist. Today, completely new forms are being created, as I am learning through my students. There is a new political art through video activism. These artists are to some extent striking at the art establishment.

DANIEL: What would be the ideal home for film as art?

BIRGIT: I can't answer that at all. An ideal point is already a standstill. There is no ideal point, only processes. If I were to commit myself to that, I'd be a dead old granny.

DANIEL: Do you have an explanation as to where the art world's sudden interest in film comes from?

BIRGIT: It's not sudden at all. It's been a long process but it's now evident that film is a fundamental medium. Video, new media and nonlinear interfaces permeate exhibitions. In addition, an entire generation of artists—Douglas Gordon, for example—is confronting the world of Hollywood images. That's another reason why film has entered the art world as a medium. It's not by chance, but due to the zeitgeist. I only hope that something will grow out of it and not just an adaptation of Hollywood for art.

DANIEL: One has the impression Douglas Gordon uses the aura of cinema without doing much with it.

BIRGIT: Yes, the aura of cinema is now being used, so that the great mass medium, before which everyone is on their knees, can finally be marketed for the art world. Everyone feels safe there because everyone understands a Hitchcock film. People feel at home. There's no more provocation and no more breaking out.

24 Hour Psycho Back and Forth and To and Fro by Douglas Gordon



DANIEL: If, on the other hand, an avant-garde film is shown at a film festival, it has a totally hard time there. In Venice, for example, it has become such a niche that you can get scared. Isn't "film as film" already lost to the film world?

BIRGIT: No, I don't think so at all. Perhaps they have little chance in Venice. But in Berlin at the Forum, at the Panorama, in Amsterdam at the documentary festival, in Rotterdam... These are festivals where I have shown my films and are very open. Documentary festivals are the ones that are most open to new forms. Leipzig, too, which you might not guess from the history of the festival. Dok Leipzig has shown all the films I made after separating from Wilhelm. The really open festivals for essay forms are documentary festivals, and there are enough of them.

DANIEL: That answers the earlier question about where you feel most at home. More in the festival world than in the visual arts.

BIRGIT: At least that's where I'm most accepted.

DANIEL: Do you think that at some point there will be a culture that understands film as well as an art that comes from, say, the painting tradition?

BIRGIT: Yes, I'm quite sure of that. But it takes time.

DANIEL: Isn't putting an exclamation mark on art—like at an art biennial—also a constriction?

BIRGIT: I have no idea what will be shown. The program is designed in such a way that I'm afraid it doesn't

have much to do with art. It's about the representation of art. But film as art doesn't play the biggest role there. The whole art film biennial takes place in the cinema and doesn't try to convert the museum space. So I don't think it's very innovative.

DANIEL: But if I understood you correctly, aren't cinema screening conditions better than in the gallery?

BIRGIT: Yes they are. But now we come to the next step. I have students who show their films in galleries, and they show them as a whole and then have discussions, and that's something that's completely new for the art field. In galleries, people usually walk around, look—and bye! Something completely new is emerging.



Doppel by Caspar Stracke (Parthenon in Athens and Nashville)

Shanghai Light Impressions

MIKE HOOLBOOM

An avant-gardist's tourist journal. Birgit Hein alights in a city she doesn't belong, in a search for home, or at least a perspective, roots, something familiar, so she has brought along a companion, a three-legged friend, her camera and a tripod. She focuses on lights and shadows, and particularly the act of making pictures, as city dwellers become tourists of their own bodies, or each other's faces, carefully posing in snapshots that will be looked at once, added to the digital overflow, and then discarded. These pictures are made not to preserve a moment, but to stand in its place, part of a restless flow.

*As anthropologists understand:
to observe is to contaminate.*

Rachel Kushner, *The Hard Crowd*

The artist wades into streets teeming with crowds. Her camera seeks out a succession of young women who turn each other into pictures. The glittering skyline and luridly lit tourist boats provide an irresistible backdrop against which the self can be staged. The camera provides a spotlight, a moment of concentrated attention. Underlining this gesture, the artist uses freeze

frames to catch the moment of camera flash. In these moments of overexposure, the faces appear stripped of detail and nuance, posing questions about the nature of attention. Perhaps the pictures themselves are not important, the outcome and product are secondary. Instead, what is at play is the exchange of intimacies, the camera offers permission to look deeply into the face of a friend, or even a potential lover. The picture is a cover story, the necessary camouflage, so that these face tourists can admit, if only for a moment, what they really want. The ability to look without needing to be seen, to look without consequences, like an emperor.

*By the time I was thirteen, I'd divorced my body.
Not before or since have I felt such animosity toward
another being.*

Brandon Taylor, *I read your little internet novels*

Perhaps these rituals of picture taking are a way of creating security, a safety net for couples. It's an activity they might share in public, but because so many others are engaged in the same living meme they can dissolve into the anonymous landscape. Once inside the cocoon of the familiar they might invent ways to connect, as if





they had finally managed to touch their favourite movie star, only to discover that this star was their best friend, or even themselves.

Social change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images.

Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

The boats drift past as if we could be freed from the unwanted burdens of living in a body. Without sync sound delivering the heavy churning gears of their motors, these vast metal hulks appear weightless, like a dream without gravity, movement without friction or resistance. Pure flow.

One boat bears a giant billboard promising “First Impressions of Shanghai.” The first, the original, the real. If only we could start again from the very beginning. To have a second chance, to do it all over again in a re-make, armed with the knowledge we have now, every bruise and hurt a compass we might use to find our way. The artist suggests that this film carries her first impressions. That we could use it as a tool not to learn something about Shanghai, but to step back into our own lives from the very beginning, to restart our journey and find the words we never had the time for, to climb over the fears that kept us from saying what we needed most of all, in our most primal and helpless state.

To love is to shed our names.

Octavio Paz, *Sunstone*

The Huanpu River divides the city in half, it is known as the “mother river” of Shanghai. In a slow motion flotilla of passing ships, one carries a giant billboard that offers a fountain of abstract light displays. The artist singles this boat out for special notice, in part because it unlocks memories of images like these she would have shown to her students how many times. The Whitney Brothers, Scott Bartlett, Jennifer Reeves and Harry Smith made so-called “abstract” films though each claimed they were documentaries of consciousness, a real-time unfolding of sensations, as if a camera had been attached to their synapses. These were painstaking efforts, years might be spent on a two minute film, summoned a frame at a time out of often marginal economic circumstances. Here on the Huanpu River, a dream world replays these avant-gardisms, along with its utopia of a universal language.

When we become aware of the language we are using and that is using us, we begin to grasp a material resource that women have never collectively attempted to repossess. Language is as real, as tangible in our lives as streets, pipelines, telephones and microwaves, radioactivity, nuclear power stations. As long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless.

Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*

A waterfall of fizzy beverage pours into a glass, pictured in a galactic slow motion that grants the simplest gesture weight and majesty. These are pictures from the world of advertising, and by juxtaposing them with sequences of inner/outer space abstractions, I think Birgit Hein is suggesting that personal forms of avant-garde expression have been swallowed by corporate culture, turned into mechanisms for buying and selling. Stan Brakhage directed TV commercials for a moment when he was 18, introducing the delirium of slow motion to products like laundry soap. How to resist the restless hunger of capitalism that aims to turn everything into a market? In the 60s, advertising companies rented movies from the The Film-Maker's Cooperative in New York, looking for new riffs to call their own. How to work "in the underground" or with alternative aesthetics that emerge out of alternative lives and politics, without becoming a style that can be copy-pasted into next season's catalogue?

Images of the stock market follow and then cityscapes scored with a mysterious light flow, as if the "hidden forces of the market" were at work, redirecting traffic, reframing the city's unconscious. Perhaps this is Deleuze's "reality of the virtual," the new interface computers have made necessary.

Everywhere you go, you are surrounded by the products of labor. Every clean sidewalk, every polished hallway, every blade of cut grass. Our world cannot function without them, and yet the laborer remains unseen and unheard.

Jamil Jan Kochai

If every shot here announces "I do not belong," the film also poses belonging as a question. The filmmaker appears near the end of the movie, seated at a small table drowning with food, trying and failing to lift a fried roll off a plate. Her chopstick clumsiness is another way of declaring: I am a foreigner. Perhaps it's only by becoming a stranger to ourselves, that we can arrive at some place that feels authentic, not yet covered over by habits and defense mechanisms.

The closing title offers a last key. There is another figure besides the artist who appears intermittently throughout the movie, though her presence is never explained. She buys a couple of cans of beer in a small, brightly lit grocery, later her reflection is glimpsed in a train window. Each look is a brush, a passing glance. It is Birgit's daughter Nina. Perhaps mother and daughter are also these ships passing, the rose that appears as large as a skyscraper (how much do I love you?), the light that flows beneath the city (we are connected, always). In these formalist solitudes, in these frames that invite us to look again at the way we look, there is another close at hand, a second presence just beyond the frame, beckoning with blood and the promise that only family can carry.



This Life, This work: an Interview with Filmmaker Birgit Hein

by Randall Halle and Reinhild Steingröver

HEIN / HALLE / STEINGRÖVER

Published in "After the Avant-Garde. Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film from 2008" by Randall Halle and Reinhild Steingröver

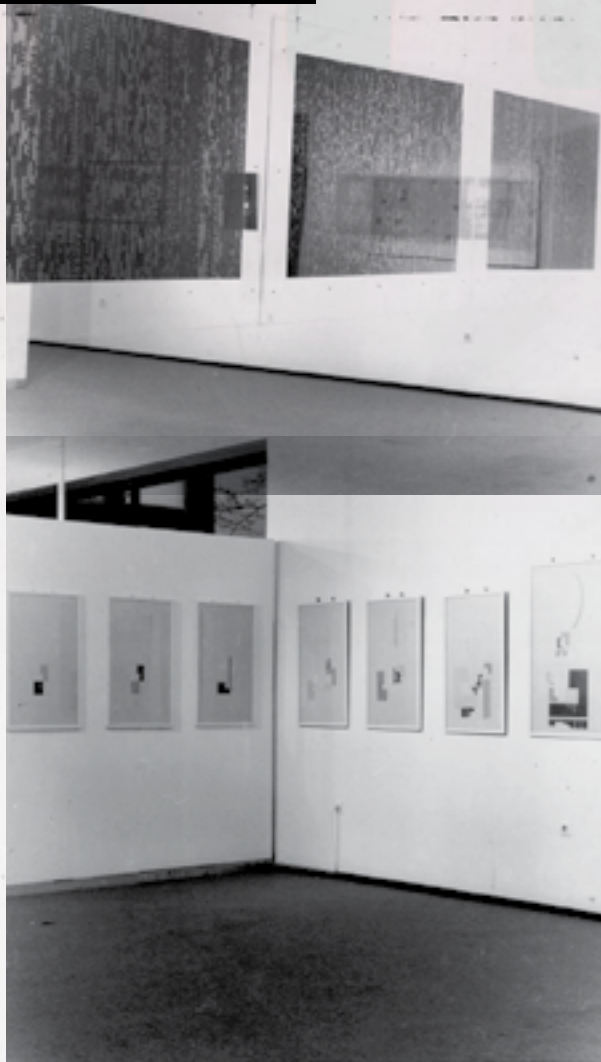
Birgit Hein is an engaged and energetic conversation-
alist. In interviews she expresses herself as eloquently
in words as in her images. She is generous with her
time, interested in the ideas of others, but also ready
to offer challenges. For this interview, we met with her
in person then we posed our questions to Birgit Hein
in writing and she responded in a series of emails. We
have also drawn on an earlier interview conducted in
German by Vera Bourgeois. We thank her for the kind
permission to adapt those excerpts.

HALLE/STEINGRÖVER: You have described diffe-
rent phases in your work. Would it be correct to identify
these phases as going from structural experimentation
through actionist performance to a feminist radicali-
sm? How would you describe your current orientation?

BIRGIT HEIN: Do I really appear as a radical feminist?
In Germany, all my films since the *Kali-Filme* (1987/88)
have been intensely criticized by feminists, who foun-
d them generally and as far as a feminist ideology is



Birgit Hein, Bjørn Melhus, Randall Halle



concerned, not politically correct. Feminism played no role in my formative years in the 1950s and 60s. I saw myself as a lone warrior in a male-dominated society. I did read Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Germaine Greer but that had little to do with the feminism of the 1970s. I only came into contact with that later. I will say

that I had difficulty with the image of the peace-loving, non-aggressive woman who is not interested in power and dominance. The famous “Por-No” debate, begun by Andrea Dworkin in the US in the late 1980s and continued by Alice Schwarzer in Germany, actually denied that women possessed their own, active sexuality. In my opinion, this propagated precisely the kind of image with which women were suppressed for centuries in patriarchal societies.

I’ve always believed in the strength of women. I still don’t understand how women could have been so oppressed by society. The only reason I can find is precisely because of their strength, which causes men to fear women. This is the basic idea of my film *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women, 1991). The archaic goddesses were threatening women figures already, as they had power over life (birth) and death. During my school years I was angry and hurt because I felt like a second-class human being. In that sense I was of course a feminist. But not in the ideological way that developed in the feminist theory of the seventies, demanding, for example, that women are better than men. Equal is good enough for me.

The beginning of my work in experimental film was tied to my interest in mediating art and organizing events. Wilhelm Hein and I began with this very early on when we, together with filmmakers and journalists, founded the organization XSCREEN in Cologne, in spring of 1968, to show underground films. Our first artists were Valie Export and Peter Weibel. There were legendary first presentations of performance art,

experimental films and underground films in a real movie theater. We felt an existential need to present our ideas to the public. We invited the people who interested us or whose work we wanted to engage. We were thus able to see things we would not have otherwise, since there was no distribution for avant-garde films. It was all very new.

For many years the mediation of new art became a crucial interest. It was not just a matter of presenting other peoples’ work, but also of writing about them. We really wanted to establish film as a new visual medium in the art world. This occurred mainly through the exhibit *Jetzt (Now)—Art in Germany* today in Cologne 1970, as well as later in the major show *Projekt 74* in Cologne 1974. Those shows featured for the first time a film section, in addition to video, performance art and photography. Wilhelm and I chose the films and I wrote the texts for the catalogue. Those were the transitional years, when media in general entered the art market. Documenta 6 in 1977 contained the first film section, which we curated. Back then it was still film. Later on it was almost exclusively video for major exhibits. The last two documentas presented not just video but film and video.

In the early 1980s art dealers pushed film out of the art market. For the important show *Westkunst* in 1980 I made a film about Andy Warhol. But that was a commission by the art department of German public television (WDR) on the occasion of the exhibit. The show itself contained no films anymore and very few videos.

After documenta 6 in 1977 we were fed up with the commercial art scene, including the rather

sterile gallery business. Our own work threatened to stagnate in formalism. That's when we began our performance art, appearing in bars that presented music

and cabaret. The bar "Singkasten" in Frankfurt was an important space for us, as was the "festival of fools" in Amsterdam. There was a trend to exit the commercial art scene. That meant for us that we didn't need to be art mediators any longer. Our generation had already established itself a bit. We didn't have to fight as hard anymore. Besides, our film work was beginning to develop. In 1982 we completed our first feature-length documentary experimental film *Love Stinks*. When we arrived in New York, we planned to continue our performance art but it quickly became clear that we would not find a suitable space. Therefore, we abandoned that plan, lived a very isolated life, and had a lot of time for ourselves. This led to a serious relationship crisis which worsened over time. The "solution" came when we began searching for images for our situation and started filming. We didn't have either a script or a treatment. We gradually filmed our ideas. The decisive contrast to our previous work was that we filmed our own images, that we directed ourselves in front of the camera. The resulting film was not only a big success among experimental film audiences but was even shown in movie theaters. What has moved people so about this film, and was always emphasized, was that the film was not fictional, but true, that truth could be conveyed via film.

From that point on we disassociated ourselves from the museums. Of course, we were still invited for individual events. But the effort to raise peoples' awareness within the art scene for avant-garde film was over for us by then. It was influenced by our rejection

of museum spaces and focusing on the development of our own work.

Today, my position as filmmaker is still determined by the dissociation from the term avant-garde that began in the late 1970s. During the first ten years of my collaborations with Wilhelm Hein, the concept of progressive, artistic work that derived from the idea of the historical avant-garde in the 1920s was crucial. This meant for us back then that we were not to repeat anything that had already been expressed visually. Consequently, one simply had to know everything about art history since the beginning of the twentieth century. We also tied the content of our work closely to its form, or rather, we saw the form as content. The strategies of structural film aimed after all at the dismissal of narrative content through the invention of a new, formal visual language. That led us to a formalist, self-referential dead-end, which removed our work more and more from the reality of our own lives. Whoever could not decipher the codes that we used, could not perceive what was so radical and avant-garde in our works.

During that time, around 1977, we became aware of the constraint that the idea of the avant-garde represented, understood as a commitment to constant innovation that was reduced to formal conditions. From today's vantage point, I consider another closely related aspect of the avant-garde as reactionary, namely the mandate of the progressive. The concept of linear progress derives from the bourgeois consumer society's demand for constantly improved standards

FILM ALS FILM EXHIBITION

- 1) Birgit Hein (pointing), Wulf Herzogenrath, in front of *48 Köpfe aus dem Szondi-Test*
- 2) Peter Kubelka with *Arnulf Rainer frozen film frame*



of living on the back of the exploitation of Third World countries. Society is aware of this but that does not mean that it will change. For me, the idea of the non-linear, of the cyclical, of recurring problems has replaced the concept of linear progress.

Back then this recognition was a kind of shock. Consequently, we began to incorporate our own lives into our work. That is how our performances, in which we combined abstract multiple-projections with excerpts from super-8 home movies, found footage, and live acts, for example the dance of Frankenstein's monster, began. We wanted to break out of the art circuit and were able to perform in bars and small theaters for a completely different audience. Leaving the art business behind physically allowed us also to end our fixation on the idea of art itself, the observation of the latest developments in the scene. This produced the liberating thought: "I am not interested in questioning whether what I do is art or not." The performances were a short but important intermediary step towards a new filmic form, in which I work to this day.

The break with formal restraints expanded the content of my work. The goal became to develop new narrative forms for personal themes, in contrast to the fictional narratives of feature film, and other established forms of filmic documentation. My goal today is to find the right images for this work. I do not limit myself to the ones that I produce myself, but instead isolate them from the flood of pictures in our mass media. My recent film *Kriegsfilm* (War Film, 2006) is one such example. But of course the fascination with

images in our mass culture is evident starting with my early films. The first, and really crucial step towards an experimental narrative form was *Love Stinks* for which we exclusively used our own documentary material.

In my film *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women, 1991) I found my style in the collage of my own and historic images, combined with a collage of sounds and texts, that relate to each other not in a linear, but an associative relationship. Texts have become a very important aspect of my work. When I refer to "my own style" I really mean that in regard to personal topics, which one might call radical, for example, themes such as "women as perpetrators," or "sexuality and aging." Aging and the physical deterioration of the body are still suppressed topics that I deal with in my next film. I've found that each film demands its own form. This is exciting because I never know in the beginning what kind of film will emerge in the end.

HALLE/STEINGRÖVER: You have described a key dynamic of your work and production as anti-establishment, opposed to conventional thought and codified social structures. At the same time you have been holding a tenured position at one of Germany's most prestigious art schools for more than 15 years. Could you reflect on how you negotiate your dissident politics with your institutionalized role?

BIRGIT HEIN: That really is the question: "What has become of us?" which I also posed in my film *La moderna poesia* (2000). I was inspired to explore this difficult



Die unheimlichen Frauen

question because of the numerous Che Guevara posters in Cuba. During the student movement in the 1960s in Germany we demanded long overdue reforms and the elimination of outdated laws, such as the banning of homosexuality and the law on pornography and prostitution. The underground films that were banned back then would not interest the district attorney today. Our protest was aimed at the hypocritical double standard of a Christian society that suppressed or concealed the crimes of the Nazi past and continued to accept war as means of capitalist interest.

Socialism seemed a solution to overcome capitalism. My idols were leftist intellectuals who recognized the looming dangers of fascism rising in the late 1920s. We had a simple enemy: the bourgeois, capitalist state. Today, after the collapse of socialism and the recognition of its dictatorial structures, the world cannot be divided so easily into good and bad any longer.

As a professor I am a civil servant and thus not allowed to demonstrate against the state. But I can freely state my opinions as long as I do not incite criminal actions. Contrary to politicians or business people, I, as a professor of art, do not need to compromise for the sake of my career. Being an artist demands being uncompromising,

to work creatively (*bildnerisch*) without any consideration for the commercial uses of the work, censorship or external influences. In my particular area of work, I am concerned with the world of images of consumer society, which is driven by the media conglomerates as promoters of official state ideologies. My focus is the independent, critical, artistic work with the visual means of the media, no matter whether my approach is formal, poetic, personal, essayistic, psychological, or documentary.

HALLE/STEINGRÖVER: The parameters for experimental film production have changed dramatically over the last decade. Funding, exhibition, and distribution mechanisms have a very different form now. Many of your colleagues have complained that these changes have led to the death of experimental film. Would you agree? How would you describe the shifts in the landscape for art film?

BIRGIT: I view experimental film as a term for a certain historical period from the 1960s to 80s. But even for this period the term was not really suitable. In Germany we used the terms “the other cinema,” “underground,” or “independent film.” Difficulties in finding an appropriate label have not been resolved today either. I notice this when I try to fill out a registration for a festival. Is it a documentary or experimental film, or perhaps both? There is no category for experimental documentary, nor one for the essay film. People ask whether we can still speak of “film” today when little is produced on celluloid any more. I view this as

a conservative attitude. My answer to this question is: the electronic production of images will abolish film. But only the celluloid. The visual system of the moving image will remain that of film.

Thus, experimental film does not have to die. On the contrary, it will become more diverse, since we can film cheaply even with cell phones and photographic cameras. Nevertheless, it's regrettable that little money is available for independent productions. After all, it's not simply a question of material costs but time for the development of projects as well. Somehow, one has to live. Even the small grants in the 1980s and 90s contributed significantly to the success of German experimental film. I will mention only one example: Matthias Müller's wonderful thirty minutes long film *Aus der Ferne (The Memo Book, 1989)* which he made with a grant of 6000 euros. One cannot earn money with film. I've merely recuperated the production costs with my films thus far, which in their final form are all 16mm films. Even for the broadcast of *Baby I will Make you Sweat (1994)* on the television channel “3Sat” I received only a third of the production costs as an honorarium. Since I did not have to pay back the grant for the development of the project I broke even. Today, this kind of grant money is no longer available.

It's correct that digital technology has changed forms of production drastically. I regard this as a liberating process in every way. First, as far as cost is concerned, I no longer have to worry about every inch of material that runs through my camera. Sound is automatically delivered, and in comparison with the small, dark viewer on

La moderna poesía



the Bolex camera, my Sony camera has a sizable, usable display. Add to that the new freedom of editing on the computer. Because I have a well-paid position, I can now afford to produce my own films. On the other hand, I have to fight for the time for my artistic work.

One problem remains: where is the market for this art? There are numerous film festivals by now, large and small ones, but most do not even cover the cost of film rental. Those artists who are accepted by the art market are facing a new situation since the 1990s. This pertains especially to filmmakers working with installations. There are now art collectors willing to purchase the necessary technical apparatus, for example numerous monitors. That is to say video or media art can now be marketed. This development has been prepared through the exhibition practice of museums and galleries. Broadly speaking, exhibition spaces have been transformed from white cubes to black boxes, presenting complex video projections. The emphasis of these works is still placed on the immediate visual impression, the fleeting glance of the viewer of art objects. Nevertheless, there is a tendency over the past few years to show documentary essay films that work with the visual world of mass media in museums and galleries. This change will naturally demand new viewing habits by the art audience, who will have to get used to greater time investments, namely the length of a film. This offers new possibilities for artistic film. One cannot screen narrative films or films of a certain length in museum exhibits, where visitors grant it the typical, fleeting glance they are accustomed to. One



Birgit Hein in the gallery

has to post screening times and of course guarantee excellent projection conditions.

I remember the situation in the early 1970s when experimental film had no place in either the cinemas or the art market. We saw its future in distributing films like books in super 8 editions for home projections. There was already a limited market for feature films in super 8. Such plans failed because of technical issues, especially the expensive, poor quality projectors. Today, almost every household owns a DVD player. This could be a new point of departure.

HALLE/STEINGRÖVER: You have been involved in training some of the most productive and recognized film, video, digital, and installation artists of the new generation. It's certainly remarkable how many students have benefited from your engagement. Yet the works of these artists exhibit very different representational strategies than the ones you employ. Could you

describe your pedagogical philosophy? How do you offer productive critique to your students, without closing down their own experimentation?

BIRGIT HEIN: Since I began teaching, which was already in the mid-1970s, I've never confronted students with my work. Instead, I've screened as many contemporary and historical avant-garde and experimental films as possible. On the one hand, I wanted to inspire them towards new ideas, on the other hand I tried to convey a consciousness for quality. Within the larger spectrum of artistic positions they should find their individual path and not remain fixated on a position such as my own. Student encounters are the basis of my work. The individual discussion with the student about his or her own work is of utmost importance. In those conversations I focus solely on the film and the problems the student might have with it. It's often about simple details such as disruptions in the editing

rhythm but also fundamental, personal problems that are buried in the work. It's not uncommon in those conversations that tears flow, and not exclusively on the part of the student.

It's important that my critique remains honest and well founded. After all it's not about me but about helping the student to achieve his or her goal as well as possible. Therefore, I don't prevent them from experimenting—quite the contrary! I encourage them to stand by their convictions. I don't have a method according to which I lead someone step by step to a certain point. My engagement is based on the principle: you have to become independent as quickly as possible. I regard the student immediately as a separate artistic person and not as material to be shaped, as a human being who I need to form. I don't think that is the job of an art school. That's the approach at technical universities, where a specific curriculum is designed to reach a specific pedagogical goal. In my class I have students in all different stages. They may be in the same semester but in very different developmental stages. Some need a long time, others don't, suddenly it stops, one has to be very patient and wait. But the basic principle is to engage with someone in an egalitarian fashion and let them pursue their own path.

I've also used forms of group work with students. It works well when we take on a specific topic. A major project was "Aesthetics of Fascist Film." After German unification, when this wave of racism hit us, I began this project with Marcel Schwierin because he was intensively engaged with the topic. He wanted to view

many films which we could only borrow within the university context. He directed a study group of approximately twenty students from different studios. We viewed the films and students gave presentations. A year later we held a big event at the school where we publicly screened feature films, culture films, documentary and war films from the Nazi period. The students were amazing, the presentations fantastic and they did not even receive credit for the work because it was organized by the Department of Applied Art. Later there was another seminar on violence, mostly about horror film. The group effort was wonderful again. Those seminars were very popular—but

also a lot of work. Another year-long project was on "Expanded Media," once again directed by a student, Florian Wüst. We organized screenings, lectures, and performances on the topic of new media. I wanted to know what was happening in new media and what positions had developed. When I work with students it's very productive. I think one ought to learn as much from the students as they learn from their professors.

I sometimes remind them that we received almost no recognition with our films in the early years in Germany and that we nevertheless continued to believe in our work. One can only persevere as an artist if one does not want anything else but this life and this work.



Birgit Hein at her exhibition

N3



PICTURES OF WAR

KRIEGBILDER

Ich habe keine eigenen Bilder vom Krieg.

Keine Erinnerungsbilder.

Dennoch ist der Krieg, in dem ich geboren bin, immer unterschwellig anwesend.

Ich habe versucht, Bilder zu finden, die meine Erinnerung ersetzen könnten.

Dabei ist etwas anderes geschehen.

Die Suche nach Erinnerung wurde zur Suche nach Bildern.

Mein Krieg ist längst durch neue Kriege ersetzt, deren Bilder ich auf Video mitsonneide.

Die Bilder haben sich verselbständigt.

Tote dürfen nicht gezeigt werden, so lange ein Krieg dauert.

Nur die Soldaten tauschen ihre privaten Tötungsbilder gegen Pornobilder im Internet.

PICTURES OF WAR

I have no pictures of my own from the war.

No souvenir images.

Nevertheless, the war in which I was born is always present subliminally.

I have tried to find images that could replace my memory.

In the process, something else has happened.

The search for memory became the search for images.

My war has long since been replaced by new wars whose images I witness on video.

The images have taken on a life of their own.

Dead bodies must not be shown as long as a war lasts.

Only soldiers can exchange their private kill pictures for pornographic images on the internet.

Pictures of War

CLINT ENNS

I. THOUGHTS REPLACED BY IMAGES



A memory is replaced by a photograph. Old images are replaced by newer images. The newsreel becomes the 24 hour news cycle, a constant flow of images considered to be breaking news.

The Iraq War is the first major war where every soldier had the ability to indiscriminately document their experiences due to the availability of cheap digital cameras. Before that, soldiers who were amateur war photographers were limited by the photochemical technologies involved. Given that amateur war photographers are not governed by protocol, nor the desire to tell stories of victory, they are often able to document the real lives of soldiers and the hidden costs of war.

A photograph can be a weapon. It has the ability to bear witness and share its perspective with the world. The soldier who acts as an amateur war photographer may capture firsthand accounts of the horrific nature of war. Consider Charles Graner's photographs of the atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib or the images of death at the end of Hein's video *Kriegsbilder* (2006). These are images captured by soldiers that were not intended for public consumption; they are private images that have made their way into the public sphere.

II. THERE ARE PLENTY OF WAYS YOU CAN HURT A MAN



The song “Another One Bites the Dust” by the British rock group Queen accompanies images of drone strikes, the contagious bassline set against lyrics that describe the fleeting nature of life. An infectious groove runs through the song that deals with the inevitability of death, a crowd favourite at sporting events. Somewhat ironically, the song has been used to train medical professionals because the bassline provides the correct number of chest compressions per minute to be used while performing CPR.

At the end of Hein’s video, we watch an out-of-control bus with its roof burning. A soldier sings:

The roof, the roof, the roof is on fire.

We don’t need no water, let the motherfucker burn.

Burn motherfucker, burn.

Immediately after, we hear a metal riff reminiscent of the one in the Coal Chamber song “Sway.” In the song, these lyrics are used to describe the state of mind of someone going insane or losing control of themselves, a classic nü metal trope. These lyrics are also found in

the Bloodhound’s gang’s “Fire Water Burn.” Ironically, the song is a critique of both the absurdity of war and the glorification of violence in American culture.

The lyrics were first used in the chorus to Rock Master Scott & the Dynamic Three’s underground hip hop track titled “The Roof is on Fire.” The song was also famous for the line: “Now throw your hands in the air and wave ‘em like you just don’t care.” Although it remains unclear which version of the lyrics the soldier is referencing, it is unlikely to be this version.

In the soldier’s version, he is literally describing the event unfolding; yet it also a public declaration of apathy towards whoever is inside the bus. It seems the soldier is attempting to be humorous by acknowledging an uncomfortable truth, a way of coping by creating distance between himself and the event at hand. A zoom lens brings the event closer while the camera creates a mediated experience of the event. The camera is both a tool to help us make sense of the world and a way for the photographer to set up a physical and emotional barrier.

III. AMATEUR SEX & DEATH

Amateur photographers often document an event with little regard for conventional aesthetics or technical expertise. This is clearly one of the appealing aspects of

amateur war photography or amateur pornography. People who want to watch real sex or real death seek authentic images.



While one is a document of desire and pleasure, the other documents conflict and violence. But aren't the sensations that accompany watching these opposite actions similar? Isn't part of the gratification that people find in consuming these types of images found in the fact that they are typically forbidden? In any case, both involve elements of voyeurism, fetishization, and objectification.

In pornography, the photographer remains in a position of power while directing and controlling the actions of the performers. Moreover, they are often implicated in the act and take pleasure in it. Although the soldier who acts as an amateur war photographer is implicated, they may capture the suffering of others without necessarily experiencing it themselves. This is demonstrated by the soldier's footage at the end of Hein's video *Kriegsbilder*. Hein imagines that the soldier who uploaded this video to the internet did it while downloading pornography. The big death in exchange for the little death. The cycle continues.

Pictures of War

BIRGIT HEIN

From a talk organized and hosted by Inga Lemke at Universität Paderborn, June 13, 2014

In 1990 the Gulf War began. I was glued to the TV and thought: oh my gosh, how amazing, how beautiful, would one ever be able to use these images? I began taping CNN, TV5, ARD and ZDF (The two old German state-run TV stations). I continued taping TV coverage on a regular basis until the Iraq war in 2003. I had this giant collection of VHS tapes and in 2006 I made a film out of it called *Kriegsbilder* (Pictures of War). That's a huge gap of 16 years after the *Kali-Filme*. I wanted to create a connection between war images from WW2 until today. WW2 was important to me because while I have no memory of this war, I was *born* during this war. So I wanted to create for myself such a memory.

I created categories before I edited, for example "humans in rows." In general, humans are shown standing in rows as small lines. They are small and far away. No one is injured, no close-ups. Sometimes there is green night vision footage from Super Channel, soldiers run across the screen as shadows, and these abstract images are also not horrifying. There was one soldier who was particularly good looking and he often appeared in these network montages. I didn't use him,

but handsome young men in uniforms were used in this propaganda to enhance the image.

After the Gulf War nobody knew that another Middle East war would happen so quickly. There were new rules for journalists who would be embedded with



soldiers, everything was controlled by the military so they could avoid what happened in Vietnam. This tight control worked until the Iraq War in 2003. The first catastrophe was the Abu Ghraib prison pictures. It was the first time images emerged in the public sphere that were not controlled.

There was a website that existed from February 2004 until April 2006 called *nowthatsfuckedup.com*. It started as an amateur porn site, but a special deal was made for American soldiers who could have free access if they provided proof they were in the military. Soldiers began uploading images in exchange for downloading porn. This was relatively harmless in the beginning. Through their images they were offering proof that they were fighting in a war so they could get download credits. More and more brutal images were uploaded to the site and of course these were disseminated as well.

The interesting thing about *nowthatsfuckedup.com* was that soldiers made their own images and developed their own bonds and networks with them. When the photos leaked the person who was organizing the site, Christopher Wilson, was prosecuted. But this was the first time there were images made by soldiers. It wasn't media reportage but pictures made from below, so to speak.

Thank god I found this site. There is an amazing scientific paper about *nowthatsfuckedup.com* that asks why these trophy images were made. Is it just the excitement of violence, war, cruelty? I found it through a story on ZDF (German TV) that I had taped, and at the very end of *Kriegsbilder* I used this clip. My film leaves the motivations for these images unclear. But it was important to engage with the question: what happens when the victims are filming?





Kriegsbilder
Stills

BIRGIT HEIN





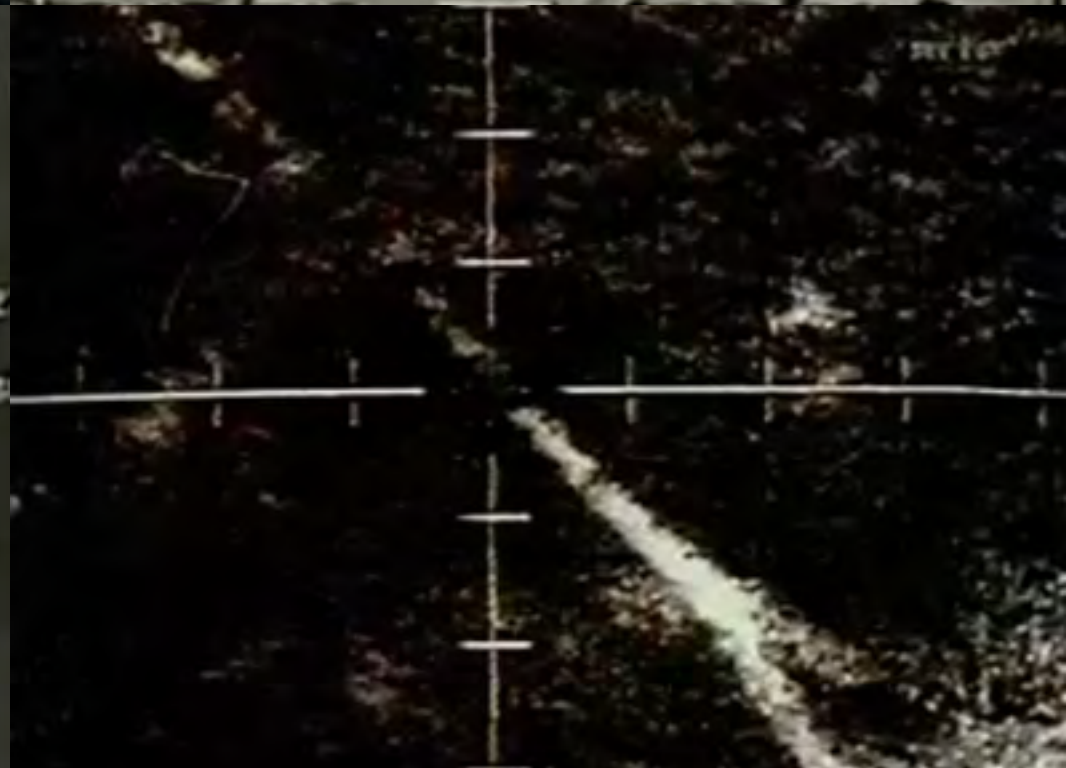
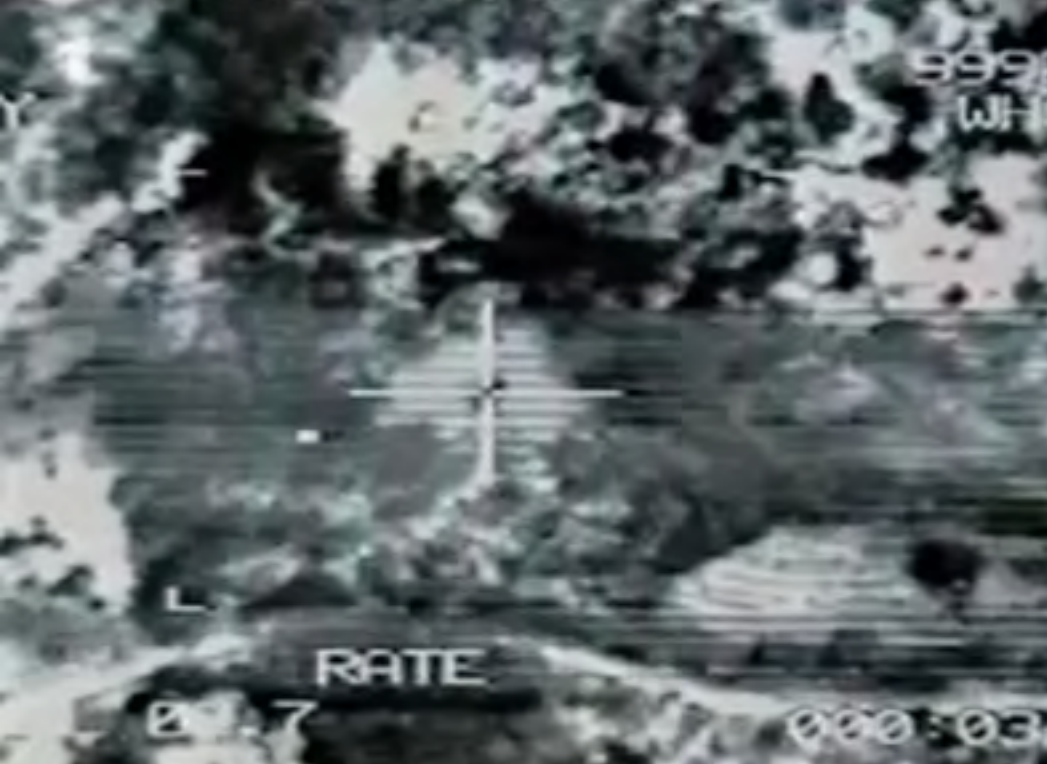
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DTV

WAR IN IRAQ

U.S. DROPPED MORE THAN 3,000 BOMBS ON IRAQ IN THREE DAYS

CNN

HIMA, IN NORTHERN BOLIVIA, AND LARGE NUMBER OF RESI





ABSTRAKTER FILM

Abstrakter Film Q&A

with Birgit Hein and Daniel Kothenschulte

HEIN / KOTHENSCHULTE

BIRGIT: For a year I gathered material until I had more than six hours of short clips. I'm fascinated by the new way of seeing that the cell phone makes possible. I was surprised by the shared qualities in these clips, how well they fit together. Each fragment has synchronized sound which is not altered or augmented, and I didn't cut into the clips, they're just added one after another. The proof of this methodology is the synchronized sound. These materials have their own story to tell.

The original videos were posted on the internet as evidence that a certain event occurred in Libya or Syria, even though often there's very little to see in the image. Clips of total chaos are regularly posted. What does that mean for documentary and the presentation of truth?

I edited the material down to a 40-minute cut that I showed to a small group. In the discussion that followed there were only questions about what facts could be gathered. Who is on the side of the Libyan rebels, where are they fighting? I felt helpless because my intention was not to provoke a discussion about the First Libyan Civil War and the Arab Spring.

I let the material rest and finally let go of this edit. I decided to take out any image where you could see soldiers shooting. What I kept were moments when the

authors lost control of their bodies, some from shock or trauma, others had been shot while the phone kept recording. Their footage was released after they had been shot, the images survived their makers.

DANIEL: It's interesting to see what images you collected. There's a predominance of red, a metaphoric bloodletting. The film appears at first as a kind of structural-materialist collage. I see it as a chain of associations designed to provoke the viewer. Because of the uncanny sound we know we are in a difficult situation but the images don't show us what it is. We are witnessing an extreme experience via abstract means. We see only colour and structure but at the same time we can't help reacting emotionally. For this reason *Abstrakter Film* isn't the wrong title.

BIRGIT: Of course the title for me is ironic. There's only one concrete moment focussed on a blood stain. I think the uploaders understood this as a symbolic image. Many of these uploaded videos disappeared after two or three days and never appeared again. But the video with the blood stain was uploaded over and over, it was obviously treasured and maintained.



Abstrakter Film

There was one main website where I searched for footage. The question is: how did I select the images? I wanted a minimum of ten minutes. I cut all the recognizable parts out of the images even though I don't give a fuck about abstraction. I felt they were still very touching images that said everything. Then I began to incorporate some poignant representational images back into the project. I slowly let go of the abstraction until at the end you see hands, an elbow, and the statue of (former Libyan leader) Muammar Gaddafi.

DANIEL: There's always a critique around splatter films of how much beauty is allowed to co-exist with imagery of death and slaughter. I'm also thinking about Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series (1962) featuring suicides, electric chairs, most wanted men. At the time it became fashionable to work with forbidden pictures. But what separates your film from the aestheticizations of art is that these pictures were made by people in a war.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Every image has its own history, when you take something from its home, you lose its context. I think you have an interest in evil images, pictures which we're not supposed to see.

BIRGIT: There is a schizophrenia at work because the images are so terrible and so beautiful. This was the main subject of *Kriegsbilder* (Pictures of War, 2006) which deals with the beauty of the Gulf War reportage. Many spectators said they were ashamed because they knew what the footage was about but still found it beautiful. There is a fascination with images that are not supposed to be beautiful. The question I asked myself with this film was simply: how far can you go with it?

In the first 40-minute version of *Abstrakter Film* there was a lot of death, the vision was gruesome. There were long discussions about what you can show. But I didn't want people getting excited about atrocities, although this exists too and that's why I had to leave this approach behind. I turned to some theoretical texts. Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003) was



Susan Sontag

prompted by photographs leaked from the Abu Ghraib prison showing American soldiers torturing their prisoners. Sontag argued that these images needed to be made public, reports of water boarding and rape had circulated for a year. But only when these photographs were made public did something start to happen.

DANIEL: Susan Sontag was dying of blood cancer when those pictures began circulating on the web. She started writing what would become her final essay *Regarding the Torture of Others*. One picture shows a prisoner in pain wearing only a hood...

BIRGIT: The Abu Ghraib pictures are good old American porn. The American soldiers were very into it, they photographed everything, they posed the prisoners and made trophy pictures and posted them on Facebook. They are gruesome images but it was important to show them. There is no option to forbid images from being shown.

DANIEL: You studied art history at the University of Köln in the early 1960s. I'm thinking of Rene Magritte's

Little Electric Chair by Andy Warhol



Abu Ghraib prisoner



painting *The Treachery of Images* which shows a pipe with the caption “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe). Filmmaking is like this painting, it’s a simulation, it’s not real life. Just like in Magritte where he shows us not a pipe, but a painting of a pipe.

There are two kinds of movies: official film and amateur film. Between the two there is an area that could be used for art. A window on windows. Was this a topic for you?

BIRGIT: I am part of an avant-garde tradition, touched by the American cinema of 1968. I wanted to see film as an equivalent medium to fine arts like painting or sculpture. At the time there was no way for people to foresee this could be possible. When I look back at the materialist movies we made I can see a lot of personal moments there, they could also have been called home movies.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I think you’ve made an emotionally charged film out of raw material that isn’t legible by itself, it gives me no possibility of understanding the narrative, to know what it is. The images wobble all the time, and my brain is trying to make a movie out of them. I just realized that all western representation is a journey back to Greece.

BIRGIT: It’s not only a trip to Greece and it’s not important where the journey is going. Why can’t we be open to an emotional experience? As soon as a formal

element is noticed the project becomes sculpture, another display in a history of forms.

I think there’s been a tremendous overvaluation of form in the writing about my early work. I used to fetishize film material but it’s not something I miss at all. There are computer programs that produce filters to make footage look like super 8 or 35mm. It used to be galvanic to work with this material, but when I sit with a Final Cut Pro editing system I’m not sentimental anymore. This is a new and exciting world. I have no desire to go back to the material of film. That’s over.

DANIEL: I believe you. And yet there’s a tragic haptic quality in this orphaned material, in the cleanliness of the immaterial digital world where you can’t hold an image in your hands, or cut into it. That’s disappeared.

BIRGIT: I always spliced by myself. I had a lot of bad experiences at the time, you had to be very attentive, especially while working for TV. When you smoked a cigarette you would make mistakes. (laughs) This is not something I have any regrets for, though it was easier to edit a film on film. Up to this day I can’t work without help in the edit suite when I’m editing video.





AUDIENCE QUESTION: Sontag says in her book that images from the concentration camps and other pictures of war shouldn't be shown in museums because visitors treat them too casually. She says that they belong in books because books are serious and solitary and places to think, though perhaps she says that because she writes books?

BIRGIT: I mentioned Susan Sontag not in relation to art history, but to talk about a political situation. I have to confess I'm not really part of current discussions, unlike 1968 or the 1980s. If I have to be very honest I'm not interested in art at all anymore.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: You've worked with different formats in film history. You have an incredible life span with many phases of filmmaking and are still alive for this digital moment.

BIRGIT: I must have been there at the big bang. (laughs)

AUDIENCE QUESTION: You were an important teacher for generations of film artists, many of whom became well known by working with found footage.

BIRGIT: Found footage always played a role in my work. The principles of collage and sampling are foundations of 20th century production in painting, film and music.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: The hand in *Abstrakter Film* reminds me of Robert Capa's famous photograph *Death of a Loyalist militiaman* (or *The Falling Soldier*). It asks the viewer the same question: is this truth or subjective perception?

BIRGIT: I think the people who uploaded the footage to the internet were not interested in art, they were interested in revolution. They wanted to bring about political change by using images to show the truth. Of course documentary films and photographs are often orchestrated. The Capa image for example is staged, but that doesn't affect the power of the photo. It became an icon for freedom fighters and from this perspective I can't find anything wrong with it. Capa found a form of image making that worked for a certain time. That's all we can hope for.



A black and white photograph of Susan Sontag. She is shown from the chest up, looking slightly upwards and to the right. She has long, wavy hair and is wearing a dark, vertically striped shirt. She is holding an open book in front of her, and her hands are visible on the pages. The background is a blurred bookshelf filled with books.

Regarding the Pain of Others

SUSAN SONTAG

Someone who is permanently surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood.

People don't become inured to what they are shown—if that's the right way to describe what happens—because of the quantity of images dumped on them. It is passivity that dulls feeling. The states described as apathy, moral or emotional anesthesia, are full of feelings; the feelings are rage and frustration.

There is nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time.

*Narratives can make us understand.
Photographs do something else: they haunt us.*



Flotsam

DIRK DEBRUYN



Ballet mécanique by Fernand Léger



Birgit Hein's *Abstrakter Film* (2013, 10 minutes) mines recent iPhone artifacts of war in Libya and Iraq, flotsam gleaned online. Machine gun fire replaces the sound of film projector sprockets. Film flicker metamorphoses into out-of-focus, masked camera movements triggered by falling bodies. The screen is pockmarked, mutilated skin and landscape, plunging in and out of panic bodies. Sound loops chant repeating screams. Our eyes grab snatches of shoes, thicket brush, grounded bloodied offal; accumulated sediments of war as an eye on a dead body sees it. This emptied animated field is not a recorded Otto Muehl Actionist performance, but a war-zone's direct imprint on a perishing eye.

In the following, I bind the digital *Abstrakter Film* historically back to Hein's earlier analog practice, theory, and influences through trauma. *Abstrakter Film*

delivers the pre-conscious dissociative impact of war's sensorium. Here overwhelming experience infiltrates the audience's body sonically while visually denied by the camera's fall and abandonment into abstraction. Abstraction here is that fugue state of denial and fragmentation at traumatic memory's core. Fernand Léger's mechanical *Ballet mécanique* (1924), a precursor to structuralist film (Curtis 1971: 155 and Hein 1979: 94) can be read similarly through his WW1 service (1914-6) as a dissociative aesthetic of shell shock and war neurosis: "the war had thrust me, as a soldier, into the heart of a mechanical atmosphere. In this atmosphere I discovered the beauty of the fragment." (quoted in Stauffacher 1947: 11).

Other contributors have outlined Hein's foundational impact on the structural film movement with Malcolm Le Grice, Peter Gidal, Paul Sharits and others. In 1979, in *Film as Film* Birgit Hein noted that in structural film "The medium is being explored as a visual system." (Hein, 1979: 93) Further, Gidal's anti-illusionist, materialist stance embraced structural film's emptied signifier: "to intervene crucially in film practice, the un-thought must be brought to knowledge, thought." (Gidal, 1976: 15).

Uncannily such "un-thoughts" deliver those amnesic acts of denial, emptying and erasure at the heart of traumatic memory. Bessel Van der Kolk's review of neurological research into Posttraumatic stress disorder stipulates that trauma initially resides as sensorial



Mama und Papa by Kurt Kren

fragments isolated from narrative recall: “Traumatic experiences are initially imprinted as sensations or feeling states and are not collated or transcribed into personal narratives.” (Van der Kolk 1996: 296).

For me, *Abstrakter Film* affirmatively answers the questions I posited in *The Performance of Trauma in Moving Image Art* (de Bruyn, 2014): Can structural film model traumatic memory and perform the traumatic flashback? Does the capacity to articulate trauma’s un-speakability and invisibility give this practice a renewed relevance in the digital media environment of information overload?

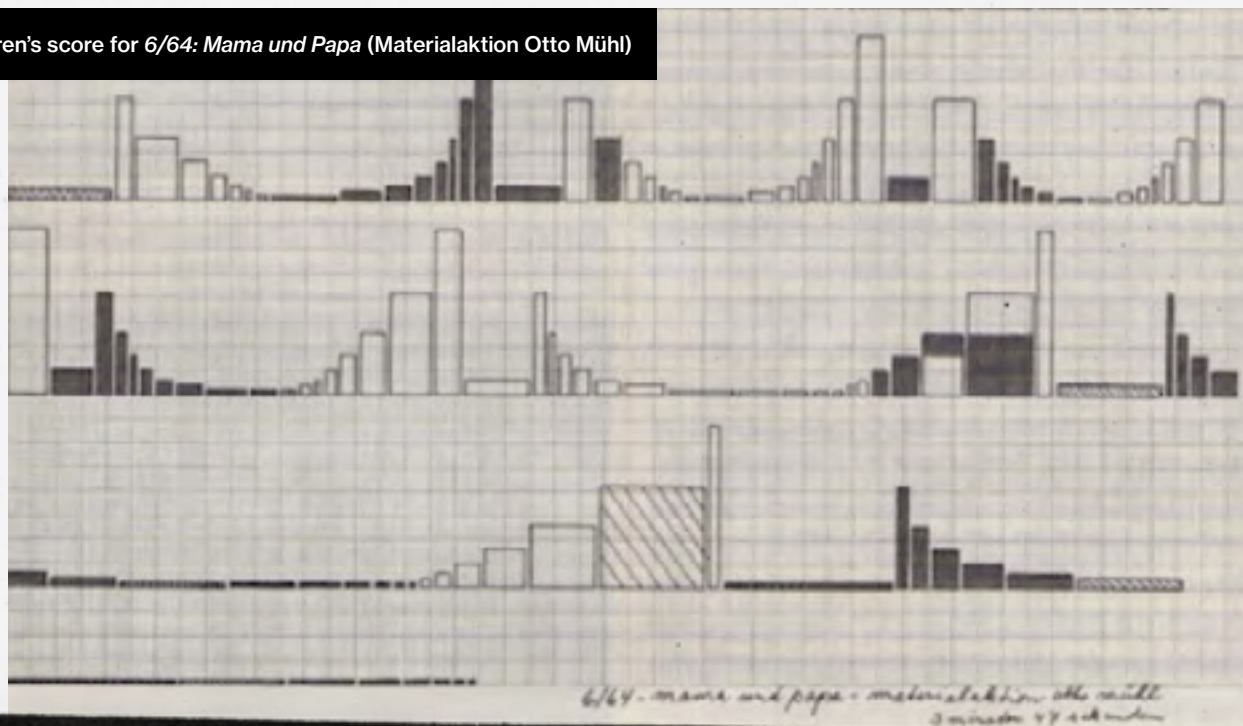
Clint Enns’s *Splice Lines* (2012) offers a contemporary trace of a trace of a trace back into Hein’s un-speakability. Hein’s pathological interrogation of film’s material body displaced Viennese Actionism’s (Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, etc) 1960s direct physical performance body mutilations. From blood to film grain. Hein has tagged Kurt Kren’s *Baume Im Herbst* (1960) as the first structuralist film. Kren’s later *Mama und Papa* (1964), documenting the violence of Otto Muehl’s performances, is further mutilated and digitally reduced by Enns back to the film’s material splices. History folds in on itself. Structural film’s relevance and visibility becomes itself traumatised back into a 47 second abstraction. Yet Hein’s *Abstrakter*

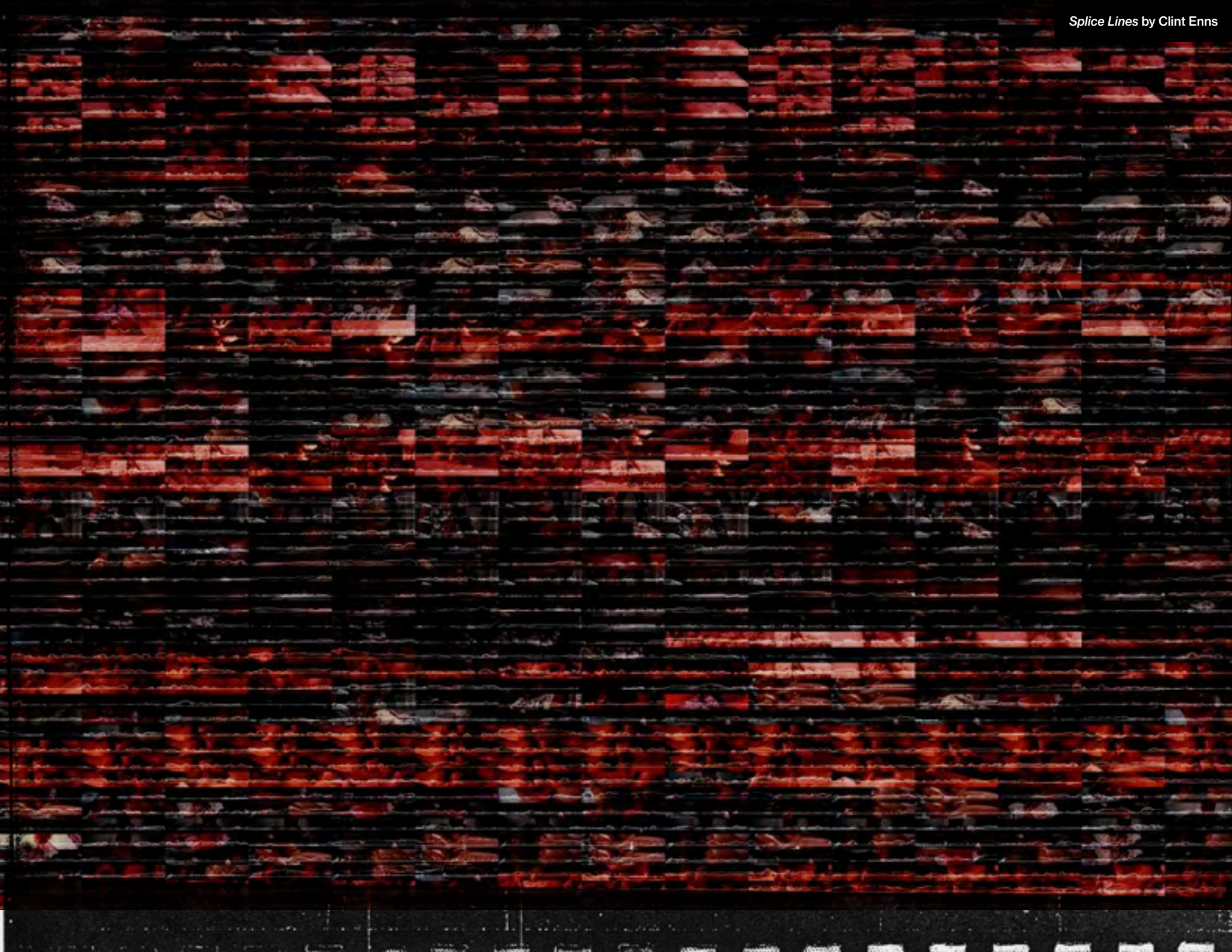
Film floats to the surface of this new technologically contested space as a container of overwhelming experience and its brutal artifacts.

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Kurt Kren’s score for 6/64: *Mama und Papa* (Materialaktion Otto Mühl)







On Birgit Hein's Abstrakter Film

LAURA MARKS

A film that comes too close, to protect us from seeing. Flesh shields the eyes from seeing flesh being torn. Other bodies protect the audience from getting shot. But on this seventy-fifth anniversary of the Nakba, the sounds of gunfire, frantic cries, and men gasping “Allahu Akbar” scrape into my skull.

The Revolution will not be televised (but uploaded)

On found footage films about the Arab Spring

FLORIAN KRAUTKRÄMER

Originally published in: Cargo 22/2014

The numerous clips that can be found on YouTube showing moments from the Arab revolutions in Egypt, Libya and Syria are primarily about visibility. The material, which is highly heterogeneous in length, quality and intention, were uploaded in order to circumvent the censorship of state-controlled media; the index is in the foreground here: this or that actually happened, this or that person was shot, here people defied the regime. At the same time, uploading these videos is a deeply political act, an intervention in the distribution of visibility.

One can observe the increasing importance of media for the revolution in *Al Midan* (The Square, 2013) by Jehane Noujai, which follows events in Tahrir Square from 2011 to 2013. More and more frequently, editing stations come into the picture, pictures are specifically sought out, witnesses of clashes are asked if they had also filmed something. (Two protagonists of the film are also co-founders of the media collective Mosireen).

Equally important, however, is what remains invisible. Many videos are not even published on YouTube or similar platforms, but remain on mobile phones or



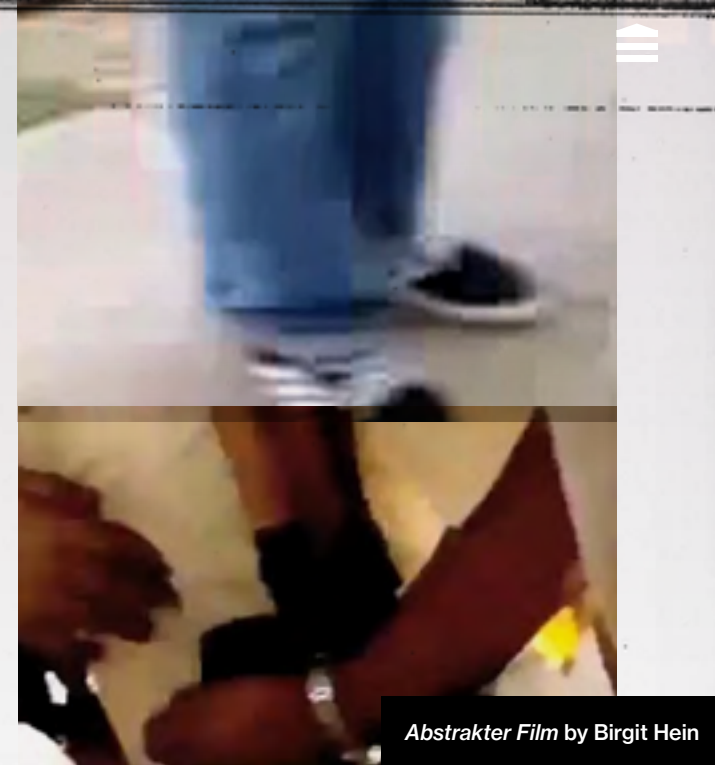
Al Midan (The Square) by Jehane Noujai

computers, and thus serve as a reminder, shared during private conversations. Stefano Savona, director of the film *Tahrir, place de la Libération* (2012), compared these clips (in *Cahiers du Cinéma*) to pieces of the Berlin Wall that were carried around after its fall.

Various artistic works have dealt specifically with what one does not see in YouTube clips or is overlooked in the stream of images. For example, in the material gathered for *The Pixelated Revolution* (2012), Rabih Mroué found mobile phone videos in which the filmmakers were shot by the filmed shooters while filming. His performance lecture, as well as the reenactments, revolved around the question of how to give the victims an image, since they, as the cameramen, cannot be seen in the pictures.

The clips that Mroué found usually end with unrecognisable images, the camera falling to the ground after the shots. Birgit Hein's nine-minute *Abstrakter Film* (2013) consists almost entirely of such passages from YouTube clips (mainly from the First Libyan Civil War)

in which little can be made out because the camera person is running or falling down, in any case no longer concentrating on filming the scene. The image flickers in different colours, it is blurred or distorted by large pixels, sometimes the camera or its owner falls and films concrete and grass. The fact that we are not dealing with a formalistic experiment, as the title initially suggests, is made clear by the soundtrack, which has been left in sync and on which gunshots and screams can be heard, thus immediately placing the material in the context of the Arab crisis regions. Since Hein avoids any contextualisation of the material except for two logos that can be seen in the image, the film remains abstract; it only becomes concrete through the viewer's knowledge of the context. It is thus also a film about what we have seen in similar internet videos.



Abstrakter Film by Birgit Hein

Abstrakter Film does not work with the index, but draws attention to precisely those passages that are overlooked in an internet search focused on novelty and topicality. The passages which make up Hein's film are perceived within a clip as authentication features, they announce that the video was not edited afterwards, but uploaded "raw." Isolated, however, without the scenes whose credibility they are supposed to underline, their evidential value is lost. Hein's film is abstract in that the scenes no longer refer to concrete, singular events, but are placed in a general context of violence.



The Pixelated Revolution by Rabih Mroué

APPROPRIATION OF THE MATERIAL

In light of the videos of the Egyptian revolution, Judith Butler has stressed (in “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street”) that it is important to remember that these are not reportages, but that the media are part of the scene: “the media is the scene or the space.” You can see this in the videos when mobile phones are held up everywhere to film the scene. But you also see it when you don’t see anything.

It is certainly not unproblematic to process material in which real deaths occur in an abstract film, but Birgit Hein makes clear what is necessary when working at a distance with contemporary found footage: although the videos are taken out of context, i.e. they no longer primarily stand for the place and time of recording, at the same time their background of origin is not abandoned. The title can also be understood as an invitation to pay attention to something other than the index.

This also applies to Peter Snowdon’s film *The Uprising* (2020) although here a completely different approach was chosen. “The Revolution that this film imagines is based on several real revolutions,” proclaims a text panel at the beginning of the eighty-minute film, which consists entirely of compiled YouTube videos. The imaginary frame is a seven-day countdown that locates its viewers in the present. It begins with the title “7 Days Ago” when the first demonstrations, meetings

and speeches can be seen. Snowdon’s aim is neither to compile spectacular material nor to use new or hardly seen footage. Rather, he concentrates strongly on an atmospheric montage. Again and again there are decelerated, silent shots as well as shots that last more than a minute, shots that one has seen before in excerpts, but not necessarily at this length. *The Uprising* is above all a film from inside the revolution(s). When the camera follows the protest marches, men and women speak into the camera again and again, often unasked, telling us their hopes, wishes and anger.

Snowdon has assembled clips from Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria and Yemen. The context from which the recordings originate can only be deduced from the spoken words (which are subtitled) or the flags, but sometimes this remains unclear. The montage is motif-oriented, it does not aim for a unity of place and time. Days two to four also consist of demonstrations, although the focus shifts from day to day. The third day (5 Days Ago), for example, consists mainly of rather long, sometimes ironically comic shots in which, among other things, onions are shot at the estates of the rich in Homs (Syria) with a vegetable bazooka to make them cry, as the shooter says. On the fifth day (3 Days Ago), the revolution seems to have succeeded: one walks across the estate of Gaddafi’s house in Tripoli and swims in the pool of his daughter’s villa. But the day ends with the video analysis of a Tunisian blogger who proves with recordings that the police are still acting violently against the demonstrators. The



Maspero massacre (Egypt) and the most brutal footage of the film follow the next day. “Yesterday” shows quieter footage, the original sound is cut back in favour of minimalist music, which was also heard at the beginning, and off-camera commentary. The woman who can be heard emphasizes that there will be no revolution tomorrow. Instead, one has to proceed step by step. “Today” shows a tornado from Alabama, which was also seen in the prologue of the film, before the first day, and frames the film as a symbol.

In Snowdon’s film, too, the appropriation of material is problematic. Here it is above all the montage of the

tornado that frames the film from the beginning as a fictionalized reading and through the music, sets a mood that is more reminiscent of a film like *Take Shelter* (2011), a film also linked to hope, departure and death. At the same time, his film is also about the video material itself. As with Hein and Mroué, the filmmaker or filmmakers behind the camera often remain palpable. One of the most haunting scenes is a night-time shot from Tunis in January 2011. A lonely man walks through a street and shouts loudly in a hoarse voice that Ben Ali has been driven out and that the Tunisian people have done it themselves. He is filmed from the window of an upper floor. The camera is held by a woman who sobs during the filming. Another woman—also only heard on the soundtrack—describes this scene on the phone

and how unbelievable it is. It is this space behind the camera, which is only present here through the sound and the shaky camera work, that comes into particular focus in *The Uprising*.

Hein and Snowden detach the photographs from an existing context that was and had to be primarily interested in the index of the images. The fact that the process that forms the basis of the recordings has not yet been completed does not make the work with the material any easier, since it is usually the temporal distance that sensitizes the viewer to what is still hidden in the images.

At the same time, the situation arises for the first time

that the archive, which forms the basis for found footage films, is equally accessible to everyone and is also constantly evolving. This means that the films have to be measured against the archive itself. In a way, they work against the YouTube feed, which cannot be consulted conclusively. The nature and gesture of the videos will have changed decisively by the time the work is completed. (Videos from Syria, for example, are now dominated by compilations of blood and violence, which are shot in high definition with helmet cameras). A decidedly abstract or fictionalising approach is therefore an adequate reaction to this, which also frees the filmmakers from having to arrive at conclusive statements. What Hein's and Snowden's films make clear is that the images point to the filmmakers, even if they are not in the frame. The material is the scene, it comes from inside the revolution because it emphasizes the space behind the camera that is not in the frame. This distinguishes the material from others and describes a special feature of the Arab revolutions—as well as of portable media.

The Uprising by Peter Snowden



Pocket Call:

Alexandra Gelis and Jorge Lozano interview

GELIS / LOZANO

JORGE: *Abstrakter Film* (2013) is visually similar to her early work. There's a lot of movement that breaks down continuities and narrative. This footage is always on the move. When you're in a war you run and this material is the result. The images are abstract, but at the same time it reveals the intensity of a war that targets civilians. There are no soldiers in this footage, it's people getting shot at and bombed.

ALEXANDRA: I feel like I got a pocket call. Do you know what a pocket call is?

JORGE: It's a phone call made by mistake, when the phone is still in your jeans and you sit on it or brush up against something. It's produced by a movement of the body.

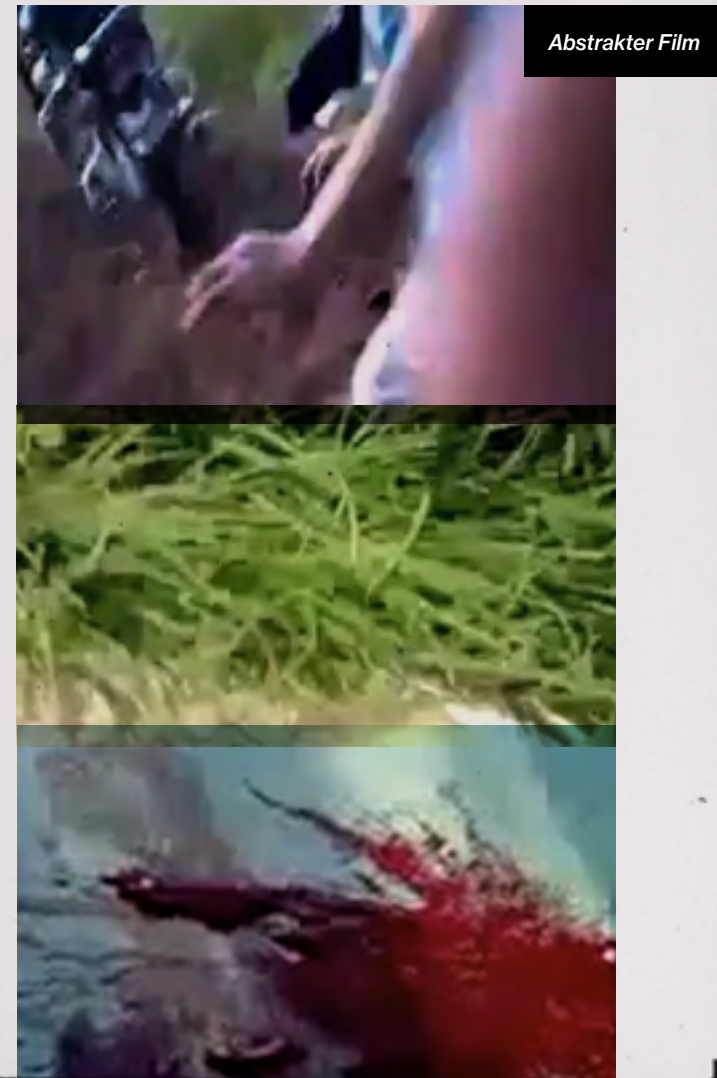
ALEXANDRA: Where are we? We are in the middle of a war. We are underneath. We are running but in the ground. This kind of audio is familiar to us these days, it's been bombarding us in all media—social media, the news, everywhere. You don't need to see the visuals in order to know what context you're in. As soon as you hear these sounds you know what you're going to see.

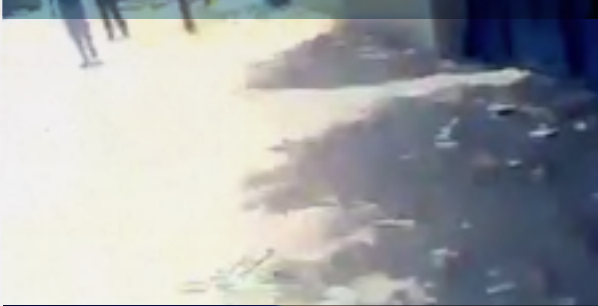
In this pocket call we start near the plants and end in the plants. There's a strong male presence running between dusty places with a lot of movement. When images and sounds are shown from the position of the one in power, the pictures are clear and the sounds are more distant, you hear the entire arc of a missile launching and landing. But this pocket call is from the ground. In the midst.

We start in the ground with the little grass that is kind of alive. Then we go underneath cars, you can feel dust everywhere, we pass by hospitals and glass doors. Even though we only see exploded pixels, the sound is already part of our memory. There's only a couple of moments of green colour, the rest is grey dust or blood, there's nothing else. It seems to be a pocket call from today, but it's not.

JORGE: It could be Ukraine today.

MIKE: In a pocket call the phone records but the person is unaware of it, there's some element of the unconscious because the image is carried by the whole body, the look is not directed at some particular thing.





JORGE: This feels more like a dog's view because it's so low. When a camera person gets hit you see this footage as they're falling and landing on the ground.

ALEXANDRA: There is some kind of surprise or secret because you're not aware of the recording. It's the transmission of a moment with no filter. I know that this is not completely a pocket call because sometimes you see a person running. This is not just one sequence, there are a lot of different sequences that are cut together. These clips been uploaded because this is information that needs to be seen and shared.

MIKE: Does it matter that the footage is not specific, that you can't identify who or where these people are?

JORGE: No, the ironic thing is that we have been trained to see what is happening. We have all these images already, she's created a film where there's no void because we already know what is going on. We can recreate these scenes with images that have impacted us through the news.

Those voices, we're heard them too. You feel they're in pain. The sound makes the film and the bits of visuals help us recreate what is happening. When you see a little bit of red we've seen that many times, we can recreate the whole scene from that fragment. The ambulance and doctors we've seen in Libya, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Gaza... It validates a visual language that is not literally representational, although it is. It validates the language of media art as a form

of knowledge. These are shots that couldn't be used in corporate media, to compile them is really nice.

ALEXANDRA: It's a powerful documentary about the pain from the ground. The sound comes from within. It's the sound of the street within a city that has become dust. The sound of the bodies was really painful, the body falling, the body going into the hospital bed.

JORGE: People issue a spontaneous language provoked by an assault on the body.

MIKE: Language is reduced to pure sensation, it communicates but without the specificity of the cut. Language cuts the world apart into names, but in this film sound emerges from the body in waves and eruptions.

JORGE: We are in a labyrinth of violence. There is no way out. This is the labyrinth of the war we're in right now. This footage is alive. Wherever you put this, it makes sense. It's a film that will be relevant forever because it's undiluted reality. Paul Virilio says that what created Cubism was bodies exploding in the First World War. This film is Cubism too.

Media and Revolution:

A Conversation with Birgit Hein on Abstrakter Film

KRAUTKRÄMER / HEIN

Originally published in: *Daumenkino online magazine*,
July 31, 2014

FLORIAN: What conflict regions did the footage for your new film come from and over what period of time did you download it from the net?

BIRGIT: Most of the material comes from Libya, mainly from 2011. In the end, I added a few shots from Syria and Yemen. I stopped with the death of Gaddafi. I had enough material, 130 clips in total. Dennis Feser then

put them into a uniform format and after that I left them for a while.

FLORIAN: How did you go about developing *Abstrakter Film* and editing it?

BIRGIT: The first version was forty minutes long. But when I showed it to different people, discussions



always revolved around what they saw in the picture, who filmed what and where? Then people would quickly talk about the current situation and neglect the footage. I abandoned this version for almost a year.

FLORIAN: What did this first version look like?

BIRGIT: I concentrated mainly on longer scenes. There was a very long shot of almost six minutes filmed out of a window in which you saw fighting at a great distance. You could hardly see anything because the fighters were so small. After a while you could see that one of the little dots suddenly stopped moving. But most of the people I showed it to didn't have the patience to look that long.

FLORIAN: How was it structured?

BIRGIT: Mainly chronologically. I was interested in the dramaturgy within each scene, how it developed. But then I left it alone.

FLORIAN: That's interesting. Peter Snowden, the director of *The Uprising* (2013), writes on the website of his film that he had to deal with the material for a long time before he knew how to structure it. He also intended to arrange it chronologically. He wrote a kind of script that helped him find the form the film now has. Only when he took a step towards fictionalisation, so to speak, did he understand how to deal with the shots.

BIRGIT: You can feel that in this film as well, the confrontation that becomes necessary when working with the footage. Whereas I don't see it that way in the documentary about Homs that was recently shown on ARTE (*Return to Homs* by Talal Derki, 2013).

FLORIAN: There are different approaches. In the Homs documentary, but also in *The Square* (Jehane Noujaim, 2013), the focus is very much on what you see in the pictures and what the audience is supposed to get out of it. That goes more in the direction of reportage or news. Both you and Snowden are very interested in what you don't see in the pictures, what happens behind the camera, how it films and sees.

BIRGIT: When I had the idea to concentrate on the "abstract" scenes, the montage suddenly went very quickly.

FLORIAN: How did the concept come about that you focused precisely on these excerpts of longer shots?

BIRGIT: The Goethe-Institut asked me to give a lecture on media specificity in art in the digital age. My observation was that the aesthetics of materials has been replaced by the aesthetics of reproduction made possible by the new technologies. I wanted to take a closer look at mobile phone videos on YouTube from this perspective. I first searched for war zones where phones were used. You see a group of people and at the moment of shooting the image flies apart, you lose control of the image, but



the camera keeps running. I meticulously examined all the clips and isolated these moments.

FLORIAN: That's a characteristic of newer video cameras in general ...

BIRGIT: Yes, but with a mobile phone you hold it differently, you don't look through the viewfinder, you generally hold it away from your body. You can run with it better. I remember a shot of someone being shot at while he was talking on the phone. He runs away, saves himself in a car and continues the phone call the whole time. A friend then translated for me that he says where he is and where he is going. This is already a different way of generating visual material.

FLORIAN: Was there a particular dramaturgical idea you followed to edit these excerpts?

BIRGIT: No. But in the first and last scene I wanted to include the special logos that were copied into the picture by those who uploaded the recordings to the internet. That way you can immediately establish the connection between Libya and the internet.

FLORIAN: Is the sound synchronous?

BIRGIT: Yes, that is the crucial thing. The synchronous sound makes the recordings documentary. The sound also makes it clear when a new sequence begins, which

you can't always see clearly on the image level. The sound is, so to speak, the proof of the reality of the recordings.

FLORIAN: Did you edit the images?

BIRGIT: In some places there is a slight cropping, when I didn't want logos in the picture, or to bring them to the 16:9 format. But in terms of image processing, in terms of sharpness and brightness or anything like that, nothing was changed. I wanted to take the pictures as they were uploaded.

FLORIAN: How did the uploaded clips change over the period you were intensively involved with them?

BIRGIT: At the beginning the Libyan rebels were seen very positively here. But that changed little by little because of the footage you could see on YouTube. It went so far that people were lynched on camera. That's when it became difficult for me. How do you deal with such material? With footage where the people being filmed are shot and the camera continues to run.

Then there was the shot where Gaddafi is dragged out of a hole and later killed. This clip is three and a half minutes long. I multiplied every frame sixfold because I wanted to see what was going on. A few weeks later the exact same thing was already on the web! On GlobalPost there was a video in which each image had been extended by one second, the clip ran for



48 minutes. I was astonished because this is a way of working derived from experimental film, if you think of earlier films by Ken Jacobs, for example.

The first shots of night demonstrations in Tripoli, with the distorted blurry colours—green, orange and blue—fascinated me because they reminded me of the aesthetics of the old experimental films. At the beginning there were no brutal shots but that changed quickly, and the more brutal the shots became, the better the image quality became. Then it was all about the indexicality of the images.

FLORIAN: Do you still follow the material on YouTube?

BIRGIT: No, not at all. With the video of Gaddafi's death, the "hunt" for authentic images was also over for me. In the end, you realize that you are on the outside, that you don't really know anything.

FLORIAN: How do you see the truth of these clips at all?

BIRGIT: In one clip there was a text overlay that read: this information should be spread all over the world. That was the clip where most of it is pink! Only at the very end do you see people shot lying on the floor. That's very interesting because these clips negotiate the question of what is a real image today. Even if I only see pink or something very blurred, is it still an image of reality? And further: do cameras, like the ones in mobile phones, change images and the way we deal with them?

FLORIAN: Do these excerpts in which you can't see anything also point to new possibilities of distribution? Now you can share large batches of images by uploading them, no longer depending on a release that judges images according to their suitability for broadcast.

BIRGIT: Yes. When we used to make films, there were so many stations in between, starting with the film lab and ending with the cinema.

FLORIAN: And in contrast to television, an archive is created at the same time.

BIRGIT: Exactly. I am a so-called war child who has no memories of the war. Here I experience it and at the

same time have the opportunity to deal with its material in detail.

FLORIAN: But apart from the two scenes at the beginning and at the end, where you see a logo, you don't give any further clues. You could have named the shots with subtitles or listed where they came from in the credits, like *The Uprising*. Why did you decide not to do that?

BIRGIT: In some cases you couldn't really tell. Many of the excerpts are so short they wouldn't work with subtitles, and in the credits it would have been rather confusing.

FLORIAN: Did you consider translating and subtitling the spoken parts?



BIRGIT: No. I asked a translator what could be understood at all, and he said that it was mostly “Allahu Akbar.” The women you hear at the end are insulting the men. But there are no political statements. The subtitles would have made something completely different out of it. For me, it was not about the individual who is filming or who can be seen, but about the state of violence in general. And the question of how far images can go to express realism.

FLORIAN: In this sense, you have made a film that no longer consists of images in the conventional sense. Is *Abstrakter Film* not only a film that consists of these YouTube clips, but also about the other material that has been uploaded from these conflicts?

BIRGIT: Exactly. It’s not only an abstract reflection on the specificity of the media, but also on the visual material based on real situations. I was asked by two people to show the film on mute, which is nonsense because it’s only with the sound that you ask yourself how abstract or how real it is. This tension is what interested me. The title was decided upon right at the beginning, which usually never happens with me.

FLORIAN: Did you get reactions from people who live in the Middle East?

BIRGIT: No. Rabih Mroué saw the film but couldn’t do anything with it. In Braunschweig, a former student, a Mexican, came up to me after the screening and said he

had to leave right away because the film had triggered such bad memories in him. But that’s a different region, even if it’s certainly also very bad there in places.

FLORIAN: Several films are now being made that work with YouTube material from the Middle East. Besides the ones already mentioned by Peter Snowden and Rabih Mroué, there is *The Square* (2013) and *Tahrir, place de la Libération* (2012). Normally, one allows time to pass before dealing with archive material, at least until the historical situation from which the material comes has been clarified. The footage from the Westerbork concentration camp was more than 60 years old before Harun Farocki began editing a film from it. Now we not only have the historically unique

situation of being able to watch an archive grow and develop, but we can also use it immediately, in real time, so to speak. Such a direct approach is risky because the situation is not yet complete, and therefore the material cannot be assessed conclusively, the archive is still changing. The footage from Syria that is uploaded today looks completely different than it did in 2011.

BIRGIT: That’s why I left the concrete situation. It’s about the violence, which is not solely linked to current events.

FLORIAN: In this sense, can the title *Abstrakter Film* also be understood as an invitation to look at these images in a more general way, and not just in terms of the index?



BIRGIT: Yes, of course.

FLORIAN: Have you ever thought of uploading the film itself back to YouTube, i.e. giving back to the net what you have taken from it?

BIRGIT: No. Festival screenings have shown that the film works very well on a big screen. That's when it becomes something else. This is also part of its reflection on media, to detach the mobile phone films from their original context.

FLORIAN: In other words, aesthetic interests were already in the foreground for you?

BIRGIT: Absolutely, that is the basis from which I start. Arnold Dreyblatt, who like me is a member of the Academy of Arts, said after seeing the film that only someone who comes from the field of experimental film could make something like that.

FLORIAN: Why should one watch these clips out of aesthetic interest?

BIRGIT: Because there are places and moments in these clips that cannot be described. That is the peculiarity of visual information, that it conveys something that could not be written in any other language.

FLORIAN: And for that, you concentrate on precisely those excerpts that are not pictures in the true sense of the word, and that one would not look for when watching these clips on the net.

BIRGIT: The people who put the material online are interested in the corpses that can be seen before or after.

FLORIAN: The passages in your film can be understood as authentication features. They only make sense in combination with the images before and after. The moment you isolate them, they become worthless. But then you bring the index back in through the sound in order to put everything into context.

BIRGIT: Exactly. The shakiness and poor quality, as Hito Steyerl writes, is proof of authenticity. This work thinks about how visual evidence is constructed.



Falling to Pixels

MATTHIAS MÜLLER

Originally published in: *Journal der Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln, no.1, October 2014*

A finger is placed deep into a gaping human wound, as if the eye had to reassure its perception through the sense of touch. It was only in this way that “doubting Thomas” was able to overcome his suspicion about the resurrection of Jesus. Thomas Hirschhorn’s 2012 digital variant of this tactile gesture as depicted in Caravaggio’s 1602 painting exposes us to a carefully

manicured woman’s hand touching explicit depictions of the most severe injuries: mutilations, oozing entrails, and leaking brain matter. In his video *Touching Reality* the artist is obviously not concerned with giving the nameless victims a face; most no longer have one, captions or spoken comments are missing. Flipping through digital photo albums by gently swiping across the user interface of a tablet is a gesture that has long become commonplace, but here it is monumentalized in close-up. “Look!” is its imperative. However this authoritarian request stands in strange contrast to the almost casual movement of fingers across the touchscreen. The source of the death images uploaded from war and crisis zones are mostly blogs and social networks; their destination, determined by Hirschhorn, is the projection screens of exhibition spaces.

Every appropriation is based on decontextualization. The very act of stripping material of its original context, and thus of its original intention, transforms it. Bringing similar material into a serial sequence takes up the logic of archiving and refers to a collecting drive in the arts that has been unleashed in times of unlimited digital access to even the most remote material.



Christian Marclay's 24-hour montage *The Clock* (2010) might be its most prominent example. In his critical analysis of this work¹ and its extensive accumulation and iconographic seriality, Eli Horwatt recognizes traits of what Max Horkheimer summarized as "instrumental reason." "By denoting a resemblance, the terms relieve one of the trouble of enumerating the qualities, and thus serve to better organize the material of knowledge. One sees in them mere abbreviations of the individual objects to which they refer."² But while Marclay compiles motifs of industrial cinema, the "flagship store in the class society of images" (Hito Steyerl), which already in their original context attempt to establish easy and unambiguous readability,

Hirschhorn undertakes an indexical reorganization of documentary images produced by non-professionals in highly diverse situations and with conceivably divergent intentions.

In his text "Why Is It Important—Today—To Show And Look At Images Of Destroyed Human Bodies?"³, which refers to *Touching Reality*, Hirschhorn highlights precisely the redundancy and "unclear provenance" of his material as qualities. These images are capable of subverting the iconization of certain "prominent" images, the official representations of "embedded journalism," for instance, which put themselves in the service of common classifications into victims and

perpetrators in order to generate a consensual "world of facts." In the urgent, appealing tone of a manifesto, Hirschhorn calls for exposure to these images in order to break through one's own sense of exclusion. "I want to confront reality."

In fact, however, *Touching Reality* removes its material, puts it in quotation marks, so to speak. Instead of a corpse, the scrolling fingers touch nothing but the flat surface of a tablet; the serial arrangement of the images emphasize not their content, but their object character. This shifts the attitude of reception from the shock effect of the death motifs, as intended for example by the detachment-free deathploitation cinema, in the direction of a commentary on the practice with which such images are received with this latest device of a placeless cinema: en masse, without pause. The term "relocated cinema," which refers to the shift of the moving image from the space of the cinema to small, mobile displays, negates the conditions of reception radically altered by this transfer. The term "user interface," on the other hand, makes a clear statement: it makes us users of what the surface seals. Quite differently from the cinema, the image on the display serves itself to us for use—this includes its disposal. It joins an encyclopedic catalog that we flip through "as if it were an issue of *Vanity Fair*," as Scott Stephens⁴ notes in his critical commentary on *Touching Reality*. The activist emphasis in Hirschhorn's text, which equates images with reality, stands in irritating contrast to his work, which demonstrates an interactivity stunted into apathetic consumerism. In

The Clock by Christian Marclay



German, the term “Begreifen” has a double meaning: it denotes physical touching at the same time as intellectual understanding. Here “Begreifen” remains a pure gesture—and the emotional touch at the moment of affect is also absent. The question is to what extent the subversive potential of the representations of his source material invoked by Hirschhorn is already defused by its transfer into the new media channels of our digital culture and its conditions.

Touching Reality is closely related to artistic video works of recent years that use comparable amateur digital recordings, primarily from the uprisings of the Arab Spring. In Rabih Mroué’s video lecture *The Pixelated Revolution*

(2011) the artist raises the question, in a reflection on media that echoes Harun Farocki’s, of whether the cell phone as a recording medium allows the filmmaker to experience the deadly facticity of the situation like a fiction before a sniper’s shot hits him, and whether the last image the chronicler took before his assassination physically inscribes itself in him, comparable to an optogram. “Pictures don’t win wars.” This was Mroué’s laconic conclusion in the first year of the still ongoing war in Syria, temporarily forgotten in Western media.

The majority of Birgit Hein’s video work *Abstrakter Film* (2013), largely assembled from cell phone recordings from the Libyan uprisings, dates from the same

year. In her interview with Florian Krautkrämer, she places the work in the context of her engagement with the reproduction aesthetics of the digital and the question of how visual evidence is constructed. According to Hein, the sharper and more graphic the representations became, the less evidence they seemed to guarantee. “You realize at the end that you’re on the outside and basically don’t know anything.”⁵ For only fleeting moments, the jarring pans and off-color clusters of pixels Hein focuses on allow us to identify a motif beyond doubt: a pool of blood, a cut body, billows of smoke after a detonation. If the sparse visual clues lead us into the realm of foreboding and speculation, the facts of the recording situation are conveyed primarily in the sound, which accompanies the “abstract” image artifacts synchronously and unedited. The sense of mortal dread it evokes allowed Hein (born 1942) to call up her own, largely buried World War II memories and to impressively condense her material—at a deliberate distance from its instrumentalization on a daily basis—in her new montage.

We are just beginning to look into the media socialization of a generation that media scholar Wanda Strauven names the “iTouch Generation,” as well as at the beginning of a critical appreciation of artistic works that react to the new phenomena of an increasing democratization of media production and the secondary exploitation of their output circulating on the internet. A large part of these products are “lumpenproletarians in the class society of appearances,” as

Touching Reality by Thomas Hirschhorn, La Biennale de Montreal, Montreal 2014



Hito Steyerl writes in her essay “In Defense of the Poor Image,”⁶ “...copies in motion...” “...degraded to the point of just being hurried blurs, so that one even doubts whether they could be called images at all.” The “poor image” testifies primarily to “its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities” and thus: “reality.” A blind trust in the authenticity of the “poor image” as a container of extra-medial reality, however, is naive: feature film productions have long absorbed the authentic appearance of “poor images” in order to lend their fictions more credibility. The very images Hirschhorn perceives as innocent were originally published to serve a political purpose; hence they are

not free from manipulation, neither in terms of their dramaturgy or use. It is also questionable whether the longing to overcome the merely virtual participation in revolutionary events simply by confronting amateur footage from the regions of uprising and revolution is fulfilled, and to move from passive participation in the endless newsfeed of the internet to active, interventionist participation in what Hirschhorn calls “reality.”

The art of Western societies moves in relatively protected spaces. Steyerl’s reference to the class society of appearances is a call for artists to reflect on the disparity between the sources of their appropriations and the context of their further exploitation. Placed between

the terrains of exploration and exploitation, found footage filmmaking seems to me particularly risky when it comes to working with “poor images” from poor economies of audiovisual capitalism, especially from war and crisis regions. The gentle swipe of a fingertip across a touchscreen belies the deep gulf that lies between the two spheres. A purely aesthetic pleasure in the rawness of the “poor image” as a counterpart to the industrial standard of high definition becomes the accessory of a new radical chic.

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Abstrakter Film



Transparent:

Stefanie Schulte Strathaus interview

STEFANIE SCHULTE STRATHAUS

STEFANIE: Birgit has created a persona that truly embodies the saying “the private is political.” The key to this was her radical honesty. This persona gave her options of how to act and to speak that others didn’t have.

MIKE: I’ve been listening to a classroom visit Birgit made with Inga Lemke. In a roomful of strangers (students) she talks about her breakup with Wilhelm, and it instantly creates a charged intimate space with deep stakes. It invites each listener to live in their bodies, to connect ideas to lived experience.

STEFANIE: She taught her students to create a very personal style and aesthetics. She led them to a place where they could discover their own language. This is one of her biggest achievements. In many film schools you see certain styles emerging, often students copy their professor or other role models who are introduced to them. Birgit never wanted that. The only quality her work shares with her students is a radical language. You see a film and know it’s a Matthias Müller film. It’s a Claudia Schillinger film. I don’t know any other film school where this happened, of course there are always

some filmmakers who find their own language, but in Birgit’s classes it was all about that.

She was extremely personal but at the same time generous and open to others. I met other filmmakers of her generation, mostly men, whose work was also personal, but they were more focused on themselves. This was not Birgit, she always saw herself as part of society. That’s the political power of her being personal. It’s about having a standpoint, a place from which to speak. The person she’s addressing has their own space, and both are respected.

MIKE: Looking at the avalanche of correspondence she created when she and Wilhelm ran XSCREEN (1968-74) was a reminder of how much work she did to pull together the small community of underground filmmakers (as they named themselves). It wasn’t simply about sharing movies, but sharing lives, inviting others to sleep on their couch, to have conversations and drink together. She was forever busy creating new families.

STEFANIE: She did the same at school, not only with her students, but also with guests she invited. When



Stefanie Schulte Strathaus

she moved to Berlin in 2008 after her retirement, she didn’t expect anything from us who were already living in Berlin. She was very relaxed with it, her apartment was open, but there was no pressure. It was family in the best sense, without obligations.

MIKE: She could be very blunt in her speaking, did you experience that with her?

STEFANIE: She and Wilhelm shared an attitude of speaking what they think. It could often be challenging for others, but I always thought that they have a point, and every community needs people like them.

They are the ones who can say what no one else is willing to say.

We were neighbours on Mittenwalderstrasse in Kreuzberg for a while. She moved there after Braunschweig, it marked a new chapter in her life. I remember her apartment was very lovingly decorated, she made it really nice, it wasn't huge but it was very well organized so every corner was used. Later we were both lucky enough to find bigger apartments in other parts of the city.

MIKE: Why did you organize a retrospective of Birgit's work in 2003?

STEFANIE: In the 90s I did a lot of work on 1970s feminist cinema, it was also the time when Anglo-American gender theory was translated into German. Unlike in the US, for example, race, class, and gender were rarely addressed together. I watched the developments in the 1980s and 90s very closely, and Birgit's films stood out from everything. Familiar categories like political, experimental, or documentary cinema were not enough to describe her. I sometimes had problems with her films, too, but they were challenging in such a productive way that they had to be seen and discussed.

The retrospective was inspired by *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1994). I liked the film a lot, but it also raised questions that put feminist strategies to the test. I found some things wrong with it, but her radical candor somehow made it right again. She found a cinematic expression for her loneliness and desire, making

them arguments, for example, that made the issue of sex tourism more complex.

She was very surprised by the idea of her own retrospective. For decades, she had worked with Wilhelm under the name W + B Hein. Although she had been making her own films for more than a decade, she still saw herself in this working relationship. A retrospective would have to include the joint films, which seemed difficult to her when only her name was above them; on the other hand, these films were inseparable from her work.

She felt a shared responsibility for Wilhelm. They accomplished so much together; her own filmmaking is very much influenced by their shared past. Whether she would have made other films without him, we'll never know.

Wilhelm showed up for the opening. Birgit was very nervous about how he would react. But he only made a small remark during the Q&A, everything was relaxed.

MIKE: For years both of the Heins made very dramatic public scenes in theatres, denouncing artists, loudly expressing their approval or their contempt in often confrontational ways.

STEFANIE: I know. And because the retrospective was so important to her, she was scared something could ruin this moment. For her it was a turning point, a public acknowledgment that she had her own career. It wasn't just about premiering a new movie, but recognizing a whole body of work that was her own.



Rohfilm



MIKE: Marc Siegel says that the three features the Heins made in the 80s are underappreciated because they stopped showing this work after their split.

STEFANIE: Maybe, but that's also true for other experimental filmmakers of their generation. For example, the early films of Heinz Emigholz should be much better known. That has to do with the history of experimental film in Germany. Many years ago, that's why I wanted to come to Canada; I thought the country was a paradise for experimental film. In Germany, it never had such a high status.

MIKE: Did she talk to you about her last (and unfinished) film about her mother?

STEFANIE: Yes, but she didn't tell me much about it. Birgit was born in the same year as my mother, 1942, during World War II. Telling their stories is very difficult because they experienced terrible things in the first years of their lives, and at the same time most family stories in Germany are connected to the perpetrator

side, to the Nazis. This was a challenge and I hoped that Birgit would find a cinematic way to deal with it.

MIKE: How did the war change Birgit?

STEFANIE: I don't know but I think we all need to look much more at the role that the war and National Socialism played in our family histories and what of it has been carried forward and in what form. Much is still very unresolved.

I myself only learned to look more closely in Cairo. When I first came there in 2010, certain objects brought back childhood memories. I knew that my family had lived there briefly at one point before I was born, but it was such a minor issue that I had forgotten about it, and more importantly, didn't know the reasons. My grandfather was an engineer who worked on airplanes during the Nazi era. After the war, he and his colleagues were not allowed to work in Germany, so about 200 of them went to Egypt in the early 1960s to help President Nasser build rockets and airplanes. Since the rockets were supposed to have a range as far as Israel, according to Nasser, and Germans were involved, this was a major scandal in history.

My aunts went to school in Egypt, my mother was a bit older and only stayed there temporarily. I began a year-long research with my friend Merle Kröger, an author, who fictionalized my family history and combined it with documentary parts, which resulted in the book *The Experts*.

Until then I didn't have a close relationship with my mother, but she and her siblings were very supportive of the research, which is not always the case in German families. I was lucky because it also allowed me to untie some knots in the family, the roots of which lay in the memories and traumas of our parents' childhood.

For example, my grandmother had a cleaning compulsion that shaped my mother's entire childhood and adolescence. When she was three years old, they fled from Berlin to Bavaria; on the way, they were repeatedly exposed to bombing raids, and the family was torn apart at times. Of course, this experience shaped her as a person and as a mother, and thus had an influence on me. I don't know what Birgit experienced during that time, but it will hardly have been any different. There have been countless other influences over the years, of course, but this period into which they were born must have been particularly formative. What perhaps connected Birgit and my mother was a certain urgency in their actions when it came to their own selves. Birgit found the medium of film as an expression of this.

How can one approach one's own family history from the perspective of the late-born in Germany without running the risk of reversing the perpetrator-victim relationship? How can one find a language for something that has always been concealed?

MIKE: Birgit's radical honesty was a reaction shot to her parent's generation of silence. Were there other

qualities you could point to that were symptoms of generational wounds?

STEFANIE: She acted radically and had a clear opinion on everything, but that didn't mean she was always negative or angry; on the contrary, I almost always experienced her in a good mood and very affectionate. I had the feeling that she had already worked through a lot in life by working on her films, a project she had started together with Wilhelm. Their radicalism was certainly symptomatic of their generation, they had to make a cut to approach the world differently. It's been said so often that the personal is political, but usually it was just theory. For Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, as by the way also for Jack Smith, whom they knew well, it was lived practice. Experimental film would sooner

or later become a genre that repeated itself, and then it was no longer political. Birgit and Wilhelm were always able to resist this.

That certainly had to do with how they dealt with the materiality of film, not as a carrier material, but as a living body, and how, in the next step, they used their own bodies as changeable material for films and performances. I think that's a very radical gesture. Being radical also means being difficult. Bodies and materials are difficult, they have resilience. In *Rohfilm* (1968) all that is already there, it's one of the first films they made. The more the film print is projected, the faster it ages, until it finally dies. It's now almost impossible to get the print that's in the Arsenal archives through the projector.

Much of what we later learned through gender theory about the body as something socially constructed

is already present in the early films. With her later video work *Kriegsbilder* (2006), Birgit turns to the aestheticization of the surface, which makes the vulnerable body disappear altogether.

We live in a time when we have to look at film in a very different way. I think it's important to reconnect films with the world, with what's happening around us. That's why I work in archives. I want to experience the urgency of films, I want to understand why they had to be made. It can be about aesthetics or content, but there has to be something that anchors them in history and from there we can see differently into the future. That's what interests me.

Birgit showed us how a film can be experimental or political without being easily identifiable as an experimental film or a political film. She was very familiar with those categories, but only to keep challenging them. Everything she did had to be done, it was the necessary next step in her life and work, and that's what makes it so strong.

Rohfilm



So far, so suspicious...

Birgit Hein's cinematic biography

STEFANIE SCHULTE STRATHAUS

for Arsenal Program, April 2003

Experimental films can also be political simply by being outside the system. If you show them, you are political.

(Birgit Hein, ca. 1968)

In the end, it became something else: It's a cohesive body of work that has to do with you, but lives apart from you.

(Birgit Hein, 2001)

Experimental, political and private: from today's perspective, these coordinates outline everything and nothing. In retrospect, they might describe the entire spectrum of an "independent" cinema. However, the frictions behind these terms, the moments of differentiation that were necessary to fathom positions that seem to have disappeared altogether today, are shown by Birgit Hein's cinematic work, which until her separation in 1989 was also that of her former husband Wilhelm Hein.

Through her books and texts, Birgit Hein has made necessary connections between theory and practice, history and the present. Her movement from visual art to material film, the showing of films and the fluid transition to performance, the autobiographical project involving the body, all these are stations of one and the same discourse: how are inside and outside related, where exactly is the border and what does it consist of, what are the forms of mediation, how does all this become experiential?

The two quotes above are taken from a film by Karin Jurschick (*Im Spiegel der Bilder, Die Filmemacherin*

Birgit Hein (In the Mirror of Images Filmmaker Birgit Hein, 2001), which can be viewed in the foyer as an accompaniment to Birgit Hein's cinematic works. They name two possible approaches to the retrospective and to the "genre" of experimental film, each of which will be the subject of a lecture. Birgit Hein herself will speak about the relationship between visual art and film and show how questions of aesthetic education and prevailing (cultural) politics are fluid. In addition, we will show a film she made with Wilhelm Hein in 1980 as a commissioned work on Pop Art for the exhibition *Westkunst: Die Medien und Das Bild. Andy Warhol's Art*. She prefaced her text "Experimental Film and Visual Art," which appeared in 1989 in Ingo Petzke's





Death in the Garden by Luis Buñuel

“Experimental Film Handbook” with a Warhol quote: “But don’t you understand? These movies are art!” Before that, we will show a film by Andy Warhol, whose radical detachment from the traditional media of art greatly influenced the Heins. *Kitchen* (1966) takes place at a table in a white kitchen where a murder occurs. The sneezing actors repeatedly interrupt their acting to take script pages, whose instructions they follow, or to pose for a photographer. “The film is very similar to real life,” Warhol said.

The title of the lecture by film scholar Robin Curtis is “A Life in Film: The Meaning of the Body for Autobiographical Works of the Avant-garde.” Central to her discussion is the question of what role the body plays in film reception and how its participation can be grasped. Robin Curtis shows in her lecture how the audience in Birgit Hein’s film *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1994) is made to enter into an embodied visual relationship with the film, crossing several boundaries along the way.

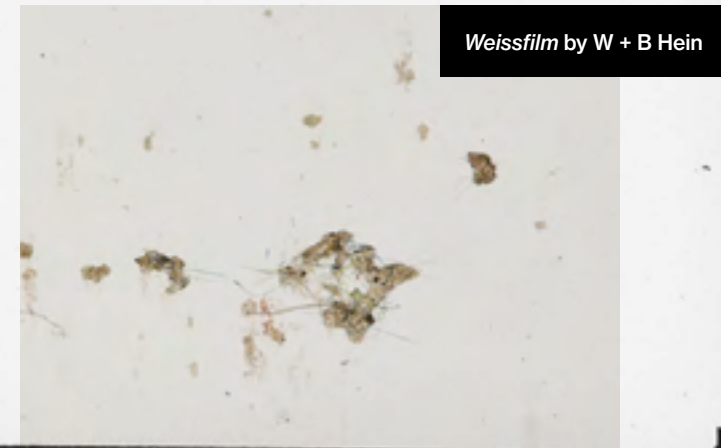
Birgit Hein was born in Berlin in 1942. Together with Wilhelm Hein, she studied art history in Cologne from 1962-68. Coming from the visual arts, they saw a Luis Buñuel retrospective during their studies. One of the films that impressed them most was *La Mort En Ce Jardin* (Death in the Garden, 1956), which “adds surreal anthology pieces to a trivial adventure plot, such as the image of the Champs-Élysées merging into a postcard burning in the jungle.” (Ulrich Gregor)

Birgit and Wilhelm Hein bought a used Bolex camera. What mattered to them was not the technical possibilities of the image, but new ways of thematizing the image itself. The demand for “film as art” meant valuing “film as film and therefore as art.” For this the film image first had to be destroyed. In 1968 *Rohfilm* was created, a pure material film, in which ashes and other rubbish are pasted onto a scratched and perforated film strip. The result was refilmed as it was pulled through a projector, sometimes causing frames to burn. The outrage that this film caused is hardly imaginable today and can probably be explained by the fact that the film leaves only subjective experience as a memory without objectifiable images.

We will show the film in a program with other material films of this period. In 625 (1969) a flickering television screen was refilmed. *Weissfilm* (1977) consists of leader materials, the sound is created by the film’s sprockets and splices made on the film. *Portraits III* was made

between 1970 and 1977, along with more than 40 other films, not all of which have survived.

At the Berlin DFFB (German Film and Television Academy) film was seen as a political medium whose content was intended to educate and to agitate, but Birgit and Wilhelm Hein saw their work as a break with the forms of the established arts. Experimental film, as quoted at the beginning, was understood as political. This necessarily included how the work was presented. These perspectives underscored their XSCREEN initiative. “Birgit and Wilhelm Hein were the most prominent of the XSCREEN artists. In 1968, the shell of the underground car park at Neumarkt was the backdrop for the most spectacular of the film happenings of this Cologne movement—film in the underground. Andy Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls* (1966) became a mass spectacle during its Cologne screening at the long-closed Lux am Dom. Later, Jack Smith, Warhol’s antipode in the gay New York underground, also came to the Rhine.” (Stadt-Revue) B+W Hein made a film



Weissfilm by W + B Hein

about Jack Smith in 1974, which we'll show as a supporting film to *La Rabbia* (The Rage, Italy 1963) by Pier Paolo Pasolini, a poetic montage film about what revolution is all about, and which was of great importance to the Heins.

After a spectacular raid on Neumarkt—the “X” in XSCREEN stood for sex—in which all the films (by Kurt Kren, Otto Muehl and many others) were confiscated, the XSCREEN events took place in the Lupe cinema. In 1971 Birgit Hein published the first German publication on avant-garde film *Film im Underground*. In his address for the awarding of the art prize of the SPD parliamentary group in the Lower Saxony state parliament, Gerhard Büttendörfer reports: “In 1972, films by the Heins were shown at documenta 5, followed in 1974 by the first retrospective of their films in New York. In 1977, B+W Hein jointly directed the experimental film section at documenta 6. In the same year, Birgit Hein and Wulf Herzogenrath prepared the exhibition *Film as Film-1910 to the Present* which was shown at art museums in Cologne and Stuttgart, at the Folkwang Museum in Essen, at the Academy of Arts in Berlin, and at the Hayward Gallery in London. The exhibition catalog became a classic text narrating the history of avant-garde film.

“With the exhibition *Film as Film* this phase of development was completed for us (...) With *Materialfilme I* and *II* (1976) we had reached the final stage of our work. From now on, the objet trouvé could replace our films.

The audience no longer understood the steps we were making, and this was a decisive shift from the political underground film, which was precisely about intelligibility.” (B.H.) The problem of mediation in the art world led the Heins to the places where the “normal” public was: pubs. “And that,” said Birgit Hein in conversation with Karin Jurschick, “marked the end of the ideas of the avant-garde.”

In a second “creative phase” of the B+W Hein couple, their bodies took the place of the film material. Between 1978 and 1984 they developed three performances, including the live show *Superman and Wonderwoman*. In addition, according to Birgit Hein in her text “Experimental Film and Visual Art,” “a new tendency toward narrative became apparent in German experimental film by the end of the 70s. Heinz Emigholz with *Demon* (1977) was one of the first. In the young super-8 movement, Trivialfilm (B movies) were broadly revisited. In addition, pop music was incorporated into the avant-garde scene. Groups like Die Tödliche Doris and Notorsche Reflexe combined film, music, and performance, venturing from the exhibition to the pop realm despite their avant-gardism. With our performance, we once met with Tödliche Doris in a circus tent.”

During a stay in New York in 1981, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein retreated into isolation in an attitude of refusal towards the city. This resulted in *Love Stinks—Images of Daily Madness* (1982). Here they regard filmmaking as a process of exploring, staging and illuminating



Kali-filme

themselves down to the last fold of fleshly existence. Refraining from psychological dissection—rampant love scenes, masturbation and menstruation are all filmed without voyeurism or embarrassment.

From this private/public sphere, the path leads straight to *Verbotene Bilder* (Forbidden Pictures, 1986), filmed in Hamburg in 1984-85, where B+W Hein “talk for the first time after 17 years of marriage (!) about problems we never dared to talk about.” “It seems that they want to fight every marital war, walk every circle of hell. Since there are no longer any taboos around ‘pornographic’ images, since you can see ‘anything’ in any magazine, the Heins create shock by lining up the taboos. They are supported by the drummer Robyn Schulkowsky.” (Alf Bold) *The Kali-Filme* (1987/88) also leaves a strong impact even today. Consisting of eight individual films



documenta 6 kassel

24. juni –
2. oktober 1977

museum fridericianum • orangerie und karlsaue
neue galerie • rathaus



compiled from found footage of horror and violence films, they depict fantasies of sex and violence that are taboo in official culture. Kali is the mother goddess from Indian Hindu mythology. She is the mother who gives birth while simultaneously killing and castrating.

In 1989 Birgit and Wilhem Hein separated. A long-standing life and work relationship dissolved, characterized by pushing their own public presentation to the point

of overturning questions about the connection between the private and the political.

In 1990 Birgit Hein received a lifetime professorship at the HBK Braunschweig. Radical subjectivity combined with a profound material consciousness was the essence of her previous practice, and she now translated this into her own films which became standards of feminist cinema without losing their explosive power. Even with the emergence of gender theory and the idea that gender was a construction, her work maintained the possibility of breaking taboos: generalizations were subject to the suspicion of essentialism. Our opening film *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women, 1991) premiered at the Forum in 1992. It shows female soldiers, partisans, wardens, criminals, and childbearing, drunken, masturbating, strong women, but also the circumcised, operated on, and dismembered victims who have to pay for the fear that women trigger in men. Scenes from documentaries, from Trivial-film and staged sequences are assembled into a collage of images, supplemented by a montage of sounds, quotations and the artist's own texts. Is this based on an essentialist idea of "woman" who is potentially always a perpetrator, no matter at what time and in what social context, or does Birgit Hein show here images of different women who, precisely in their diversity, emerge from an underlying patriarchal structure? "So far, so suspicious," writes Merten Wortmann in the *Berliner Zeitung*, "But in the face of the personal consternation

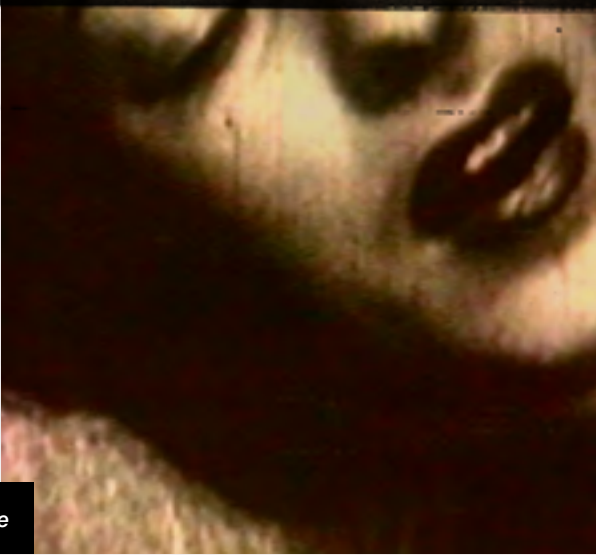
with which Hein links her material in the commentary, any questionability pales."

Such a subjective point of view, of course, represents a critique of the notion that identities are only constructed. *Baby, I will Make you Sweat* (1994) goes beyond this taboo by addressing the physical desire of an older woman who loves a younger man. In addition—at the same time as the emergence of the term "political



Love Stinks





Kali-filme

correctness”—there is the issue of sex tourism. Birgit Hein travels to Jamaica in order to have her desires fulfilled, desires that are not granted to her here in Germany. What the images can no longer show, the sound takes over; a spoken travel diary accompanies the grainy images. The possibilities offered by the autobiographical to make these taboos visually and physically tangible are the subject of Robin Curtis's lecture.

The literal “awareness of oneself,” which is especially present when one is on the road, is also the aesthetic challenge in her latest film. *La moderna poesia* (Modern Poetry, 2000) is a very personal travelogue to Cuba. The second thread is Cuba's history, which has become part of an everyday mythology: Che Guevara has become an image seen on walls, T-shirts and souvenir items. “What has become of Che?” becomes the question, ‘What has become of us?’” (B.H.)

Baby I will Make you Sweat



At the end of the retrospective, we will present a program of films by former students from Braunschweig, compiled by Birgit Hein, which reads almost like a “who's who” of a younger generation in German experimental film: Bjørn Melhus, Claudia Schillinger, Matthias Müller, Michael Bryntrup, Caspar Stracke and Christoph Girardet are represented. They present a bouquet of films made during their time with professor Birgit Hein, whose life has written film history like no other.



SCHOOL

Remembering Birgit Hein: an interview with Matthias Müller

MATTHIAS MÜLLER

MIKE: Birgit was an iconic presence, both in and out of the classroom. Her reputation preceded her, trailed and haunted her. She was rumoured to be a fearsome teacher, with legendary critiques that would reduce students to shadows, or on the other hand lift some into a rare and golden light, as if she were the gateway to some celestial realm of cinema. Partly for financial reasons, most of what she named “the third generation” of German “experimental filmmakers” became her students, including yourself.

MATTHIAS: I met Birgit at a festival when I was about to finish my studies at university. She told me about the professorship she had just started at the Braunschweig University of Art (HBK), which she initially shared with her husband Wilhelm and continued alone from 1990. She suggested the postgraduate program with the degree as *Meisterschüler* (master student) to me. I entered this program in 1987. Film as an artistic medium was not yet a matter of course at the art academies. To establish film as an artistic medium on an equal footing with traditional arts: this has been Birgit’s life’s work as a filmmaker, curator, author and teacher. She carried this work out against often massive opposition.

Under Birgit’s leadership, the film and video class quickly developed into one of the centres of experimental film in Germany. I studied until 1991 with fellow students such as Caspar Stracke, Bjørn Melhus, Claudia Schillinger, Michael Brynntrup, Maija-Lene Rettig, and

also got to know Christoph Girardet, with whom I have worked closely and continuously since 1999. We were not a homogeneous group at all, our intentions quite diverse. There was a guest student from the neighbouring city, Edward Berger, who won four Oscars a

Film class 1991, left to right, Christoph Girardet, Bjørn Melhus, Matthias Müller, Udo Kier, Oliver Becker



few nights ago; that was certainly not our common goal. One person really stood out from this group: Uli Versum, a maverick who unflinchingly and with great independence developed eccentric films such as *Citrus Fruit 2*, *Harmony* and *Fascinating Doll's House*. I was entranced. I was—in the best sense—shocked. It is with great regret that I have to admit that his graduation film was his last work. Was it Birgit who “lifted him into a rare and golden light?” I guess in the first place it was us, his admiring fellow students.

The manners in this class were direct, the language open, the discussions often controversial. Birgit had the guts to be outspoken. She had to overcome so much resistance in the male-dominated spheres in

which she was active—film, art and academia—that it took a clear, concise, quasi-“male” language to prevail. It often got loud, there was swearing, there was drinking. The fact that Birgit and Wilhelm’s marriage was falling apart at the time fuelled the intensity of the arguments. I was used to a more distanced relationship between professors and students at university and it took me a while to open up.

Birgit’s uncompromising attitude was paired with great warmth and humour which created a trust that made it possible to share even the most private things with her. That was essential in a circle devoted to personal film. Birgit wanted to communicate at eye level. Again and again she emphasized that she saw us more as fellow artists than as students.

The class had a good budget so we could afford to invite filmmakers and curators for regular public presentations and screenings. The conversations with these guests were then continued and deepened in the classroom the following day. One of these guests was Alf Bold, who programmed for the Arsenal cinema in Berlin and had previously been artistic director of the Collective for Living Cinema in New York for several years. He introduced us to films by Bruce Conner, Morgan Fisher’s *Standard Gauge*, Alberto Grifi and Gianfranco Baruchello’s *La verifica incerta*. These screenings were initial sparkings for students like Christoph Girardet and I.

At the time, I was on the road a lot as a member of the Alte Kinder distribution collective and learned valuable lessons about how to present programs. Birgit

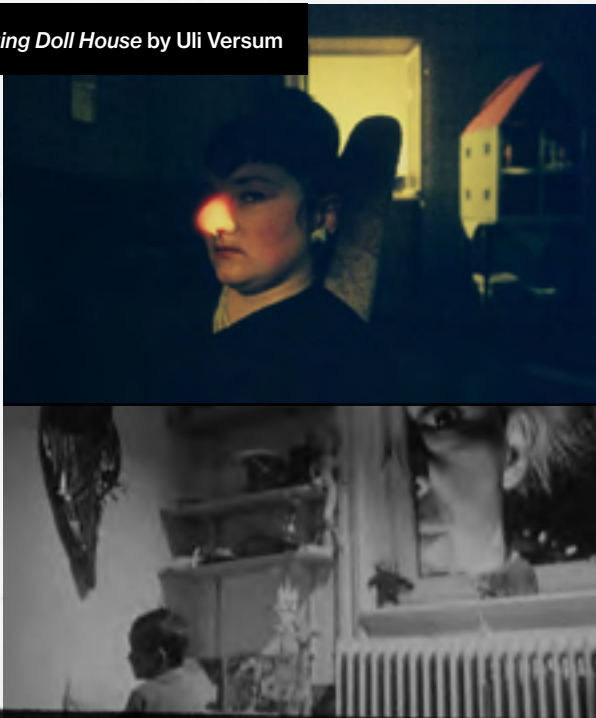


also brought Udo Kier into the class, who tried his hand at teaching and provided unforgettable moments (and equally unforgettable gossip) as a middleman between the underground, art film and Hollywood.

There was a weekly meeting of all students working in film and video. Birgit chose the term “plenum” in the sense of a general assembly/gathering. Of course, it never had the formal character of a political assembly. Until 1990, there had been separate film and video classes at the HBK. Birgit wanted to unite the disciplines in one class. There were artistic reasons for this. My film *Home Stories* (1990), for example, was edited on video, then re-filmed on 16mm. Did I belong in the video seminar or in the film class? It was about overcoming the rivalry between these media that still existed then. At the same time, bringing the two classes together was a wise political move, as the area of moving images could no longer be underestimated in the institution. Despite the difference in media, the common term “film class” was kept.

In the plenum, student projects were presented in different work phases and discussed together once a week. While the founder of the film department,

Fascinating Doll House by Uli Versum





Home Stories by Matthias Müller

Gerhard Büttendebender, was very reserved in these debates, Birgit's contributions were extremely lively, often challenging. There were certainly students, mostly younger than me, who found the tone too loud, the judgments too harsh. I drew great benefit from them and adopted the format in my own teaching.

Birgit's contempt for everything formulaic, including pretense and pretension, made her a role model. She also opened up this protected space for social debates of all sorts. I remember, for example, her passionate rejection of Andrea Dworkin's PorNOgraphy campaign. This subject occupied us intensively. Birgit and Wilhelm addressed areas of Trivialfilm, splatter films, war films, women's prison films, and brought these investigations into their own work, for example, in their *Kali-Filme* (1988). They saw these genres, which were disregarded by official film historiography, as areas in which affects suppressed by bourgeois culture could articulate themselves uncensored. With such themes, Birgit's film class developed into the antithesis of Peter Kubelka's class at the Frankfurt Städelschule, which we perceived as a convent school concerned with teaching pure doctrine, the tedious definition of what is "essential cinema"—and what is not.

Birgit had long since broken with the old boys club of the avant-garde. In 1997, she brought Mara Mattuschka to the school as a colleague in fine arts; in the same year, Marina Abramović received the professorship for performance. There were many fruitful interactions between these disciplines and their representatives. A friend of mine had the chance to study with Birgit, Mara and Marina and had the time of his life.

MIKE: In 1964 Birgit married Wilhelm Hein, two years later they began making films at a torrid pace, marking out terrain for future generations, running an exhibition space in Köln named XSCREEN, organizing a spree of experimental films for documenta in 1977, writing and curating. Do you feel this enormous body of work, that included roomfuls of formalisms (breaking down and investigating the traits that make film unique), dress up superhero performances, and feature-length political diary movies remain an enduring influence?

MATTHIAS: Was it Gustav Mahler who defined tradition not as the worship of ashes but as the passing on of fire? Birgit definitely passed on her fire to generations of students. Curators such as Florian Wüst and Marcel Schwierin emerged from her class, bringing historical positions into the present in their work. When I show programs of experimental films in my Cologne class week after week, I am aware of the historical background against which this is happening: it is the pioneering work of Birgit and Wilhelm for XSCREEN

in the late 1960s. Only today I don't have to expect police intervention and the confiscation of film prints.

We live in a fundamentally different media situation than Birgit and Wilhelm did. But when a student shows me her film today, an indictment of her father, who sexually abused her for years; and of her mother, who consistently denied the obvious and thus became an "uncanny woman," I ask myself: what would Birgit have said about that? I can't ask her anymore. What I see is that certain challenges and problems, but also necessities of autobiographical work in film, are the same today as they were then.

Birgit was modest and unsentimental, and this also determined her view of her own work. She herself has consciously and self-confidently experienced long-fought-for positions coming to an end. She had an intuitive understanding of when something was over. This was reflected in her seminar sessions, which she ended almost abruptly at the moment when everything seemed to be said. In a conversation with you, she recalled the moment when structural film, which she had played a major role in shaping, was suffocating in formalism and it was time to reinvent herself as an artist. Her turn to a radically personal film could not have been a more decisive departure from her earlier work. That *Baby I will Make you Sweat* was broadcast on German television in 1997 seems incredible today. How would the film be seen now in the midst of postcolonial discourses, wokeness, exaggerated sensitivities and trigger warnings? I will know in a few months when I

screen the film in my class. Birgit has passed the fire on to us. Now it is up to us to keep it burning.

MIKE: I remain haunted by your breathless description of the opening of Birgit's sex travelogue feature *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1995). Now that I'm also old and fading fast, I wanted to steal it to open a movie of my own. You said that it began with a train ride through a blank landscape with Birgit's blunt voice-over announcing that she was old, fat, tired, ugly, bored, horny, exhausted. That she was going to Jamaica to find someone who could fuck her back to life. Of course, after all these years, and without access to the original, what I'm writing is only fantasy and projection. But I'm wondering if you have some thoughts about the honesty she brought to her cinema and to her life, the risks she was willing to take and how this movie affected you.

MATTHIAS: For Birgit, fighting censorship also meant avoiding self-censorship. The directness of her film, only slightly tempered by its aesthetic surface, is unique—and uniquely challenging. At the time, I think Birgit underestimated the impact of her outing as a sex tourist, the transgressiveness of her stubborn insistence on having her desire fulfilled, and the demonization of sexuality in old age. Many reactions were harsh. As a professor, “she was one of the privileged, not the oppressed of this society,” wrote one critic, denying her the right to complain. “Aging is like a disease that isolates me from life”—what does that have to do with Birgit's status as a professor? Others denounced her for double abuse. First she buys sex from men who have to offer their bodies out of economic necessity, then she exposes them on screen. Birgit claimed for herself the right to act, film and discuss what men take for granted, but do not speak about out of shame.

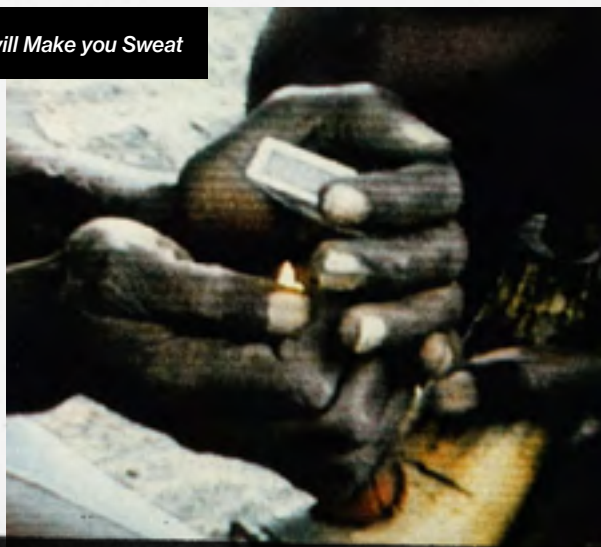
When I made my first personal film, *Aus der Ferne—The Memo Book*, in 1989, in shock over the death of my first lover from AIDS, I tried to banish the horror of the subject with beauty. That was never an option for Birgit. She would have considered it cowardly to express herself in a lyrical way instead of her everyday language. Such projects were also stress tests for her, serious attempts to examine herself using artistic means and risk emerging from the process changed.



MIKE: Wilhelm and Birgit Hein had a much publicized split in 1988 that marked the end of their collaboration, though it felt that the ghosts of their dynamic duo identity lingered—after 25 years of a very visible life, how could it be otherwise? I wonder if you could speak about the difficulties Birgit faced in having to reinvent herself in public and private realms.

MATTHIAS: “W + B” was a brand that denoted a common program, a trademark. And like white and black, these poles belonged together, complemented each other, bound the wide field of shades of grey as extremes. It was not easy to experience the strains to which this relationship was exposed towards its end. I don't want to become the Hedda Hopper of experimental film, and in fact there is little on this subject that I can or would like to share. There was always controversy in the class. At the time, I remember it as

Baby I will Make you Sweat



a safe space in terms of sharing personal experiences though. Wilhelm was in a new relationship. Birgit was alone. Her class supported her in this situation.

The last work they completed together, *Kali-Filme* (1987), was dedicated to a goddess who gives birth and kills at the same time. W + B had found reproduction and extinction, good and evil, in one and the same figure. The extremes of their relationship, their ambivalences, the overlaps and transgressions according to the traditional understanding of female and male parts, broke out here. Her professorship would have allowed Birgit to stop making films. She did not. It would certainly have seemed like a surrender to her. Besides, there were enough topics that she could work on alone, only alone. It was a new start, but certainly not a start from scratch. Again and again, interests and aesthetic preferences that marked her work with Wilhelm, doubts as well, shine through in her individual works. In 2013, for example, *Abstrakter Film* expresses a mistrust in the truth claims of images that had determined the beginnings of her career.

Birgit's first film after the separation, *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women) (1991), was an attack on the attribution of being peaceful as a woman by birth. She did not need Wilhelm for this unsparing confrontation with her own socialization. And of course *Baby I will Make you Sweat* is also a late reflex to the experience of being abandoned, and living alone. Wilhelm is not addressed here, but at least as a "lingering ghost," as you say, he is present.

On the occasion of her 80th birthday, I reminded Birgit of a moment in her class when a risky psychological game was played: the participants chose a person from the group and described him or her—without giving the name—as a plant, until at some point the person had to recognize him or herself. A guest student had chosen Birgit and described her as a gerbera. No one could solve the riddle. And Birgit, after guessing for a long time, laughed out loud hysterically and complained that he had chosen the only flower that could not stand on its own. It couldn't have been more absurd. Birgit was steadfast. I will not bring any gerbera to her funeral service.

I last met Birgit in Brussels in 2014, where she was moderating a talk with Christoph Girardet and I. At the time, I had discovered two vintage armchairs I wanted to buy while strolling through the city, showed her the photos I had taken, to which she first reacted uncomprehendingly—how can anyone fall for chairs?!—only to show me photos of her beloved grandchild Çiğdem in return. I think she died a happy grandmother's death. Her memorial service is sure to be packed with companions, friends and loved ones remembering her fondly.



ALTE KINDER
K A T A L O G

Alte Kinder

THOMAS THIEL

Kunstverein Bielefeld exhibition note “Das Bielefelder Gefühl,” (The Bielefeld Feeling), 2009

Thomas Fechner, Christiane Heuwinkel, Steffi Krack, Thomas Lauks, Matthias Müller, Udo Penner, Maija-Lene Rettig, Holger Schildmann

The super 8 film group “Alte Kinder” was founded in Bielefeld in 1985. The core of the group was formed by students of Prof. Jürgen Heckmanns’ film class at the University of Bielefeld; parallel to their studies, an independent film work developed, from which the concept for the cooperative emerged. The group “Alte Kinder” became known for their full-length Super 8 film programmes, which were put together from their stock of 66 short films and screened in a wide variety of venues, often away from the cinema.

The artistic professionalism and independence of the film productions were recognised by numerous awards and participation in festivals worldwide. In addition to their own film production—first in super 8, then also in 16mm format—and international distribution activities, they also curated film programmes (“Special Films,” 1989) and organised experimental film festivals in Bielefeld (“Avantgarde Film Days,” 1989). Over

the years, the group increasingly relied on close cooperation with the international super 8 scene, bringing many well-known filmmakers to Bielefeld for the first time. After the group disbanded in 1990, most of the “Old Kids” continued their activities professionally in the art and media sector.

In the exhibition, a museum-like glass case is filled with relics from the past: white editing gloves, a glass with traces of red wine, various super 8 film cans, black-and-white portraits of the group members, a Braun super 8 film camera, handwritten notes, etc. The items make for a curious mixture of ordered chaos and traces of the past, which have somewhat preserved the spirit of the times and the atmosphere in the collective. Two posters above the display case refer to past film festivals in Bielefeld and seem very up-to-date, especially because of the ongoing 1980s retro wave.

Matthias Müller



Maija-Lene Rettig



Christiane Heuwinkel



ERSTE BIELEFELDER
AVANTGARDE
FILMTAGE



20.-22.1.1989
KINO „LICHTWERK“
AUGUST-BEBEL-STR. 94 - 96

FOUND
FOOTAGE
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LABORATORY FILMS
DISTRIBUTION



KÜNSTLERFILME
DONNERSTAG 19 UHR UND SONNTAG 11.30 UHR
IN DER KUNSTHALLE BIELEFELD
EXPERIMENTALFILME DER 60er JAHRE (III)



ALTE KINDER
KATALOG



The Letter:

an interview with Maija-Lene Rettig

MAIJA-LENE RETTIG

MAIJA-LENE: Birgit's daughter Nina contacted me last year before her mother's 80th birthday. She asked me to create a page for a book she was putting together. Birgit was quite ill, still recovering from an operation on her spine. Nina wrote us that there would be no party, instead, she wanted to offer Birgit a book by all of her former students, friends, people who loved her. I wrote a letter with a photo. I told her how important she was for me, and that she was there at decisive moments in my life. She acted a little bit like a mother. With Birgit I could talk without any fear, knowing she would not judge me. I could tell her everything.

Birgit always said that it was Wilhelm who discovered my work. He saw my film *Rosenrot* (1985-87) at a festival, and together they saw *Take Courage* (1987). After the screening they said, "You should come to Braunschweig and join the film class." I started studying there in 1987.

Birgit was great. Straight away she said what she thought. I always felt her directness and honesty. She was never talking just to talk, but to say something. She talked about herself, but was open to the other person at the same time. Birgit was so real, a bit like a man in her way of moving. Wilhelm sometimes spoke badly

about the film work of my fellow students but never to me. I felt protected.

I had been part of a super 8 exhibition collection called *Alte Kinder* (Old Children) with Matthias Müller, Christiane Heuwinkel and others. When we broke up in 1988 it was very difficult, I had the feeling that my film family was no longer there. I was alone.

I made *LAppesa-die Gehängte* (1988) at school, a

difficult project. I wasn't sure if it was good or not, if it was the kind of film I didn't want to make. It's complicated and constructed with fictional doppelgangers. Afterwards, I knew that this kind of film was finished for me, it was not my way. *LAppesa* was a detour.

MIKE: Was Birgit a different person when she was with Wilhelm?



Christiane Heuwinkel, Regina Latyschew, Renate Röllecke, Matthias Müller, Maija-Lene Rettig, Lichtwerk anniversary Filmhaus Bielefeld



Birgit Hein, Matthias Müller

MAIJA-LENE: No, I don't think so. But I remember how much she suffered when they separated. She talked about that when speaking about her work. Her films were always made in relation to what she experienced, what she had lived. That was very important for me and my approach to making, it has to be personal. She was always encouraging this. The theme is less important,

or if it was made to please, or get attention. I always felt she encouraged my approach to filmmaking.

There was an anti-porn campaign (PornNO Kampagne) initiated by Alice Schwarzer. Birgit was completely opposed to this project. She called it censorship. There was a split during that time, it was a topic often discussed at festivals: for or against? Birgit and Wilhelm didn't use pornography strictly speaking. The problem with this project against pornography was that their definition of pornography was vague. Images with humiliated women from Trivialfilm, such as W+B Hein used in *Kali-Filme* (1988) were considered pornographic.

MIKE: They made very explicit sexual images of themselves in *Love Stinks* (1982). Did you see that when you were a student?

MAIJA-LENE: Yes. It was shocking but also a liberation. It shows what is possible, what can be done. I couldn't make these raw and brutal images. It's not the way to approach my inner world. Nina talked about that too at the party after the memorial ceremony. For her it was very difficult to see these images of her mother and father having sex.

MIKE: How did you wind up in Paris?

MAIJA-LENE: Birgit was decisive in my coming to Paris, where I live now. In 1990 I attended a screenplay workshop in Paris and it was Birgit who asked if

I wanted to do it. During that time the idea to live in Paris started to grow.

Then I started to work with someone. It was a very insane and negative relationship. She was the age of my mother and I was completely dependent on her opinion so I could no longer do what I wanted. Birgit saw my situation, that I was in a bad way and felt unhappy. She talked to me about the possibility of going to Paris with a grant from a Germany-France exchange organization.

I went to Paris and lost contact with Birgit. I made a poetic documentary which was shown on ARTE, and afterwards I started working for a TV magazine on ARTE called KARAMBOLAGE that I still work for as a freelancer. In 2015 I travelled with colleagues to Berlin to celebrate the anniversary of our program. Birgit and Nina came to this screening. I was so happy that she came to see what I had become. It was so important. That's the last time I saw her.



Matthias Müller, Christiane Heuwinkel, Birgit Hein, Luise-Albertz-Halle, Oberhausen

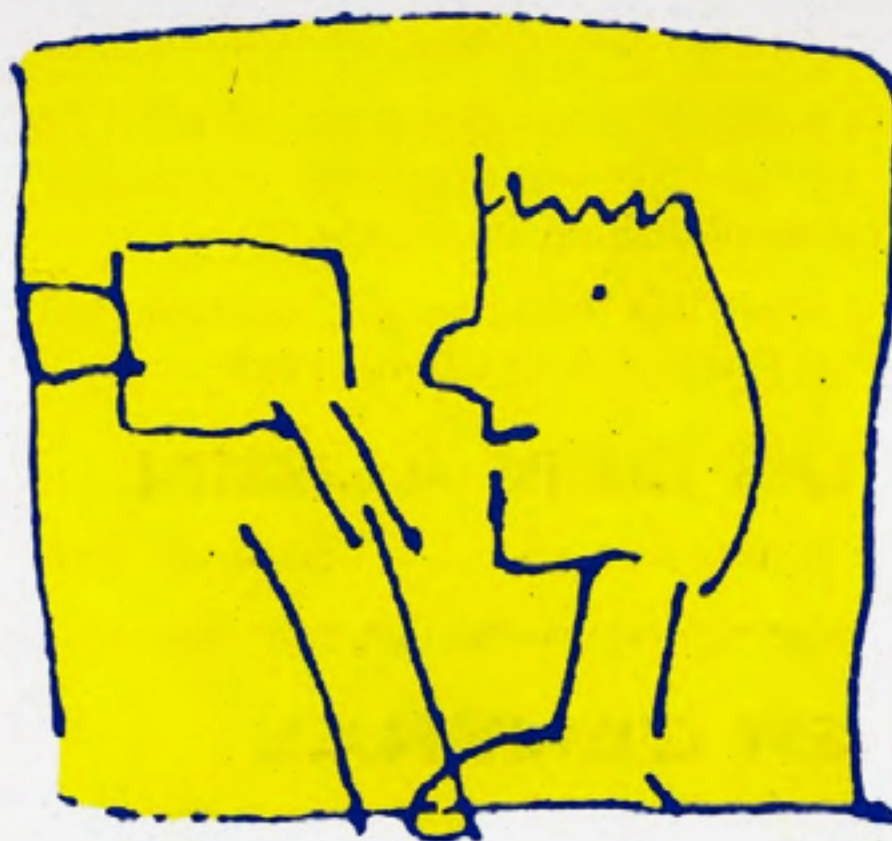
MIKE: Did you feel that she became your friend, or was it always teacher and student?

MAIJA-LENE: A friend I would not say. But it was also not a relationship between teacher and student. When we met it was like a relationship with a friend. But the fact that I went to Paris and didn't keep in contact with her means we were not friends.

MIKE: Did you feel that as a loss?

MAIJA-LENE: No. But in the end when Nina contacted me for this book I realized how important she was to me.

ALTE KINDER





Take Courage by Maija-Lene Rettig

Radical: an interview with Peter Zorn

PETER ZORN

PETER: I wanted to study experimental film because of Matthias Müller's presentation of Alte Kinder's super 8 work in Stuttgart in the late 1980s. (Alte Kinder/Old Children was a super 8 distribution collective of friends in small town Bielefeld.) They were a strong presence in the underground scene of the mid-80s and I was deeply impressed by Matthias's way of filmmaking which fit my interests in subculture. He suggested I check out the art academy in Braunschweig. I met Prof. Gerhard Büttenbender there and told him, "I'm interested in radical things." He replied, "You will fit in perfectly because Birgit Hein is starting her Professorship next semester." We began together in 1990.

I grew up in southern Germany which was quite conservative. We loved to provoke and do radical performances like naked people destroying things... The typical underground adolescent ideas of those times you know. In Braunschweig I lost interest in that because you could do whatever you liked. You want to do a SM or bondage performance? Fine, no one was shocked at all. It didn't make sense to be provocative anymore.

Birgit was one of the most radical women I've ever met. She revolutionized filmmaking not just once,

but two or three times. Think about her influence on structural film with work like *Rohfilm* (1968) which was groundbreaking at that time in Germany. After splitting with her husband Wilhelm she did *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women) (1991) which deals with the aggressive power of women throughout history. It

offers evidence of atrocities done by women, trying to destroy the myth that women are only peaceful. Birgit didn't agree. She saw similar potentials for aggression in both genders.

Birgit had an ambivalent attitude towards institutions. On the one hand she was aware how people



Birgit Hein, Judith Stern, Peter Zorn, Silent Green in Berlin, 2019

get corrupted or manipulated by them, on the other hand she loved to have influence and wherever possible to change systems. On one occasion for instance she proposed that we all become members of the Lower Saxony Media Association and vote for another board because she was embarrassed about their funding decisions. When she retired she became the vice-president of the fine arts section of the German Academy of Arts which is quite a prestigious position. She was always up for deciding things, not in the way that officials wanted, but in her own way. That was something we shared. Her subversiveness was different than her former husband Wilhelm (Hein)'s position who never really tried to work within institutions, his radicalism always led him outside. But Birgit was smart enough to understand that you could be more efficient changing things in positions of power, rather than radically declining everything.

She was very critical of the whole academic system and as a result she let us do whatever we wanted in Braunschweig. As students we began organizing our own seminars. After discussions, Marcel Schwierin and I decided that Marcel would begin with a seminar/film analysis series on National Socialist aesthetics for a year and I followed with a two-year seminar on violence in the media, analyzing the aesthetics and impacts of horror movies. Birgit helped raise money so we could find larger audiences and bring in the work we wanted. After each screening, students analyzed the films. *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* were running at the HBK! (laughs) Birgit said, "This is

really crucial work you're doing because it is a seismograph revealing society's deepest fears and desires."

MIKE: How did your artist-run gallery/workshop/event space Werkleitz begin?

PETER: Three Braunschweig students (Thomas Munz, Alexander Decker and myself) all from the south of Germany, moved to the east and bought an old farm house outside the village of Werkleitz. It took us two years (1991-93) to create a decent place to live. Two days a week we went to Braunschweig and slept there, officially we were not allowed but many students camped overnight in the academy building. Birgit always backed us up, she said, "This is work and life that needs to come together." She still carried ideas from 1968, and liked the idea that we were starting a commune. Though she doubted whether we would ever start making films. I assured her there were similarities between making a house and making a film...

We wanted to create a workshop like London Film-Makers' Co-op or The Film-Makers' Co-operative in New York, but in the countryside instead of an urban setting. We were filmmakers coming together to share passions, interests and technical resources. We needed equipment that was too expensive for a single person to buy (this was before laptops).

After two years of work on the building we founded Werkleitz Association with 27 founding members including Birgit and Bjørn Melhus amongst others. Then Birgit



Cockpits by Christoph Girardet



Professional media master class, Werkleitz



Tehching Hsieh, lecture 2000

said: you have to organize an event and reach out to the public. The result was the inauguration of the Werkleitz Biennial which started in 1993 as the first Art Biennial in Germany ever, and this in the tiny village of Werkleitz! Amongst many others we showed Birgit and Wilhelm's *Kali-Filme*, one of the first works by Bjørn Melhus *Das Zauberglas*, *Cockpits* by Christoph Girardet looped in our barn as an installation. We had punk bands, experimental film installations, a visual art exhibition, and



Kuhdemonstration by Thomas Bruns

Peter Zorn

the Mittelbisches Konzertorchester played Telemann, Handel and Bach. In Germany there is a strong division between high and low culture but we liked to ignore this and maintained a wide mix. We didn't care about categories, if we were interested in a topic we curated whatever fit, it could be a TV commercial or a theatre play. The DJ would play until 5 every morning, if there was a theme of collectives then the DJ played music made by collectives. We considered everything equally valuable work. The topic we wanted to examine with our events was the decisive issue, not the artform or the question if it was considered "art" at all.

I remember a boring night in a big disco in the eighties when Thomas Munz said to me: "People should be paid to be themselves and hang around here all night. Then for relaxation they would spend their hard-earned money getting hold of a place on the assembly line." This little Buñuel-like conversation came to mind when we started to deal with our Biennial *real [work]* in 2000. At a time when technology increasingly turns everything we do into work, it becomes necessary to think about the definition of work. We showed many amazing artworks including the first appearance of performance legend Tehching Hsieh after 15 years of no art. We wanted to talk about a universal basic income but politicians refused to take part in the discussion panel...

With *Zugewinnngemeinschaft* (Community of Surplus) in 2002 the Werkleitz Biennial reached its peak. It won the *Special exhibition of the year* award by the International Art Critic Association (German Section) 2022 and was



featured in the German Tagesthemen (most prominent news broadcast in Germany) as "documenta of the East." Everything started to be overcrowded and we therefore decided to move with our organization to the city of Halle in 2003 where the Werkleitz Centre for Media Arts is located until today.

For me it's convenient that art exists because it gives you more freedom to explore whatever you are interested in without making anyone suspicious. It's basically about getting to know new things, thoughts and experiences—no matter if it's art or anything else. My interest always started with the underground and that was nurtured by Birgit because she partly shared that interest and of course the term *underground film* existed next to the term *experimental film*. Many of the film class students were part of subcultures in those days.



The Oculist Reason by Lauren Moffat, 2015

MIKE: You said that Birgit was radical in her work and as a person. How was she radical as a person?

PETER: She hardly made compromises. Being her student you were thrown into the “plenum,” a weekly gathering of 40 students. It didn’t matter if you were first year or fifth, people with lots of experience or newcomers like me. The quality of discourse was quite high, but Birgit was also quite ruthless with her critiques. She never tried to be polite. “How dare you show this rubbish to me?” she shouted not only once. Ideas like trigger warnings or safe spaces hadn’t been invented yet in the early 1990s. Some students had a hard time and cried, while for others it was encouraging. It was a good school to learn how to discuss and defend your position

MIKE: Was teaching, talking about and making films a political act for Birgit?

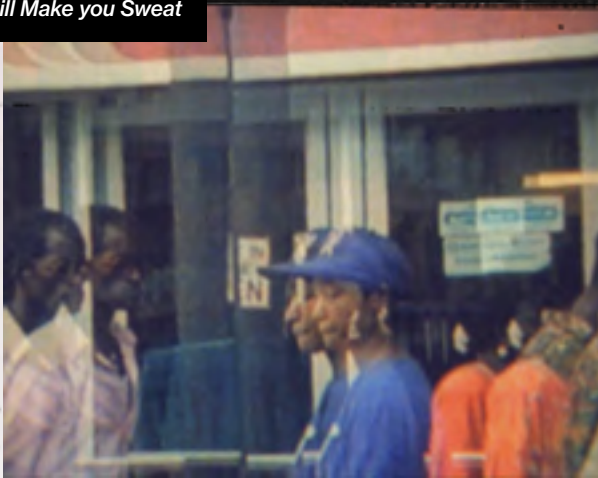
PETER: She considered everything you do political. That’s one of the reasons why she supported

Werkleitz. She thought that filmmaking was both personal and political. You have to position yourself. There was a strong opposition to commercial cinema because it was considered too supportive of the capitalist system. Furthermore the idea of communes, collectives and collectiveness was an alternative to the traditional belief in the individual artistic genius. In our Werkleitz Professional Media Master Class we teach a collective model of knowledge transfer and Birgit was invited twice.

MIKE: How did Birgit react to new media technologies?

PETER: In 1994 Werkleitz bought our first Avid (digital editing software). We had internet in our village because one of our guys was writing the Linux manual. I told Birgit that she had to get the film class equipped with computers. She replied, “Leave me alone with your computers.” But six months later she came back from a trip to New York and said yes, everything is going digital, we have to get into it. She was a pioneering, visionary person. She was highly interested in what nowadays is called diversity. She once mentioned that “trans” might be a new way of existence, a new vision of what we could become. She





was straight herself, but supported specialist sexualities, she had a very open mind.

MIKE: Were you surprised that she didn't have a partner after Wilhelm?

PETER: Not really I have to admit. It was hard when they split up. For her as a woman she was very insulted and sad. But also there was so much pressure. Everyone wondered who did what in their films. They never made separate films, they always worked together, their public life was signed W + B Hein.

Die unheimlichen Frauen (1991) was her first solo film and she received a lot of recognition for this political, provocative and personal essay. Her second solo film *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1994) was even much more controversial, a highly important film. She often mixed different aesthetics and styles. She was never polished, never tried to accomplish perfection, or needed high resolution. She always did it more punk,

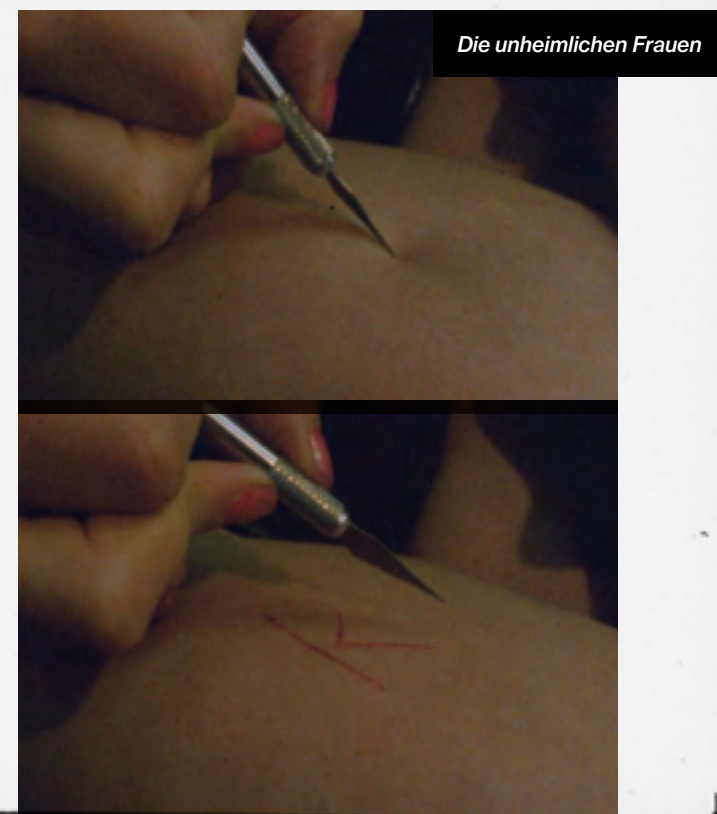
low budget, with small digital cameras, or filming off the TV screen. It was a very personal style grounded in a radical honesty with herself. I can't think of anyone else who would dare to make a film like *Baby*, going to Jamaica and doing a piece of work on your own sex tourism as an elderly women. These two films offer a completely new perspective on feminism. Therefore I consider her as a really radical feminist! The last line she speaks in *Baby* is: "Better to burn briefly than to slowly go out."

MIKE: Can you remember a moment you shared with Birgit?

PETER: We had many moments. We were driving in her car from Stuttgart to Karlsruhe for an experimental cinema conference. She turned on the radio and listened to whatever pop music came. I asked, "Don't you care about what you're listening to? You make such radical films but now you're listening to commercial shit music." In *Baby* she uses the experimental German music group Pol, but here in the car she was listening to anything. My cultural conditioning started with the underground music scene, it influenced the way I looked at images. We had a long discussion on how this was linked or not.

At an Experimental Film Conference in Karlsruhe which Birgit and I visited together, Christine Noll Brinckmann gave a keynote lecture on the use of color in women's experimental films. Birgit, in her lovely

way, argued vehemently against this and brought up the Cinema of Transgression films of Cassandra Stark, Beth B. and Lydia Lunch as counter-examples. Films by women can also be black-and-white, dirty and brutal.



*You had to drop your pants:
an interview with Christoph Girardet*

CHRISTOPH GIRARDET



CHRISTOPH: I started studying at HBK Braunschweig in 1988. Birgit and Wilhelm worked there together as assistant teachers. That went on for two semesters. Then both left and Birgit applied for a professorship in 1990.

MIKE: Why did you go to that school?

CHRISTOPH: At that time it was one of the few art schools with a film class. It wasn't like a film academy where you do classical stuff like screenwriting and cinematography. I was more interested in film as a contemporary art form. Except for Nam June Paik who was teaching at the Academy in Düsseldorf, or

Helmut Herbst who was head of the film class at the HFG Offenbach, there were no media artists teaching.

Secondly, I had seen a work the Heins had made together, the *Kali-Filme* (1987). I was shocked by this piece, it was so dirty, ugly, disturbing. They chopped up female prison films where the inmates were cutting off penises, all the clips badly edited together. It was such a horror. Intriguing. Radical. I was quite young then, other students, for instance (friend and frequent collaborator) Matthias Müller already had his education and made films. I had made some videos but had no clue about avant-garde/experimental films. That was one of the toughest pieces I'd ever seen. The anti-aesthetic was one part of it, but I had never seen those

kinds of images. I had watched classic horror films but this was something else, ugly B pictures from the 1980s on VHS tapes. Gore and splatter. It was shocking. I think they put some classical music underneath.

Finally, the school was close to where I lived. When I was accepted I found it a harbour for people who wanted to do film in another way, which meant that there were a lot of weirdos around.

MIKE: You fit right in.

CHRISTOPH: No, I didn't. I wasn't quite sure if I wanted to do film or painting and drawing which I was doing at that time. Eventually I decided to move on with film. My first year was interesting because I hardly said a word during the discussions in the plenum. Wilhelm was very tough on many of the students. It was really shocking. He even told some of them that he hated the work, that he's been fighting his whole life against the kind of films they were showing to him. People were intimidated.

Birgit wasn't like that. At that time she was more interested in psychology. What does this work tell us about you, the author? Who are you when you are making this film? You had to drop your pants. It all went down on a very personal level.

The plenum was a meeting of all the film students in a single auditorium where one would present their work. In addition, one evening per week an invited guest would show their work and the next day, if the guest stayed over, there would be a small seminar with



Kali-filme by W + B Hein

them. There were not only filmmakers but also curators and writers. The many guests ensured that in a very short time you met a lot of interesting ideas, and after a couple of years you had an education in the history of avant-garde film. We learned about the history of gay film, the aesthetics of underground.

Birgit and Wilhelm were in the throes of their divorce and there were very visible tensions between them. That was difficult. They tried to manipulate certain students to take sides and make statements. This wouldn't be possible in today's universities or art schools, there would be complaints.

When I showed my first tape in the plenum I expected to be crucified. (laughs) But it went very well. Wilhelm was happy, he said, "You can do it like that." The critique was all about: what is this showing about me? They were trying to figure out my family relations. My motivations. The unconscious. A lot of their teaching was based on that.

There were students who couldn't cope. They were talented but needed a different approach, so they left or disappeared. I'm not sure if I would have gone on at that school if both Wilhelm and Birgit had stayed, it was not sustainable. After Birgit and Wilhelm left, Birgit came back the next year by herself as a professor. The course was more structured, the tension was gone, and the focus of critiques was around content. For instance, Birgit organized seminars on fascist aesthetics and violence in films.

There was still the problem of her identity with Wilhelm, she talked about that quite a lot of course and

the fights they had, though she didn't discuss this in class. She was very motivated to find her own voice because they were now separated. She had to find her own artistic identity. *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women) (1991) was the first film she made herself, not as part of a well-known artist duo constellation. It was very stressful for her but it worked out. The film argues that women are not only victims but also perpetrators. They could be killers, lovers, criminals.

MIKE: Birgit and Wilhelm made "structural films" for years, films that took their own properties as subject matter. Does this work still have lessons to teach us, or is it a movement that has come and gone?

CHRISTOPH: I was impressed by *Rohfilm* (1968) which is an attack on the eye. It was a radical film in its time. You glue things onto the film strip, you destroy the film until there's nothing left except the act of destroying. The soundtrack had a powerful industrial aesthetic that could be heard years later in Foetus or SPK.

But mostly I was not so impressed with the structural films they made. The structural movement was very aesthetic, graphical, meditative. Look at the work of Paul Sharits. I don't know how you improve on the immersive quality of his work, you can't tell anything new with structural film. For me it was logical that they turned to something else. They were driven by the idea of being avant-garde, always doing something formally new, but eventually felt this was a burden. They



Rohfilm by W + B Hein

became tired of the structural movement and made a shift in the mid-70s.

I was not so much interested in the work but the attitude of the artist. Be true to yourself. Shift borders, be radical. Don't make compromises for aesthetics, don't soften stuff up because a festival might like it. You have to work with your struggles.

MIKE: To know what your struggle is.

CHRISTOPH: Maybe you know it, maybe you don't, but you can figure it out when you're doing the work. I was never interested in diary films where I mirror myself in the world. But you can use other materials



Home Stories by Matthias Müller

such as mirrors and still talk about personal things, yes? Even if you are not fully aware about what you're dealing with, it has to be true to your own judgment.

What was impressive with Birgit was that if she was angry she would say it out loud. We learned to talk and reflect in a tougher way. That was the most important thing we learned, to talk under pressure, to make your point and find arguments. Of course for some artists it's not their way. They need time and patience, peace and quiet, and that's totally fine. But the sensitivity for those kind of people was not to be found at the film class.

Christoph Girardet

MIKE: When I hear you and (frequent collaborator) Matthias Müller talk about each other's work there is an unflinching directness. I remember you mentioning that a certain film of Matthias contained "mistakes," very specific errors that you could point to, and he nodded in acknowledgment. Does your unsparing critique style owe something to Birgit?

CHRISTOPH: That conversation must have been about *Home Stories*, but absolutely. Though Birgit would rarely point out particular mistakes, or offer suggestions about what to do to make something better. But she could feel if a work was authentic, if it was true to form. You couldn't please her by mimicking radical style or showing pornography, she wouldn't be interested in that. If you do design, you have to please people. Sometimes design is too artsy, it's not functional enough. But if you do art it has to please no one, it just needs to be true to yourself. That idea comes from Birgit.

MIKE: Birgit had a deep engagement with found footage in her movies. As someone dedicated to these reworkings yourself, was her thinking about found footage influential?

CHRISTOPH: If you see film as an art form, you can recycle, you can use found footage. Nobody would teach you to work with found footage at a film school. I could have gone to Nam June Paik who also recycled.

I think it has to do with art and art school, not specifically because she used found footage.

MIKE: Is there a movie of hers that left a mark on you?

CHRISTOPH: *Love Stinks* (1982) was a kind of exploitation of their own life but it was also a city portrait, showing New York at that time. It's a tough film to watch and I don't have to see again. But it made a huge impression on me. It's a film about their struggles but also talking about the world they live in.



Wilhelm Hein in *Love Stinks*

MIKE: They appear often in the movie, though there is little attempt to make themselves look good or cinematic.

CHRISTOPH: Cinematic? (laughter) I think they wouldn't know how to do it.

Robert Ryman



MIKE: Every frame feels authentic, giving the viewer an unmistakable sense that there is something at stake in the making of these pictures.

CHRISTOPH: Absolutely, there is quite a lot at stake. It's existential. What struck me most was their attitude towards making this film, the almost compulsive overcoming of personal taboos as a questioning of their real life struggles. That is basically the point. But it does not exclude other possible strategies. To name an example on the opposite spectrum, an abstract painter like Robert Ryman painted white canvasses most of his life. This attitude seems to trade the exploitation of real life physicality for the attempt to expose the sublime. For some, this might be dull and defensive, but for him it was truly existential to work in this way. I fully understand and respect the process, and this is important, to feel a certain urgency in artworks. Unfortunately it has become a cliché to say art has to touch on something existential, but I still wouldn't know how to define it in any better way. That said, I am sure that Birgit would not have liked the comparison with abstract painting very much.

MIKE: What was Birgit like as a person?

CHRISTOPH: Very lively, friendly and funny. She loved to laugh but could also explode in rants. The word "rants" sounds so negative, but she wanted to make her point. If she felt something was wrong and discussions weren't clarifying... she was very emotional. She had a great sense of humour, all those funny anecdotes she



would tell. Birgit was sitting in a café on the street when an elderly beggar stopped at her table: "Do you have some change?" She gave him a few coins and the guy said: "Thank you. I love you for that." "Well, you really don't have to," she replied. He: "Thank god, then I am also rid of that problem."

When I was in my early 20s my experience with the older generation was more or less reduced to my parents, their friends, some family members and past teachers. Most were a bit boring or predictable, they had settled and made accommodations. You'd always feel the generational gap. But in art school it was very different, it wasn't only Birgit, there were a lot of older people who were weird. (laughter). Somehow it was easy to connect to Birgit, though she was very outspoken, that was very new for me to experience, and especially striking because she was a woman.

MIKE: Did you stay in touch with her?

CHRISTOPH: We crossed paths. She made a few opening speeches or introductions for my exhibitions in the 90s. But after 2006 we rarely met, she did a very impressive lecture on the historical relation of avant-garde film and the art world during an exhibition of Matthias and I in 2014. And it was good to see that she was around during these years doing interviews and lectures which further consolidated her position in the history of art. The last time we met was at the Âge d'Or Festival in Brussels in 2014 where she was on the jury. She was calmer, but could still freak out about a bad film she had seen. She was still filled with energy.

Birgit Hein



CINEMATEK



Christoph Girardet, Birgit Hein 1994 by Matthias Müller

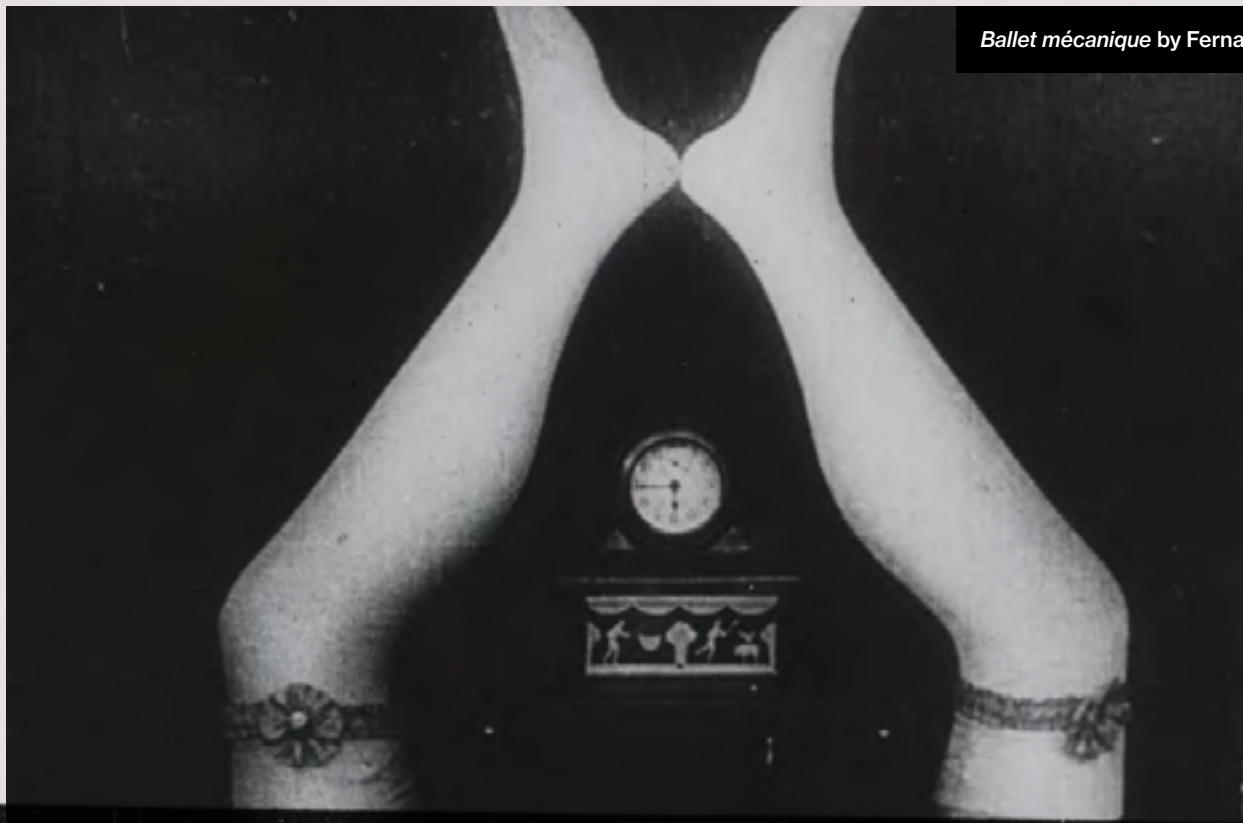
Introduction to Dialogue

BIRGIT HEIN

Introductory speech to the exhibition Dialogue by Christoph Girardet and Volker Schreiner, Kunsthalle im Artmax, Brunswick, April 21st, 1999

I'll begin with a quote from Volker Schreiner: "If sculpture is as old as the *Venus of Willendorf* then it is an orange. By contrast, video art, which began in 1963, is only a grain of sand. Newly grown to the size of a grain of sand, it is already at the end. Not only

does it hardly feed its producers, distribution stagnates, and its position within the fine arts has hardly become more present, though its carrier medium and namesake, the technical invention of videotape, has disappeared.



Ballet mécanique by Fernand Léger

Video art survives these technical changes which are not its carrier medium but its output medium: video is the electronic moving image. The 'new media' that have become buzzwords and protective claims, i.e. video and computer, have this as their common denominator. The computer is not a new output medium but a new tool. The electronic moving image is cinematic, it is an overlapping area of old and new media. This means: new media—old categories.”

I would like to add that the electronic moving image in art does not have to be seen exclusively in the context of video art. Furthermore, I would like to remind you that even in the early days of video art it did not play a role because there was no corresponding technology yet.

Nam June Paik's exhibition in Wuppertal in 1963 was about television sets as objects, that is, in the broadest sense, about sculpture. This was an attack on conventional notions of art and art making in the sense of Nouveau Realisme and Fluxus. The artistic act was fundamentally called into question, actual objects replaced images or constructions made by artists.

Meanwhile, the monitor as object plays a subordinate role in contemporary video art. Since video projections began, the moving projected image has become more and more important, and with it the old, filmic categories. These were formulated in the 1920s, when visual artists discovered the new medium of film for the visual arts. Artist films of the 1920s were called

abstract films. Yet the first abstract films by Ruttmann, Eggeling and Richter were not very cinematic, but rather moving paintings.

Part of film is the image of the real reproduced by optical means. The decisive step towards film as a medium of fine art was to abandon plot and to work with the purely pictorial, expressive possibilities of film.

In 1925 the French painter Fernand Léger wrote: “The error of the film is the scenario. Detached from this negative background, the film can become the gigantic

microscope of things never seen or felt... the real cinema is the image of the object entirely unknown to our eye.” By this he meant the close-up, a cinematic device that lets us perceive things as we can never see them with the naked eye. His 1924 film *Ballet mécanique* is the first film collage to combine very different visual material according to visual and rhythmic categories.

The installation *Dialogue* by Christoph Girardet and Volker Schreiner is in this sense a cinematic work. It is based on the old categories, but has developed them further to convey new visual experiences that



Nam June Paik

now involve not only the eye but the whole body. This is already present in their two earlier collaborative works.

In *Grounded Sky* from 1994, they transformed the cross vault of the Gothic Hall in Celle Castle with 11 mosaic-like projection surfaces into an artificial sky that eventually opens up into outer space. There is no longer a fixed point of view as in conventional cinema. The viewer has to walk through the room looking upwards in order to grasp the whole event. "Several times the feeling arises that one is wavering, that the ground on which one stands is losing its consistency," writes Friedemann Malsch.

In the installation *Subsoil* from 1996, the ground is literally pulled out from under one's feet because the projection surface is the floor of the exhibition hall at the Foro Artistico in Hanover. Here one could also experience the feeling of walking across water without getting wet.

In *Dialogue* the images are placed on six canvases in the room. The installation is also an "architectural sculpture," or a walk-in sculpture that no longer promotes a single view but is interactive: the viewer puts together their own picture of the whole.

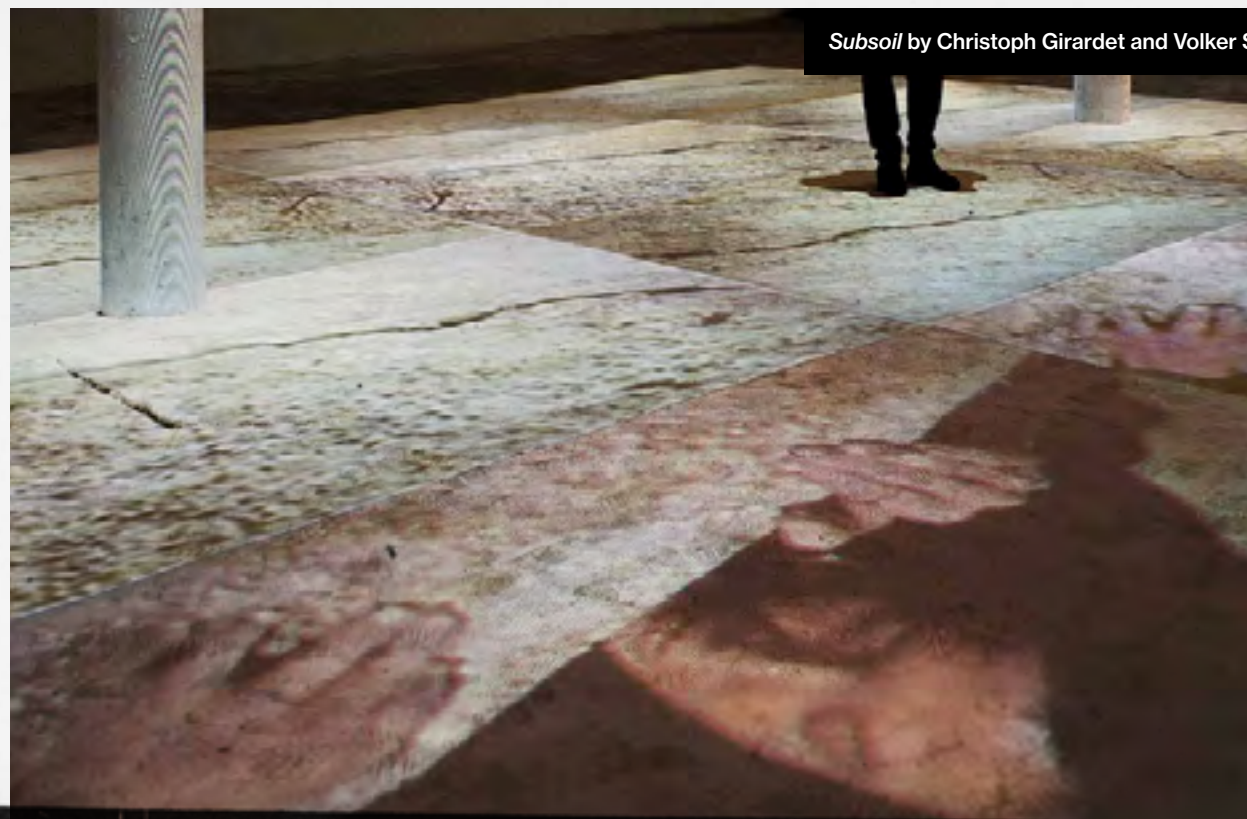
The same image appears on each canvas. As an exception, there are motifs that appear briefly and exclusively on only one of the two outer canvases.

In contrast to the two earlier installations, here the images take on a monumental character through their size, especially when a single form, such as the gigantic detail of the tip of a red plummet (plumb bob), alone fills the surface. Because they are detached from the wall, in contrast to the classical staging of cinema, individual images take on more significance.

Those familiar with film language may be surprised to learn that I always speak of the image and not the shot, which is considered the basic unit in

feature films. Details like a doorknob or a stain on a dress are contextualized and granted meaning via montage in fiction films. In *Dialogue* they appear independently in long sequences of individual loops. Léger had already worked in a similar way in *Ballet mécanique*. He would surely have been delighted by the close-ups in *Dialogue*.

Here in *Dialogue*, the alternation of images, or, in film language, the cut, orders not only the succession of images on the screen, as in film, but also the juxtaposition of images in space.



Subsoil by Christoph Girardet and Volker Schreiner

The two artists describe their montage concept as follows: "Morse code, with its units of short and long, shapes the editing. Each new image is projected synchronously on all the screens in short, pulsating alternations of light and dark as a Morse code sequence, before being shown in a linear or rhythmic loop in one of the next chapters. The text that can be decoded from the Morse code describes the image. The installation is a visual experience of image and non-image, space and non-space."

For the insiders among us, it is certainly a special pleasure to see how sometimes real and cinematic movement merge into a new pictorial rhythm.

The images change on all screens simultaneously. This creates a tension between illusionary space and surface. Since the horizontal center of the images is at the viewer's eye level, the illusion of space appears perfect in the shots of the vast sea and the high mountains. Although individual images are multiplied across the screens, they come together to form an overall image of spatial expanse. The close-ups of the plummet, the yoke (control wheel of an aircraft) and the spirit level, on the other hand, form a series of figures against the ground of space. The result contrasts transparency with heavy, weighted images.

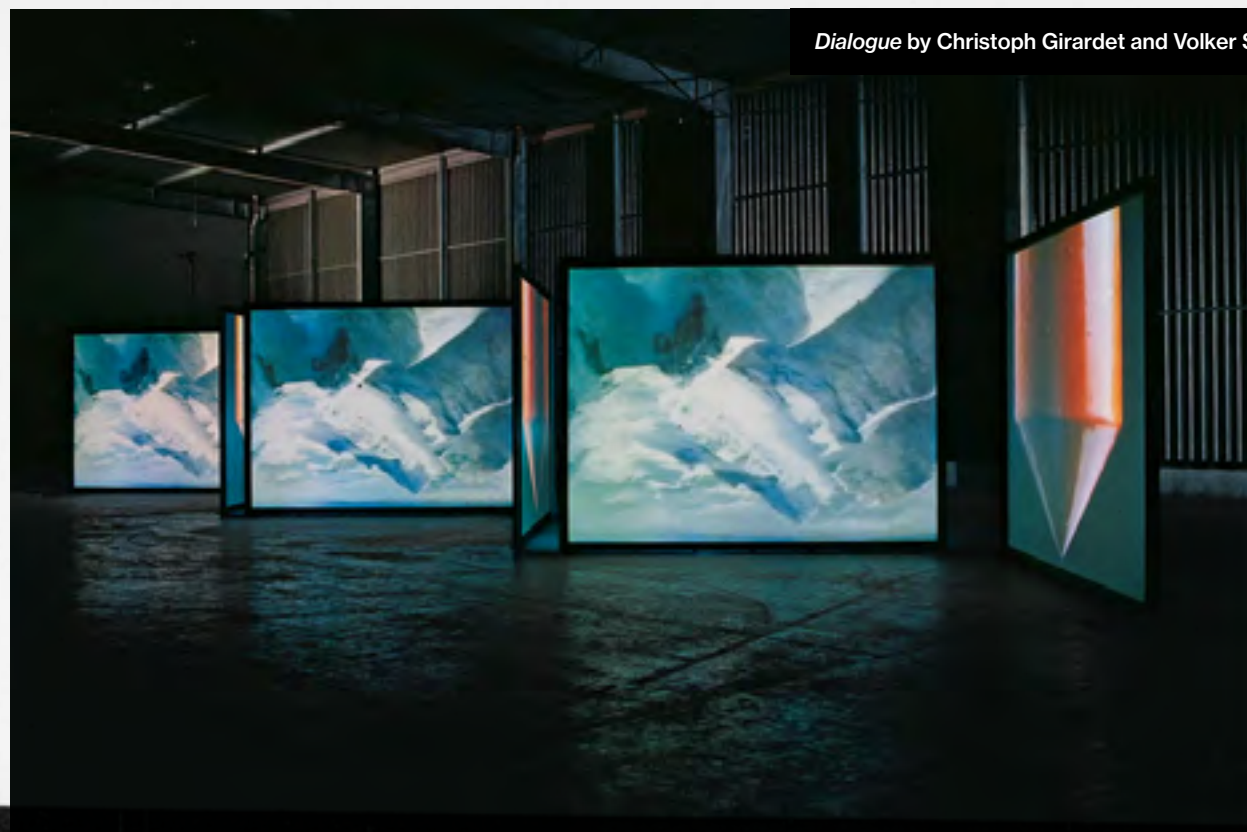
The repetition across screens turns the images into visual material that can be split and projected side-to-side or upside-down. Even the sense of what the images

represent can be lost. The inverted mountain range is particularly impressive; it becomes an ambiguous, almost abstract image.

In this context, the individual images appearing at the beginning and end of the picture series take on special significance. At the beginning of the sequence we see a hand writing Morse code; later, an almost motionless forearm with an open hand refers to other hands—the ones holding the fighter plane on course, or which try to reach the life-saving crack in the rock face, or that hold the rope that stretches across all the images.

At any moment what is held can slip from the grasp. The open sea and the mountain peaks from the roof of the world are untouchable. These areas of nature cannot be colonized or cultivated or brought under control by technical means. This message, so abbreviated as a statement, seems slightly banal. But no sooner is it uttered than it is cancelled by the independent visual presence of the images, which in their ambiguity elude a single reading.

In the text quoted at the beginning, Volker Schreiner says that video art is already at its end. He takes that

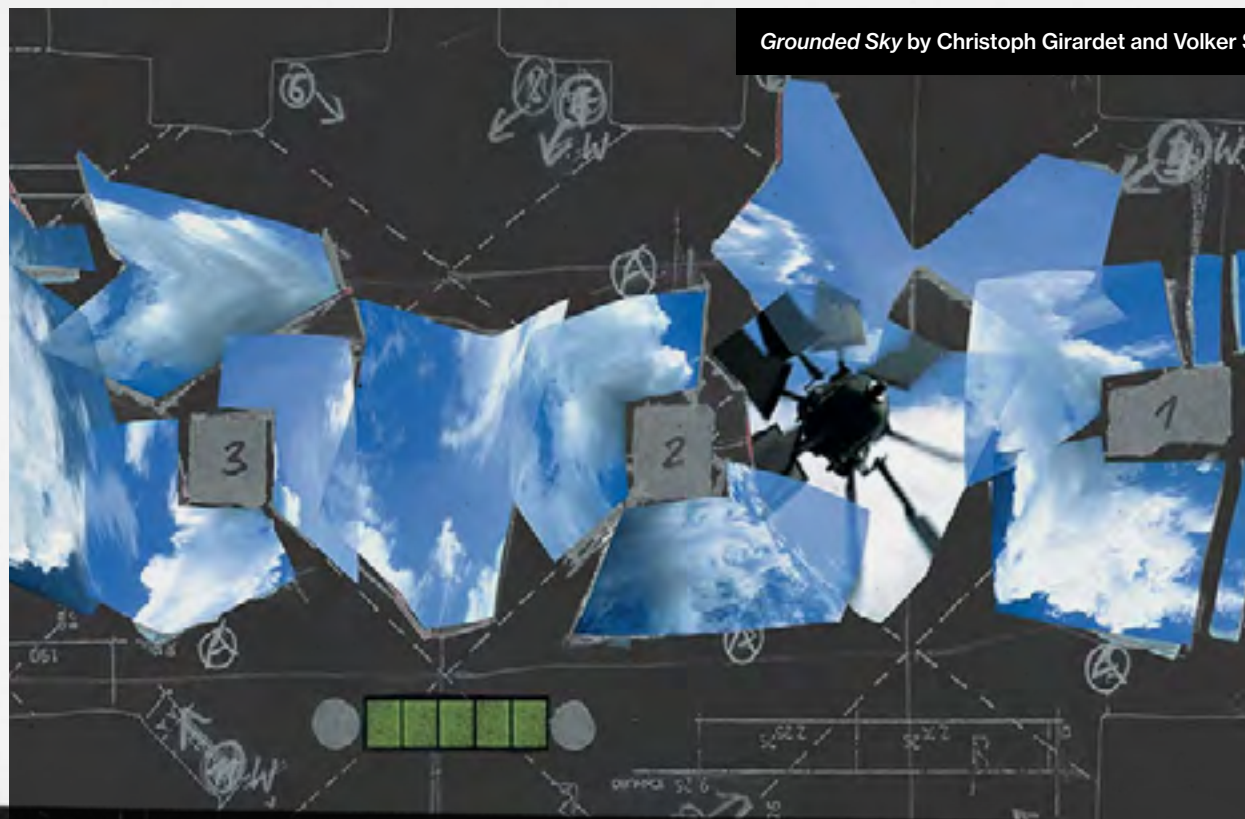


Dialogue by Christoph Girardet and Volker Schreiner

back again and refers to the end of the carrier medium, but such a formulation still sticks and I know a number of people who hope that the end of video art will come. But they won't gain much by doing so, because as we know, behind one evil that is eliminated, the next one is usually lurking. Here it has already been conjured up in the form of the old categories which persist, even if the carrier material of the moving images changes from celluloid to magnetic tape and disc.

This horror also already has a name: Andy Warhol. Although the art world has managed to completely

ignore his cinematic work for 30 years, his films are now showing in art halls and museums. Some curators and directors are trying to stem the tide by showing the films in full daylight. Or they give the projectionists earplugs so they don't hear the audience's frantic cries of "Sharpness, frame line, sound!" They don't set up proper chairs, just boards nailed together at right angles so you can't sit for more than ten minutes. But we can cope with that. As we can see today in this wonderful installation, the art of moving images is more intense and vital than ever, it has a long life ahead of it. I wish you an exciting dialogue.



Grounded Sky by Christoph Girardet and Volker Schreiner



Opened

BJØRN MELHUS

Birgit Hein opened my eyes to the world of moving images as a unique form of art and political statement. Studying with her in the 1990s had a strong impact not only on my artistic practice but also on my life. As an extremely sharp critic, she taught me to be honest with myself, with others, and with my own work. She had no taboos and some feared her for it. She didn't like salad or overly sweet champagne. The latter she called stamp glue. She was radical and argumentative, but at the same time warm and very emphatic. She cried with me after my sister's suicide. With her support, I was able to develop self-confidence in my own artistic practice which she always greeted with curiosity and thoughtful input. We stayed in contact forever and without her I would not be where I am today.

Orientations: *an interview with Michael Brynntrup*

MICHAEL BRYNNTRUP

MIKE: Could you bring me back to a moment that you shared with Birgit?

MICHAEL: A situation comes to mind that I think about often. Birgit was one of the first to see my *Loverfilm - An uncontrolled release of information* (1996), even before the film became public. She and her

daughter Nina were sitting in my old apartment, on my bed, everything was very primitive, and we were totally focused on this 20-minute film. At the end, she said very succinctly, "Oh, so sad." That was her first, spontaneous reaction after seeing all my past lovers, and that all these relationships ended.

MIKE: Why did she say that?

MICHAEL: Her breakup with Wilhelm was only six years old. I think that was the main reason she said that. She never really got over that breakup, it totally overturned her concept of life. Family was a big part of her thinking, even though her movies were pretty different. Maybe it's very similar for me.

Just a side note: I just got back from a family reunion in Rome. The thought crossed my mind, "I'm very bourgeois." Yes, I've had many lovers, a family of sorts as well, and I show all those lovers pretty openly in a film. But on the other hand, I have this very old way of thinking about the special value of family. "Blood is thicker than water."

Birgit also had this inner conflict. On the one hand, the good-bourgeois family image and the strong family bond. And on the other hand, she was so radical with her films, confrontational and provocative, and broke all bourgeois bonds. But people who knew her felt that she really longed for love and warmth and to be close to someone.

MIKE: Was the breakup with Wilhelm a surprise?



MICHAEL: Yes, when I was studying at HBK in the film class, they taught together from 1987-89. They were often pretty drunk. I remember one night after class there were still some students left and the two of them started fighting with their fists. We were shocked. I knew them as a couple, as an intact family, with a child and a dog.

MIKE: Did Birgit ever talk about how she became an artist?

MICHAEL: She studied art history. We had that in common, I also started my studies with art history. We both had the feeling that in the perspective of art history, film was missing, it simply didn't exist. We had a strong desire to change that. Birgit saw a clear line of development from the old avant-garde films of the 1920s to contemporary media art. One of her main concerns was to convey an understanding of this historical development.

While I was studying art history in Italy and making my first film with a very theoretical, top-heavy approach, I read Birgit's book *Film im Underground* (1971). The book is a survey of experimental film in the sixties against a background of the classical avant-garde. Birgit describes what is possible in experimental film. That was very inspiring for me. In my Super 8 book there are also excerpts from my diary where I wrote: "She is an art historian." I took that as confirmation, and since that reading, Birgit has been a constant for me. In the end, neither of us graduated with a degree

in art history. But from this experience we found an approach to film.

05.02.82

Some time ago, when I was working with the film camera at the passport photo machine in the train station, a Persian asked me what I was doing there and for what, and I answered, "I'm an artist." And immediately I thought how much clearer it is when you speak in a foreign language—here I said for the first time that I was an artist; in Germany I never wanted to admit it. In the same thought, I wondered when I would definitely say "Sono froggio" (I'm gay) for the first time.

(from: Michael Brynntrup Super 8 book)

MICHAEL: (holding up the book: "Michael Brynntrup: Super 8") This new book is about super 8 as a way of life for a young generation. It describes the mood of departure at the beginning of the 80s. In my case, three big changes came together: I started making films, I went through my gay coming out, and I moved to Berlin. The book also contains a series of articles on super 8 that I wrote in 1982 in the Tageszeitung (daily newspaper). It started on the occasion of the first Interfilm Festival in Berlin, which was still a super 8 festival at the time.

MIKE: Birgit and Wilhelm later joined your Interfilm gang and regularly attended events.

MICHAEL: Yes, they were very interested in young

filmmakers and the super 8 scene. Some of us were interested in them, not so much for the old films, but because Birgit was very present. When there was a film discussion, she always said something, and very loudly. (laughs) Wilhelm did, too. During the screenings, Wilhelm always let the audience know what he thought about the film being shown. He would make noises that sounded like comments. When the lights came back on, he'd say, "Oh, that's crap." Funny, funny.

In the early 1980s, the Heins made performances called *Superman and Wonderwoman* (1978-82). They



Love Stinks by W + B Hein



wanted to move away from abstract structural films and toward live presentations. I saw them in a squat underground cinema here in Berlin, probably the Kuckuck. But I wasn't that convinced. Their big desire at that time was to find a new language. They went to New York for a PS1 residency and shot *Love Stinks* (1982). In this film, you can sense that a change is coming.

The Heins showed *Love Stinks* at the 1983 Berlinale. Oh, by the way, I wrote about it for the *Tageszeitung*. The 'taz' was a left-alternative daily newspaper, just a few years old, and it offered a lot of freedom. Even if you were Mr. Nobody you could write what you wanted in a relatively uncomplicated way. I wrote that *Love Stinks* was a shitty movie. (laughs) I wrote, "It's not love that stinks, it's the movie." I was never sure all these years later whether Birgit even remembered that article I penned; I never asked her directly about it. I hoped she would not remember. The title of the article was "Formal Film at an Impasse." At that point we didn't know each other.



MIKE: But you met her a number of times before you studied in Braunschweig?

MICHAEL: Yes exactly, but I don't remember when we first met in person. Maybe it was at the event 'Wildes Kino' in Hamburg, a little later in 1983. In 1985 I asked them if they would like to contribute an episode to *Jesus – Der Film* (1986). I invited about 22 super 8 filmmakers and groups to make a feature film about the life of Jesus in episodic form. I played Jesus. I traveled to the various filmmakers throughout Germany to shoot the episodes, and mostly stayed with them.

Birgit and Wilhelm chose the episode of the washing of the feet, which takes place at the Last Supper. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. They picked a couple of gay guys they knew, so there were about 10 people sitting around a table, more or less gay, some definitely, some not, whatever.

Birgit asked me later, "Was it erotic for you?" I replied, "Actually, yes." There was one guy I found very attractive. I held his bare feet in the water and cleaned them very gently, you can see that in the film. That was her interest; erotic sex and gay sex played a big part in her thinking. The filmmakers she often presented and advocated for were Warhol, Kenneth Anger, Jack Smith, Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'Amour*. That certainly had to do with the self-liberation of her feminism. That's where she drew parallels.

We had no taboos and could talk about anything. Once she asked me to be in one of her films and have an orgasm. I took some time to think: Should I do that?,



and then told her: I probably won't get a hard-on in front of the camera. She realized I wasn't comfortable with her idea and never mentioned the subject again. We were often able to communicate without talking.

MIKE: You have Birgit's old job at the art academy.

MICHAEL: I took over the position from Gerhard Büttenbender. Büttenbender had held the first professorship of the film class from 1972 and then led the class together with Birgit for 17 years. Gerhard retired in 2003 and I started in 2006. There was a long hiring process and Birgit made sure I got the job. She fought for it, hoping to keep the spirit of the class. One person on the appointment committee was really shitty, and wanted to prevent my hiring. Perhaps it was personal aversion or my openly gay films? Even after I was appointed, this person never stopped scheming against me, against film and the film class. I suffered from him for quite a long time until he retired. That struggle was really exhausting.

MIKE: I imagine Birgit's oratory skills were very important in committee meetings.

MICHAEL: When she started as a regular professor in 1990 she was the first female professor. She sat at a table with circa fifteen/twenty male professors. The department was dominated by old painting and sculpture professors who thought that this was their realm. In the lecture she gave in 2013 on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the film class, she

describes the situation at that time. The painter and sculptor princes told her to her face, "You can't sit at our table. This is our club and you don't belong." But she fought for film and for the film class. By the end of her university days she was quite a strong voice in the department.

MIKE: Were you surprised that she stopped making films?



Jesus - Der Film by Michael Bryntrup

MICHAEL: Not really. I was surprised that she used the internet as a resource for some of her later films. Certainly it was easy, a lot of people did that of course. But I really liked the concept of *Abstrakter Film* (2013). It's close to her early interest in abstract images and comes full circle. She always believed in the visual, almost violent power of images. She often found American films too talky. For her, the images were much more important than what was being said. The voice-over texts in her films are reduced to the bare essentials and are very precise. No blah blah. Her last films had no words at all.

MIKE: Unlike the rest of the art world, artists' film-making is still an oral culture. It's not uncommon at screenings to drag the artist in front of an audience, who are invited to ask questions about what they've seen. Some became masters of this form, like Birgit.

MICHAEL: She had a message. She demanded films go further technically and in terms of content. And she was always searching, curious about what was new. At the end of the nineties I used the internet for experimental forms of film, and started working on interactive film. She was very interested in this and even invited me to give a lecture on it in Braunschweig. In the call for my professorship this interest with new media was directly formulated as well. She had a clear conviction that the progress of the arts would take place primarily on cinematic terrain.



Birgit Hein, Gerhard Büttenbender



She always proclaimed very enthusiastically that a new kind of film had to be created. In the discussions after the screenings, her enthusiasm and spontaneity were very decisive. It was perhaps more important how she reacted than what she said. Her contributions always made the discussions very lively. After all, the audience is always very shy after the screenings. Nobody opens their mouths. But she created a special atmosphere in which you got the feeling that what we had just seen was essential and important, that it was worth fighting for, and that you had to be there with your emotions.





Self Portrait with Skull:

Remarks on the films of Michael Brynntrup

BIRGIT HEIN

*Originally published in: BERLIN - Images in Progress,
Contemporary Berlin Filmmaking edited by Jürgen
Brüning and Andreas Wildfang, Hallwalls, Buffalo, 1989*

Since the beginning of the twenties many of the most important works in experimental cinema have been personal films, “psychodramas” representing individual feelings and thoughts that opposed censored official culture. These films have always developed new forms of expression to convey their subjects.

Michael Bryntrup’s films belong in the context of this tradition because they are radical, personal, and because he cultivated his own new narrative style with them. For him, filmmaking is a process of searching for his own identity; therefore he is (mostly) both the actor and subject of his films, in which

he examines the relationship between reproduction and reality.

In his film *Handfest - Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle*, (Handheld - Voluntary Self-Regulation, 1984), he asks himself about old and new passport photos, old films and photographs, Xeroxes and his mirror image. This analysis is at the same time a reflection on the production of images and filming as a process of reproduction.

He lays his head on the Xerox machine’s glass where the light is flashing. What kind of copy of the head will it create? The Xeroxes of his hands, the plaster hand in the

photograph, the moving hands, the hand with the ants from *Un Chien Andalou* (1929)—they are all the same reality in this film. He enlarges the Xerox of his passport photo in several steps and finds that the pupil of his eye looks like a skull. Producing images means creating a new reality, not simply reproducing an existing one. The film shows what you actually can’t see: feelings of guilt, which lead to the intention to commit suicide and the terrible fears resulting from the forbidden action of the hands. The trauma of the adolescent.

In *Tabu I-IV* (1988) he portrays his own life in the last years. It starts with a drastic personal experience, a dangerous and painful operation. The text from his diary is supplemented with a small, not very focused Polaroid photo, which depicts him with a bandaged head in bed. This is the proof of it—that everything has happened. As the pages of his diaries turn, the images lose their documentary style. His life is now portrayed in clips from his films in chronological order. On the one hand it means he portrays himself indirectly, in a digested, newly-constructed reality. Privacy is taboo. On the other hand it means that his life goes into his films and that you can find the essential there.

In *Testamento Memori* (1986) the peculiarities of his narrative style are fully developed. He addresses himself directly to the audience. He looks into the camera, he talks to the spectator, he reads texts off camera, or he displays written statements like “please publish after my death” We get the impression that the film is being



DIE BOTSCHAFT - Totentanz 8 by Michael Bryntrup



DER RHEIN - ein deutsches Märchen by Michael Bryntrup

produced now, as it is being projected for us. Images and texts put themselves together like arguments of a direct speech. At the same time one is conscious of the process of making, although the shooting isn't visible. The distance of the filmed action also results from the dichotomy between image and text, which, for example, in *Höllensimulation* (1987), don't seem to relate to each other. The spectator has to make an effort to decode the information.

Michael Bryntrup works in many different styles. He also carries out the search for his own identity by playing the part of somebody else as in *Jesus - Der Film* (1986) or *Orpheus* (1984). By using "the other," his own persona becomes visible. In the mirror he doesn't see himself, he sees the face of the other.

In some of his films the skull is his partner and second ego (*Musterhaft* (1985) or *Testamento Memori* (1986),

with whom he talks, plays, kisses, and even has sexual intercourse. The theme of death runs through his work from his early films on. Death is the end in the beginning, before life has really started.

Der Rhein - Ein Deutsches Märchen (1983) is about his uncle, his father's younger brother, who died when he was 18 in the last days of WW2 at Kaub, the area where his family spent their summer vacations. Bryntrup dissolves the color home movies of his childhood with black-and-white documentary footage of fighting soldiers. The study of death even in his childhood has a deeper meaning. His identical twin brother died in childbirth. Speaking in terms of depth-psychology, the guilt of the survivor unconsciously determines his fascination with questions of death.

Testamento Memori ironically describes the birth-death theme. Texts with music about breathing techniques accompany his playing with the skull, in which the exhortation of the end is satirized. In this film his talent to create his own new images comes to full expression. His face, his hands, the skull, and a "Chinese" bird cage dangle in the room like silver shadows on a golden background.

In these works, a unified pictorial style is used repeatedly. In each episode of *Totentänze 1-8* (1988/89) the skull has different "relationships" with men and women. I have seen only one of these eight films, which evoke the poetic independent American cinema of the early sixties.

You can see Michael Bryntrup's films again and again and always discover something new in them. The visual and textual complexity of his work ranks him amongst the most important new German and European filmmakers.



STUMMFILM für Gehörlose (SILENT MOVIE For Deaf People) by Michael Bryntrup



Selbstportrait mit Totenkopf (1984) Fotokopiearbeit (Copy Art) 168 x 148 cm (erweiterte Originalsequenz aus Handfest - freiwillige Selbstkontrolle)

Kunstmama: an interview with Kristian Petersen

KRISTIAN PETERSEN

KRISTIAN: In a Karsten Witte Seminar I met Stefanie Schulte Strathaus in the very early nineties. She had just founded a small cinema in Berlin called “Quino Im Querhaus” and asked if I wanted to join. Some of the filmmakers we presented were from (the art academy) HBK Braunschweig. We invited Michael Bryntrup, Bjørn Melhus, Claudia Schillinger... I started to wonder: what kind of school is this? Then I saw Birgit’s *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (1991). Birgit was the reason I studied art. I never thought of it before but I wanted to discover this lady. After I started at the school in 1994, I understood why I wanted to explore experimental film.



Karsten Witte

Kristian Petersen

MIKE: What was it about the film that struck you?

KRISTIAN: It wasn’t simply the film, it was the Q&A afterward. She was so radical. I remember when she used the word “cunt” the feminists would say ooh. I saw her film *Baby I will Make you Sweat* (1994) in Theater im Delphi, and then I went to the Q&A of the second screening. I really enjoyed the way she presented her work in such a fearless way. It was very controversial, many people loudly left the cinema. (laughs) I really liked her politically incorrect, feminist approach.

MIKE: Birgit was a master of the Q&A form, and went to some lengths to prepare her students, many of whom are wonders of articulation in public post-screening conversations.

KRISTIAN: She did a lot of this work in our individual meetings. Why do you feel the urge to make this film? I remember she said: Everybody can make a film, but you have to defend it. You have to talk about it in front of an audience. Maybe that’s why I became a moderator at the Berlinale.



Birgit Hein, Kristian Petersen

It’s not a secret that most of her individual meetings at art school were like psychoanalytic encounters. So many left her office crying, but that was a big help because she really wanted us to dig deep and confront our past. She would confront us with our art, and our methods of hiding or not being truthful. She was a big Freudian and my father was an analyst. I remember we had a fight about Freud when I said, “I don’t believe in that crap.”

I was living in Berlin and commuting to school. I slept in the university and she did as well, so we became neighbours. We spent many nights in our classroom

drinking and talking. She had questions about my coming out, my doubts about whether I'm male or female. Now as a professor in art and film schools I have a very close relationship with my students too. That's probably what I learned from her. My other teachers were Mara Mattuschka and Marina Abramović and from each I learned how I might approach my students.

MIKE: Did she talk about her family with you?

KRISTIAN: She spoke about her complicated relationship



Die unheimlichen Frauen



Kristian Petersen

with her mother which shows up in *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (1991). She hated the professed innocence of her mother after she had been in contact with so many Nazis. Her family made a point of not talking about the past. There were so many words and secrets in that generation.

For the last film she wanted to make she was reading and transcribing her mother's diaries. She showed me images and we talked about her approach. My mom and her were more or less the same age, and she talked about the trauma her generation went through as Kriegskinder (war children), and then there were also Kriegsenkel (the children of war children). She worked on that film a long time.

MIKE: You're describing her last project which was left unfinished, did that surprise you?

KRISTIAN: She said I'm old, I don't have to prove anything, to make another film, to go through the processes of being confronted. Maybe talking about it was enough.

MIKE: She became your neighbour later in life.

KRISTIAN: When she moved to Berlin in 2008 we met regularly, especially in the last few years when she lived just down the street. I would bring her burgers from our favourite burger place, and a bottle of white wine and we spent many hours speaking on her balcony. She wasn't in the best state in the last year. She said, "Let's



Quino Im Querhaus schedule



meet after your stay in Italy,” but it was too late. She was my kunstmama, my art mom.

She worked a lot for the Akademie der Künste. We went to exhibitions together. She spent a lot of her last year in her apartment because she couldn't move. Çiğdem (grandchild) came once a week, a ritual that was very important for both. She had many guests and many “kids” (her students). I said to Nina that I was sorry she had to share her mom with so many other kids. Nina said “No, you know how extreme she was. I wasn't the only one who received all this extremism and radical thoughts.”

MIKE: I wonder if she reflected on her own decline, as she watched so many of her generation die, and her own body failing.

KRISTIAN: The way she left was very much her. She went to sleep and died in bed and didn't suffer too long. I think that's what everyone wishes for. To fall asleep and never wake up. That was very much her. She wasn't afraid of death. When Nina contacted me I wasn't surprised, I thought: well done lady.

Kristian Petersen



Dear Birgit

CLAUDIA SCHILLINGER

Mike has asked me to comment on your work, on you as a former mentor and professor of mine. I am writing you a letter as if you were still alive, a fictional conversation with you, because it gives me pleasure to imagine I could still address you directly. In addition to my gratitude for your role in my life, the contrast between now and then, during my studies in the mid-1980s, excites me to exchange ideas with you. The quality of time in the 80s, the free and open-ended experimentation with one's self and film as an art form, the exploration of the soulful component of filmmaking, that doesn't seem to be part of the art canon anymore. Maybe that sounds like an old filmmaker wishing for times gone by, but hey, let's take a closer look.

Today the social knot is tied tighter, which means that art is more than ever in the grip of a control-addicted establishment. The shock strategy of politics and the media is having its effect, and so I often feel stuck in the waiting room of the apocalypse, wondering how we got there and where we might be going. How free is art today and how free was our art back then? In the 80s we thought we were avant-garde, today I wonder if we had enough distance to the "system," if we detached



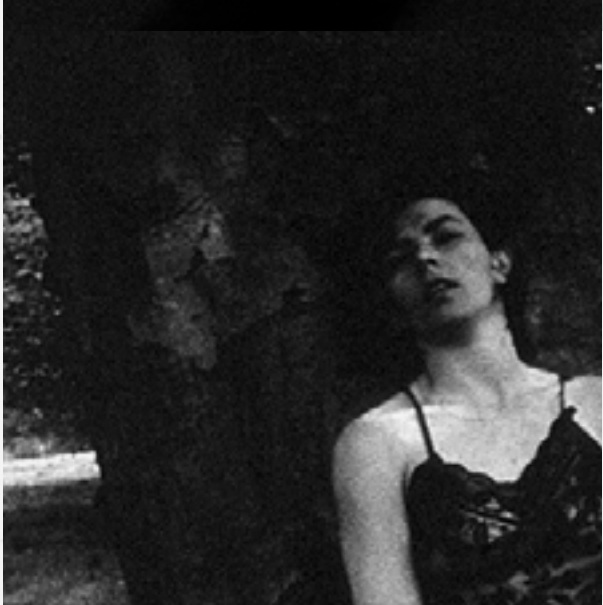
between by Claudia Schillinger

ourselves enough from its structures? Everyone is a child of her/his time, the quality of life and work is determined by the degree of inner freedom and reflective thinking. This degree is historically shaped. Today, the pursuit of freedom collides with a new free-floating social anxiety fueled by the media.

The 80s seems to me like our golden age of experimentation. Looks like it's just the right time to think about a film and a person who were guiding stars for me in terms of personal and artistic freedom. When I think of our time together as filmmakers, and of you as my

mentor, I have a somehow iconic image in my mind: your steadfastness, your radicalism, and at the same time your openness to whatever came up. That willingness to look closely and address or express it without masking, theorizing, or sugarcoating. You have always known, practiced and communicated that artistic potential relates to the focus on the personal dimension.

That's why *Baby I will Make you Sweat* is the film I most associate with you. Not because of its undoubtedly provocative content: a woman in her fifties searches for a young sex partner in Jamaica and films herself doing



allegations or social criticism. One might wonder why you satisfy your sexual needs in such an unequal relationship. The dichotomy between you and your partner could hardly be greater. Old versus young, female versus male, white versus black, rich versus poor, first versus third world, just to name the most striking aspects. This setting alone is incredibly sharply drawn and left raw. The film is raw, your films are raw, and through this rawness they open up a special inner dialogue for us. We feel your fear, your doubt, your desire, your search for closeness and also for moral integrity.

You don't gloss over this relationship, you don't justify yourself. You could talk about love, you could talk about social support, but you refrain from both. You give yourself, unrestrained in your feelings and your horniness, you are actually powerless and driven by desire; only the camera helps you to keep control in a situation where you are very vulnerable. You go into pleasure and into danger, accompanied by your documenting camera and diary, which are protection and challenge at the same time. Both the pleasure gained and the danger survived are ambivalent. Even at the premiere in 1994, I had the feeling that both aspects are interwoven with pitfalls, have a dark side that hides the opposite of what was hoped for. In terms of pleasure, it could be diminished by the mental effort it takes in such a setting to separate horniness from the need for closeness. In focusing on the danger, one senses the fear that the male stranger might feel provoked to aggression, to attack. This uneasiness swings along on the

it. That's the "factual level" of the content, but the "relational level," that is, what we trigger in the thoughts and feelings of others and also in ourselves, interests me more. What inner dialogue does this setting lead us into, you as the filmmaker, the people you film, and me as the viewer? Do we all break a sweat together? You show us the wound of female aging, without restraint, without accusation, and without extra meaning or narrative. Because of the social repression of the sexuality of older women, you could be seen as a victim, but you are a resistant person who is not ashamed of her situation and presents herself to the environment without

interpersonal level and carries over into the cinematic experiment. Through this uncompromising approach to one's own desire, the film not only evokes personal conflict, but also draws attention to the implications of experimental filmmaking itself. From today's perspective, the film has made me newly aware of the attitudes and goals we as feminist filmmakers were striving for in the 80-90s, it pushes me to put them to the test.

Have our feminist conceptions of female appropriation and redefinition of sexual stereotypes driven the "liberation" of female sexuality? Do women today speak

more openly about their sexual ambiguities, about their vulnerability, their narcissism? Thirty years later, I miss bold approaches to a language of sexuality, both in the media and in the private sphere. On the contrary, I have the impression that an open speaking about the sexual self that does not hide vulnerability has almost completely disappeared.

Has the visual representation of women as "objects of desire" changed at all? Well, there are more strong and free-willed women now, self-assertion has increased. But how can the gender debate become an integral part of

societal thinking without bringing the portrayal of female sexuality in all its ambiguity into the public eye? Have self-reflexivity and authentic desire taken a back seat along the way? Have they been pushed away by self-dramatization as victims of toxic masculinity? Do we need to recognize that the narcissism immanent in the economic system is taking over all areas of life and undermining our attempts at liberation by celebrating self-staging and suppressing self-reflexivity? All of this runs through my mind when I think of our concepts at this time. Is perhaps the focus on "liberation" a misleading approach? Am I not rather aiming at a perception and integration of the inner life into the outer world, regardless of gender? I imagine how you would have answered.

Dear Birgit, I wish that your redeemed soul will once again be given the task of making you and us sweat. We need filmmakers who draw us into the abysses of interpersonal life. And that's how I understand experimental film. The experiment does not solely refer to the film in its material aspects; the cinematic experiment must open itself to the question of how we think, feel and communicate with each other and how we integrate our sexual desire into this communication. I am sure that we don't need tolerance limits for our language or thinking, but more tolerance for the spectrum of being. Ideologies will die, but film will live forever.

Goodbye you wonderful

Claudia



BIRGIT #1 Meeting – Relating

ALEX GERBAULET

Before I met Birgit, I first saw her without the slightest knowledge of who she was. That was in 1993. I was 16 years old and had just moved away from home into a shared flat in Braunschweig. Two art students lived with me there. One of them drew, I can't remember what the other one did, but he had a French accent, two children, and was a good cook.

At the HBK there was a series of events that critically examined the aesthetics of National Socialism. It was organized by the film class, but I didn't know that at the time, or rather, I didn't know anything about the HBK. Anyway, we went to some of the events. That was my first contact with the HBK. Peter Zorn was a student who helped organize the series back then, and I work together with him today.

I was in the Antifa (loosely affiliated international groups supporting anti-fascist, anti-white supremacy, anti-homophobia work) and dealt a lot with German history. Later these themes returned in many of my films.

I can't remember the events exactly, but I can recall one picture: Birgit with the students and a prevailing

mood of serious urgency that was contagious. I must have been impressed because a few years later, when I thought maybe I could study art after all, I remembered that. It was in 2000, when I was studying philosophy in Vienna, where the protests against the first elected black-blue fascist government were taking place. Many artists were there as part of the protests. I had the

feeling that I, too, wanted to be able to express myself in a different way than with words alone.

I always felt a bit strange in the academic field, a bit out of place. My family is working class, my mother was the first to go to university. My grandmother wanted that for me too, and did what she could to pave the way for



Alex Gerbaulet

Margit by Alex Gerbaulet



me. In any case, art did not really exist in the universe of my origins. Only as a subject in school, or a school trip to the opera or to an exhibition of “old masters.” There might have been more contemporary expressions, but I don’t remember that. Art simply wasn’t for me. Philosophy and politics were already daring.

I dared to make an appointment with Birgit and told her I wanted to study with her (and ask if that was even possible). I had video sketches with me. Something about letters from a lover and everyday pictures. Attempts that have fortunately disappeared (I don’t like to keep things for too long). Anyway, that’s when I met Birgit for the first time. I knew she was a professor in the film class, nothing more. I don’t think I had even seen her films. I don’t remember much about the meeting itself, mainly her physicality. Her quick, sometimes jerky movements, the way she looked at you, slightly bent forward. She was impatient and—at least it seemed to me—genuinely interested in what I had to say.

I took the entrance exam a few months later and started studying in the fall of 2020. My mother died that fall and then my grandmother in the spring of 2001. I made my first film about her death and Birgit later wrote a very beautiful text about it. My professor at that time (Grundklasse) was Mara Mattuschka, who impressed me very much. Nevertheless, I mainly talked to Birgit who helped me a lot to process the losses. I’m sending you her text about my film here, too. And my

film *Margit*. Please forgive the long-winded and very personal answer. I write so much about myself, not because I think I’m so important, but because I learned to take myself seriously, not least at the HBK in my studies with Birgit.

I already knew Birgit’s films when I made *Margit*. Especially her film *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women) was very important for me. So radically personal and political at the same time. That’s how I wanted to work. And that’s where we met in our conversations. In her film she talks about a dream. In that dream she is in a shithouse... floor, walls, everything covered in shit and she tries not to touch it. I told her that it reminded me of my childhood, of how my grandfather, when he was drunk, sometimes actually shat all over everything and how I was afraid to touch anything. Maybe this openness and unselfconsciousness to talk about shit and how it sticks to us for a lifetime is my real initiation and most intimate memory of Birgit.



Alex Gerbaulet collage

Margit

BIRGIT HEIN

Margit (2002) is the first documentary film by Alex Gerbaulet. Of all her work, this film touches me the most. It is deeply personal, recounting a tragic event that crosses the border from the private to the political. At the same time, it subverts notions of objective truth because of the radically subjective way events are portrayed. The impression arises that the viewer sees everything in the film alongside her, at the same moment, and for the first time. Using constantly moving shots and a limited field of view, it becomes clear that the filmmaker is looking directly through the viewfinder, as we hear the original sound and her spontaneous remarks.

The film begins with the camera moving towards the facade of a half-ruined house. Alex doesn't know what it looks like inside. Only when she slowly enters the dark hallway of the house is she confronted with the extent of what happened.

"Creepy," she whispers as she looks into a completely burned out room with charred black walls. It is sparsely illuminated by light seeping through the cracks of the boarded-up windows. All colors are obliterated. The images appear black-and-white.

She slowly looks around the hallway. "There are still bottles here. Bottles of champagne and orange juice, like she always had," she says quietly to her companion, who will only be seen later in the film. Without this remark the bottles would not have been noticed in the darkness of the shelf.

The view moves up through the burned stairwell to an open door on the second floor. Through the kitchen we enter the back of the house via a landing. The good room. "Here everything is the same," Alex says in a hushed voice as she looks through the untouched rooms, which are clean and tidy, as if visitors were



Margit by Alex Gerbaulet

expected. Only above one door in the living room are black stains visible.

As the camera looks around the worn furniture, framed family pictures and decorative plates on the walls, we hear a memory text spoken by Alex. She recounts a dream in which her father summons her to her mother's deathbed to say goodbye to her. The dream reveals a great sadness and a longing for love that could not be fulfilled. It is clear that this was not just a fantasy, but that catastrophe had already preceded her arrival here. Together with her friend, she looks at several of her childhood photos. We learn that the mother was so ill at an early age that Alex had to be taken to her grandmother's as a toddler. She tells us about the modest living conditions on the self-sufficient farm which the grandmother coped with. "But it's really strange, isn't it? Except for the stench, she could still be walking around here."



Alex walks through the rooms as if she hasn't been here in a long time. "I'm looking for a secret. Something she left just for me. But I don't find anything." Dresser drawers are opened and searched. Her hand grasps a loose-leaf binder, which is placed on a large table. We hear her astonishment as she flips through a binder. Newspaper clippings mark her grandmother's anniversary as an official at the post office. A large photograph shows her grandmother surrounded by the village community. The present and past have naturally connected. Alternating between off-camera commentary and reminiscence texts, Alex reports on the alcoholism of her grandparents. Her grandfather's drinking always ended in delirium, while grandmother maintained enough control so that she could even be honoured in the community. In the tragicomic climax of the film, Alex describes in plain language her childhood attempts to assist with her grandparents' struggle with alcohol. How she secretly located their hidden liquor stash and plundered it, causing her grandparents to accuse each other of theft.

How she wishes she could castrate grandpa so she wouldn't have to wipe his leaking body and mop up everywhere. She continues to search. In one of the drawers, she finds a folder of family photos. Her camera rests for a moment on a snapshot that shows grandmother drinking from a bottle. "We are just a normal family," she comments.



As she flips through the pages of glued-on photos, she talks about her grandparents, who grew up in the Nazi era and what happened during the post-war years. She recalls stories told a hundred times in the same way by her grandfather, who understood nothing, like in most normal families. There is one last room. It is not for living, but for work like ironing. Plastic sacks stand on the floor, already full, waiting to be removed. Should she take one of the many aprons? It might serve as a reminder, since grandma always wore them. After a pan once more captures the charred ceiling of the hallway, Alex leaves the house. Her hand pulls the front door



In dem Feuer starb eine Frau.

men

en gefunde



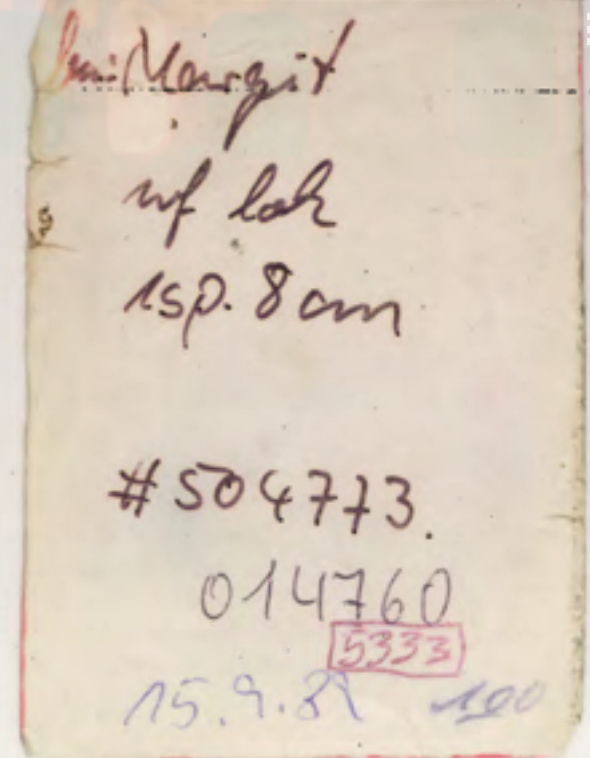
closed from the outside. The camera movement stops. A life that was once hers is finally over.

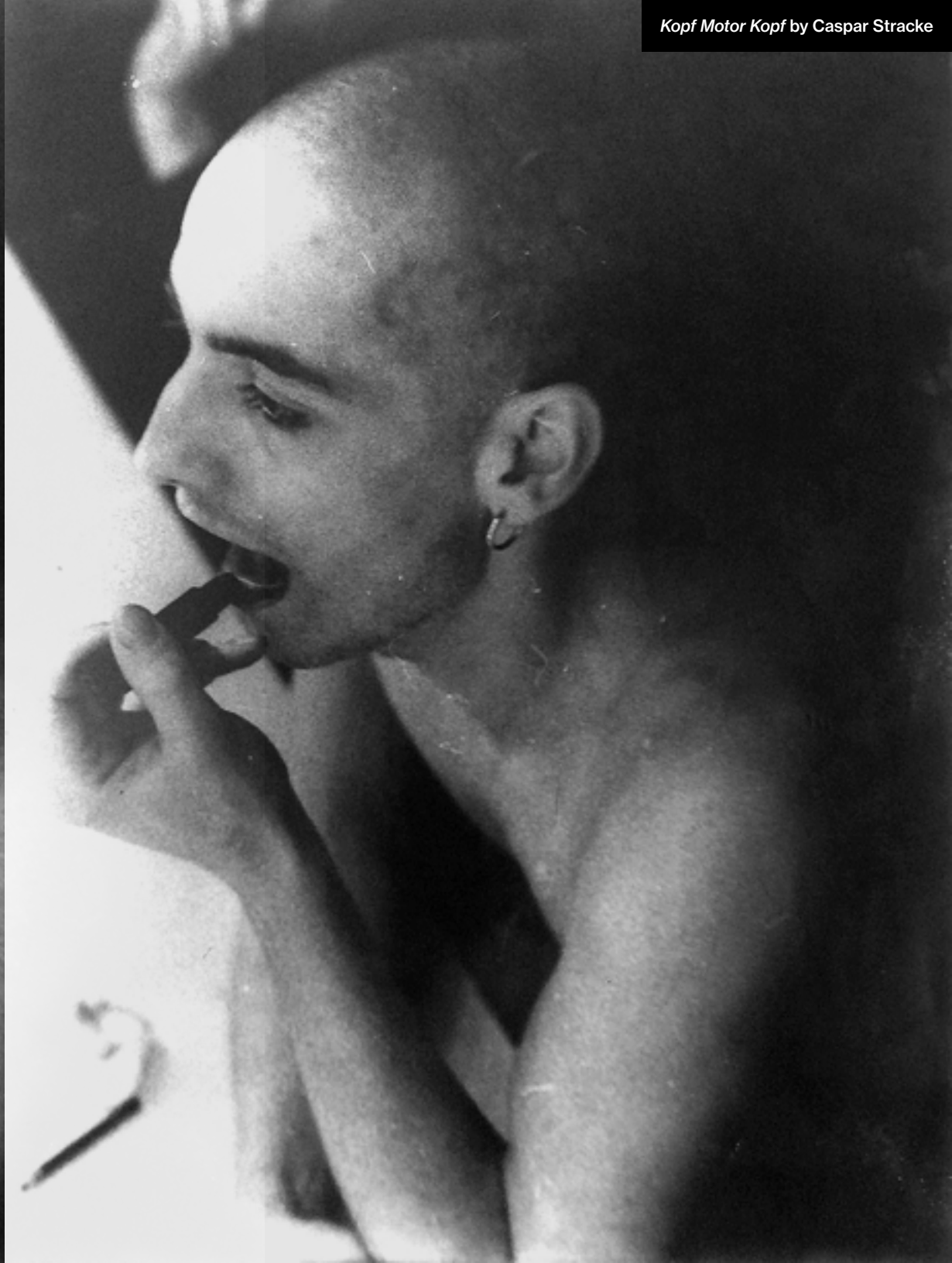
A newspaper photo fills the frame showing the front of the house we saw at the beginning of the film. A song begins, its melancholy sadness accompanies the rest of the images until the end of the credits. "You've got a tear in your buttonhole."

We see more newspaper photos of the disaster. A hearse stands in front of the house. Firefighters with breathing masks can be seen beneath a large headline where the words "Burning corpse" can be read. Once again we see newspaper photos from the anniversary folder, then a full-length, black-and-white portrait of the grandmother who is looking directly at us, and finally color photos of the Grandma playing with little Alex.

"You don't wear tears in your buttonhole."

Or do you?





Before the Funeral

CASPAR STRACKE

In one hour I'm leaving for Birgit's funeral so I'm following your advice to interview myself. I understand your point that we should talk while my memories still belong to me, in an hour there will be many unexpected encounters all blending into one big Birgit memory cocktail.

Let's start with the question: where did you meet Birgit for the first time?

She was introduced to us at the wild InterFilm Festival, which started as a super 8 festival in the backyard of Kino Eiszeit in Kreuzberg. There was a performance by Georg Ladanyi. At the time he was a kind of legend in 80s subculture though his performances were dreadful, on this occasion he looked like a parody of grim Hungarians with some weird mumblings and almost-cultivated crazy attitudes. And there they were, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, who I had heard about from

my friend Torsten Alisch (a filmmaker and journalist who also helped organize InterFilm). He had seen their films and described them to me as the most radical experimental filmmakers in Germany today. So with that in mind, I observed with some curiosity how they reacted to the performance, clapping loudly for Ladanyi. I thought: here are radicals appreciating another radical artist. In their eyes this crap seems to be good. Years later when they came to our art school I asked Birgit about this. She explained that both Wilhelm and herself clapped as a provocation. They thought the performance was so bad they wanted to interrupt it using forced applause.

I saw the Heins coming to all the screenings. They were passionately interested in the new super 8 underground scene. It baffled me. Only later did I learn about Birgit's curatorial involvement in documenta 6 and the "Film as Film" exhibiton co-curated with Wulf Herzogenrath in the Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne in 1977. Now here they were with our little Eiszeit family that grouped around the InterFilm Festival. People would whisper, "The Heins are coming" or "The Heins are here at the screening!" In retrospect they were not so far apart



Caspar Stracke at Berlin Sputnik Cinema

from us. Of course, they had a name, a good portion of a career, but if I was just three or four years older I probably wouldn't have thought of them as demi-Gods, people you were too shy to introduce yourself or talk to. Luckily that came half a year later when both started as guest teachers in our art academy in Braunschweig. Both were equally present. They were one unit, one person with two heads they were so close. Together they shared a not-so-well-paid lecturer job, and they could only get one year per contract. But our smart department head extended it via ping pong—one year Birgit would get the contract, the next year Wilhelm.



Torsten Alisch, Judith Klinger photo by Ekko von Schwichow



Wolf Herzogenrath, Birgit Hein, Film als Film exhibition, 1977

Caspar Stracke



Caspar Stracke and Susie Hofer, European Media Arts Festival 1989

The Heins were absolute punks. The film class within the art academy became a school of hard knocks. From today's academic perspective it's hard to imagine people being so brutal to students and everything around them. Later I realized it was their own insecurity, particularly with Wilhelm, who used aggressive confrontation as a psychological battering ram. He liked to begin by punching you in the face (still metaphorically speaking!). Birgit would do this less and in different ways, but she was equally radical and endorsed almost everything Wilhelm argued for. They seemed completely united against the rest of the world.

It's interesting that they maintained this unity even when their own relationship was eroding. There were

no (or very few) public fights with each other. On the other hand, they had no shame about getting into massive arguments with visiting artists including screaming and slamming doors. It impressed us kids, who didn't understand that these were signs of trauma. They were simply not ready for academic teaching. Needless to say, in the years to come Birgit managed to grow fully into her role as teacher.

Just a few years before they had a New York residency where they produced *Love Stinks* (1982), a radically open film about sexuality and family relationships. In an early conversation with them I mentioned that my mother died when I was five and that my father remarried some years later, so I had a stepmother. Wilhelm

interrupted me to ask, “Did you fuck her?” I turned pale with shock from such an insulting and provocative question. I realized that Birgit wouldn’t stop anything, she was together with Wilhelm as both provoked transgressive ideas that brought together art and life, family, sex and even teaching.

Birgit grew up in a very Catholic family and I had the feeling that for her these acts of liberation were more dramatic than for Wilhelm. Of course it was symptomatic of the postwar ’68 generation to question any societal norm, but the Heins didn’t stop there. They believed that any sexual taboo (and maybe any type of taboo) had to be broken at all cost.

Birgit’s parents pushed her to study art history (with the idea that at least one of the two gaga artists could earn a living), and this work made Birgit a different type of artist. She was a good speaker and moderator, eager to publish on experimental cinema—qualities that made her compatible with academia. Early on she developed a unique life philosophy: be radical on the

one hand but don’t burn down institutions and the people who run them—work hard to change them. Wilhelm pursued a social life marked by more polarizing moral beliefs. I think the hard struggle for the acceptance and proliferation of underground cinema (a term that needs to be seen in 1970s German context) came with psychological baggage. It seemed to them pure warfare. Either you were friend or enemy, there was nothing in between. We experienced the Heins as enormously hostile towards certain colleagues and contemporaries in their own field whose work they would never accept. (“Assholes!”)

Some felt Wilhelm was ultra macho and Birgit submissive. I don’t agree. It was by all accounts a very unconventional, yet symbiotic relationship. During their year in New York Wilhelm endured a dramatic beating in the subway. This had such a traumatic impact on him that he lost his voice. His voice came back, but only gradually. In the first years he spoke in a high-pitched girly voice, eventually it became lower and lower again. Birgit became their spokesperson in those days. So maybe for a short moment there was an absolute reversal of the hetero-normative cliché of male domination.

Early on from the Jack Smith days, he also became fascinated with queer culture. Wilhelm would fully embrace feminism if it was—in his eyes—radical enough. Both cherished forms of radical feminism and there were close contacts with a small group of German female experimental filmmakers. The circle



was very small at that time. There was the grand dame of queer performance art (with amazing poetic films) Ulrike Ottinger, pioneer video artist Ulrike Rosenbach, Dore O., and the lesser known Monika Funke-Stern. The younger generation included the amazing Austrian Mara Mattuschka (who collaborated with Birgit on the crazy lipstick-on-vagina performance that opens *Die unheimliche Frauen* (1991)). Then there was Claudia Schillinger, Maija-Lene Rettig, (both HKB students), Ulrike Zimmermann and a few others. Birgit was also close with feminists of her generation such as Karola Gramann, who directed the Oberhausen Short Film Festival from 1985 until 1989, and her long-time partner, influential film scholar Heide Schlüppmann the editor of “Frauen und Film,” the first feminist German film journal. Their “border politics” were a direct challenge and sat outside our cherished world of abstract experimental film.

Mara Mattuschka



Klaus vom Bruch



Marcel Odenbach



The 80s were such an introspective, introverted time of dealing with questions of the body, but in a very narrow way, always returning to an individual. Birgit and Wilhelm pushed me into new topics that arrived in a succession of small shocks as I encountered and came to understand their reality, their thinking, and the way they put their arguments and worldview into their films. *Love Stinks* (1982) was the first time I saw such open and radical sexual imagery that was both personal and pornographic, and used for purposes that a 20-year-old could only slowly begin to interpret. At school they took a non-academic approach, dealing with concrete political topics within avant-garde cinema that included Surrealism, Dada, Fluxus, Happenings and abstract film. We had the privilege to

learn from a film artist who had not only experienced moments of these avant-garde formations first hand, but had written it down and historicized it.

She often referred to herself as a “Kriegskind” (war child). Growing up in post-WW2 Germany, war and National Socialism were constants in her own film research. A keen interest in totalitarian art led to many interesting seminars, on the aesthetics of fascism for example. I only had the chance to participate in the beginnings of these courses, but after I graduated she continued working on them in partnership with students (and soon-to-be curators) Marcel Schwierin and Florian Wüst who came to share her fascinations.

Another side of Birgit was her art world contacts. She introduced us to amazing people like Wolf Herzogenrath, from her Köln gang there was Marcel Odenbach, Klaus vom Bruch and the crazy, wonderful actor Udo Kier who was invited into several seminars. In the first year we made a small film together, the next year he returned with an “excessive experiment.” Everybody got very drunk, there were homoerotic overtones, some of the students started fondling Udo or themselves. At one point Birgit got up and announced she was really frustrated. She said, “You homos and bisexuals want to have a good time, but I cannot join you so I’m going home.” More than two decades later I became a professor myself and Birgit became another kind of important mentor. Naturally, in tricky teaching situations I would always ask myself: what would Birgit do? I even

contacted her a couple of times about Surrealist cinema and the early Buñuel films that she was so fond of.

I adopted some of her models, like the stringent, well-organized weekly public film screenings. Every Monday films were shown in a real cinema setting, sometimes with an invited guest, and there was always an intensive post-screening discussion. We often had the privilege of having a seminar with the guest before the film, and even a follow up seminar the next day. Seminar/public screening/seminar. I met so many amazing artists during these intense seminars: Ken Jacobs, Jim Hubbard, Vera Bódy, Mara Mattuschka, Heinz Emigholz, Klaus Wyborny, Christoph Schlingensief.



Ken Jacobs



Jim Hubbard

Together with an allied film department in Offenbach led by Helmut Herbst, Birgit organized a meeting with all German film experimental film departments where I met David Larcher for the first time (who became another close friend for life).

Heinz Emigholz



Klaus Wyborny



Christoph Schlingensief



Unlike the hostility of the earlier years, it turned out that her tenure as a full professor revealed another side of Birgit's character. By sheer magic she created an environment where everyone was welcome. She was very popular at the HBK. Our weekly plenum session was a gathering of all the film students but soon began to attract students from other departments. They were curious to hear what this woman had to say. At some point there were so many we could hardly fit into the room. This created a rivalry between her and co-chair Gerhard Büttendender. Gerhard was the one who had invited the Heins and was a very powerful figure at the academy. Under his rectorship great transformations and expansion took place. So he had some street cred. And he used it shamelessly—he ghost-retired before his official retirement. That meant he stopped teaching and dumped all the department work on Birgit. This created a major fallout between them. Birgit would always tell us everything, including the inner university politics so we knew exactly what was going on.

Even as she settled into her job there could be surprising commentaries when she disagreed. I still remember a studio visit when she interrupted me, "One more word like this Caspar and I'll tear off your balls." Those were moments that stood out in a teacher-student relationship. She was part of an academia that from today's admin-controlled environment would not be possible. OK, maybe in certain areas she went a bit overboard. But at that time it was still possible for people to yell at each other in an uncensored way.

Yes, the big marriage breakup. As much as I portray Birgit as the most transparent teacher, artist, mother, being—this chapter was less shared with all of us. The actual split came quite suddenly for us, but at the same time nobody was surprised either.

After the Heins split up, Birgit received a full professorship. The small group of students who studied together at that time included Bjørn Melhus, Marcel Schwierin, Christoph Girardet, Matthias Müller, Michael Bryntrup, Maija-Lene Rettig and Peter Zorn. There was also Claudia Schillinger, Volker Schoenwardy, Anke Doeppner, and the artists group "Die Kreaturesn," among many others. The other professor I mentioned, Gerhard Büttendender, created an inner circle of the "special ones" that I later thought was unfair and undiplomatic, it pissed off many of the excluded. But the group around Gerhard and Birgit felt close, we hung out in their office and that encouraged us to drop official student-teacher relationships. Gerhard's office (and later in Birgit's studio) is where the real conversations happened. It was formative, crucial to developing friendships with Birgit that continued long after our studies. There were other students after us, but I don't think there were any who become such close friends. This bonding occurred with her first student generation who watched their teacher grow up.

OK, now I jump again some twenty years later. I am back in Berlin where I organized a big dinner and invited almost all of that little gang, except Matthias who wasn't

in town. I recall how Marcel remarked that evening to Birgit that it was unbelievable how much time had passed and how little had changed. It was the same constellation. We were older, although Birgit didn't really seem to age. She was the same sharp, wonderful person, who looked basically the same with just a few more wrinkles. That would only change in the next few years to come. Aging moves in a bumpy and non-linear way.

The period after the break up was so crucial, as it marked one of the most important moments of her professional life. The first time she stepped out into the world as a solo filmmaker was with the premiere of *Die Unheimlichen Frauen* (The Uncanny Women) (1992)

which took place at the Berlinale (Film Festival). It was in the giant Delphi Film Theater which was sold out to the last seat. That premiere was a big deal. It screamed for flowers I thought. Totally broke I managed a single rose. A yellow one. I thought red is too kitsch, too love, but yellow was a color Birgit liked. And then came this bombardment of a film. It really shook me up. After all the congratulations onstage I approached her with that rose like a little boy. I was so overwhelmed I didn't have a voice. With a great effort I squeaked out, "Great work, thank you Birgit." She of course laughed and hugged me. I had never been so proud, so overwhelmed, that I literally lost my voice (returning to the theme of disappearing voices!).

What followed was a post-screening discussion that included some nasty questions from the audience. One person made clear what was at stake in feminist filmmaking, and what feminists would like to see in the cinema: images of affirmation and/or present-day oppression, a useful film that would assist the project of emancipation. The woman who addressed this wasn't interested in Birgit's themes of women becoming criminals, or the communities of women in prison, or women in the Third Reich who held key roles in concentration camps.

I was very curious how Birgit might react. She fiercely told this woman in front of 500+ people, "Look, I'm not here to tick off the commonly discussed subjects that you would like to see and discuss." She didn't say: "This is my film, my vision, so shut the fuck up," but she could



Birgit Hein, Gerhard Büttenbender

have, as you know how directly she spoke when she was enraged. Her articulate defense really impressed me.

After leaving school we all worried about the health of Birgit and Wilhelm because they were drinking a lot. It was almost a required trait for decadent art professors at the time. *Die Unheimliche Frauen* introduces Birgit lying in a mountain of bottles. She told me that it wasn't about showing how she lived, but that she wanted to profess openly that she had an alcohol problem. During her professorship she managed it pretty well. There was never a moment when I saw her drunk in public, but it was an ongoing issue in her life.

One chapter I forgot to mention is New York. A year before graduating, I'd become very unhappy in that little Braunschweig circle. Birgit realized what was going on, that I had to get out to see the world. I was making lamenting comments like, "Everything is so fucked up here..." when she countered, "Why don't you go to New York for a while?" I asked, "How should I go?" She said, "You have wealthy, upper-middle class parents, why don't you push your father to finance you for a couple

Die unheimliche Frauen by Birgit Hein



of months?” I went to New York and joked that I was given a DAD fellowship, three months became six, I fell in love, came back, graduated, then applied for a (real) DAAD grant which allowed me to move back to New York where I lived for 23 years. Birgit had asked a question that determined the trajectory of my life and career.

I had a great moment of reconnection when Birgit also came to New York during a sabbatical. She had helped me with her New York friends and contacts, now I could help her finding an apartment and look after her a bit.

In my first NY years I was in a relationship with choreographer Kumiko Kimoto. I gradually developed a fascination for dance and started helping with her massive dance theater productions. I even contributed with film, shooting some material for the stage productions.

I proudly invited Birgit to one of Kumiko’s performances at St. Mark’s Church where I made 16mm projections on a movable wall. A week later I asked Birgit what she thought. She said it was very impressive but that this kind of dance theatre was not her cup of tea. Suddenly she changed tone and said, “But Caspar don’t you see that you are being completely exploited and have to go your own way? You cannot waste your time with this kind of ridiculous assistance and I’ll bet you’re not even paid for it.” This was crucial advice that no one else could have given me. Only Birgit, as the imagined mother of my extended family, could have offered such a judgment in this decisive moment.



time/OUT OF JOINT by Caspar Stracke



For Birgit

JUDITH STERN

Even today, I still have fond memories of Birgit's verve with which she spread good vibes at university and, with her assertiveness, brought new momentum into the system. If she hadn't appeared there at the right time to take over from Wilhelm Hein, my life would certainly have taken a different turn.

Birgit's heartfelt, distinctive "kölsche Schnauze" was ever present. In her direct, if sometimes quite gruff, but confident manner, she never minced her words. Always ready to stir and rough things up.

I remember going often to exhibitions with her after my university years. Partly disgruntled, tired of the whole art bubble, Birgit trudged through the rooms. Mostly smoking one cigarette after the other, she gave the exhibiting artists a piece of her mind, slagging off the paintings and installations in a huff and expressing quite unabashedly and freely when she thought something really sucked and looked like shit. It was always a real pleasure to look at the bewildered faces of the exhibitors, especially since most of the people didn't know Birgit at all.



Birgit Hein, Judith Stern

Once, after a holiday trip together, we parted ways half-way along the road and I took her to her departure track. The train she was supposed to board made a longer stop and two big, tattooed and all-muscle men wanted to get out of the carriage to have a smoke. But Birgit, 76 years old at the time, wanted to get on right there and then! There was no excuse me, she squeezed into the train with her suitcase and immediately bumped into the first huge guy, who shouted out loud: "Now, now, now—take it easy, grandma! Let us get off first!" Birgit paused for a moment, vehemently gave the two guys the

fuck finger, pushed them aside and, cool as a cucumber, disappeared into the corridor of the train. Shortly afterwards she waved at me from the compartment window, smiling. The guys' jaws dropped.

Birgit is one of the most important people in my life. I will miss her big heart and her robust, honest manner.

Note: "kölsche Schnauze" is a colloquial expression referring to the Cologne (and Rhineland) people's very direct, blunt way of expressing themselves.





Impatient and Hot-Headed Nonetheless

CYLIXE



Our paths crossed for the first time, when I was just beginning to become an artist, while Birgit was leaving behind her legacy at the Braunschweig University of Fine Arts. Luckily, we shared a semester. I was very shy with low self esteem, depressed, angry. I had finished my first short film *The world counts loud to 10* (2009) by the end of that semester. It is an essay about my stay at a psychiatric facility. It had already been screening in public, but I was afraid to pin my name on it. I showed it to Birgit, nervous about her judgment of my art, of me. I had heard about her harsh critiques, her bluntness, was worried about my little artsy heart. I had sat in the plenums, in the back, seeing students and teacher fight passionately about what a “good” film is.

Instead of all my worries, this meeting became a turning point for me. Birgit taught me that authenticity doesn’t need to hide. That vulnerability and nakedness can be a tool, a weapon even. Through Birgit, I began to unlearn shame and guilt, learned to be angrier.

Later, the film was the reason I was accepted as a fellow of the German Academic Scholarship Foundation. It was a film I could finally attach my name to.

Birgit left and we would meet five years later in Berlin. We sat on the grass at Urban Hafen, white wine, cigarettes, film talk. I needed work, she needed an assistant, as her previous one had moved.

This became a ritual over the years. We would meet once or twice a month, have a coffee and a muffin, fix a printer or get into the nitty gritty of Adobe Premiere or something computer related, and we would talk. About my father, her mother, her past, my present. So much coffee, so many conversations.

We both moved apartments, but the ritual stayed. We began to work on her new film. The first thing she showed me was light, reflected on a white wall, moving through the day as a square, framed by the shadows of a window. It was a video she had filmed at her studio back in Braunschweig. It would be the backdrop for the reading of her mother’s diary about the war. We made some recordings, talked about the importance of differentiated voices between her words and her mother’s. We collected footage of pre-war Berlin and the Arab Spring and people trying desperately to enter fortress Europe and its barbed wire borders. We talked about how the collective trauma of war can destroy generation upon generation, how it is passed on. How it is happening again right now.

skull.jpg: video still, 16bit:wolf, 2021, cylixe





The film would not be finished.

Over the years, my work for her changed and finally stopped. There were no more printers she needed to curse at, no more angry emails I typed for her, at one point she told me: "I've done so much, read so many books, wrote them even. It's ok now to just watch TV sometimes."

My favourite moments with Birgit were when I would call her out on being impatient and hot-headed and she would look at me, agree with me, and then continue to be impatient and hot-headed nonetheless.

Birgit asked so much of herself and I think that is why she was also harsh in her judgment of others sometimes.

I went to a New Year's party with her, photographed her daughter's wedding and worked as an assistant for one of her former students for a while. She came to see me at the Berlinale and at my solo exhibit at Berlinische Gallery, met my mother and my partner. Birgit would find small ways to support me and others, opening doors for us, introducing us to other artists and when you read this, to introduce us to each other.

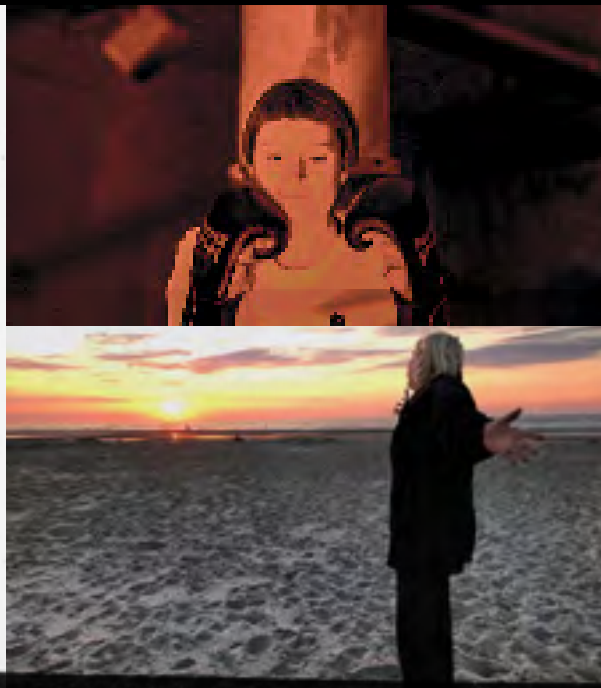
I miss Birgit, our coffee, our talks, the bright light entering through the glass door of a Berlin fifth floor balcony without any plants because Birgit didn't do plants. The light landing on her books, covering both walls, talking about War, Art, Sex, Women and Film. The big things. The light landing on an abstract painting from her ex, lots of white with little coloured interjections, crossing the long table with a growing collection of yellow Post-its. Once, she had run out of Post-its, so I brought some from my place. She gave them back the next time we met. The pink was too annoying.



cylix, Judith Stern, Birgit Hein

The last time we spoke was February 7th. She called before noon, I think. "Hallo mein Schatzi, meine liebe *cylix*! Ich wünsche dir alles liebe zum geburtstag." (Hello my lovely, my dear *cylix*! I wish you a happy birthday). I replied that it wasn't my birthday, but that I was super happy to hear from her. We still met usually every two or three weeks but hadn't since December. During the following minutes of her excusing the mistake and my assurance that it was appreciated anyway, I could hear her granddaughter Çiğdem in the background, helping to set her calendar right. Apparently, Nina, who, like Çiğdem, had been supporting her more and more, had made a mistake by putting the wrong date on a Post-it. My birthday is after February 23rd. It is even after February 24th, the day when Nina called me to tell me that Birgit had died. I would like to thank Nina.

02 a *cylix* low fidelity.jpg: video still, FLINTA* boxing club, 2023, *cylix*





Have a day.

FLOWERS

I Love

You



Timeline

RALF SAUSMIKAT

I met Birgit for the first time in 1982 when she and Wilhelm showed *Love Stinks* at the Experimental Film Workshop in Osnabrück (the precursor of European Media Arts Festival). It was their first long film, made during a Goethe residency in New York. I was really surprised about both the openness and directness showing their sexual intimacies on the big screen. I was also astonished about Birgit's open offence during the sometime harsh critique in the discussion after the screening. Wilhelm was more defensive in the disputation.

In 1984 we presented *Superman and Wonderwoman* at the EFW and I was involved in the set up and technical issues of the performance. I experienced a sometimes demanding artist but also a warm character when problems had to be solved which I really appreciated, knowing things can get out of control when tempers explode.

A year later Birgit held the seminar "Experimental film and Psychoanalytics" in Osnabrück which she based on films by Buñuel, Cocteau, Anger and Deren, exploring and explaining symbolics in their works and the underlying social and sexual dimensions in reception.

In 1986 the Heins showed *Verbotene Bilder* (Forbidden Images), an extension of their former film *Love Stinks*. It deals more with the sexual demands and problems of Wilhelm (the battle of the sexes continues) rather than showing lust and devotions like in *Love Stinks*.

At the first EMAF in 1988, B. and W. presented the first edition of *Kali-Filme*, a compilation film based on the contradiction between film as art and Trivialfilms dealing with sexuality and violence. Another radical approach on experimental art versus traditional values. After the split with Birgit, Wilhelm continued the Kali idea and presented new flicks by Richard Kern and Mara Mattuschka along with *Un Chant D'amour* by Jean Genet at EMAF 1990.

In 1992 EMAF screened Birgit's mid-length flick *Die unheimlichen Frauen* composed from doc images of war, women in prisons, women soldiers, etc. as well from horror movies. For this collage that offered a different view on tough and self-determined women, Birgit was awarded the best experimental film prize by German film critics in Osnabrück.



Ralf Sausmikat, European Media Arts Festival, 1988

Two years later she made *Baby I will Make you Sweat*, a filmic confession about women's sexual freedom to take what they need to fulfill sexual demands that society grants only to men. Of course the EMAF screening was followed by a heated dispute in which Birgit did not take a single step away from her personal approach to this topic.

After four years of war on terror Birgit made her short *Kriegsbilder* (War Images), a compilation of images from WW2 to recent TV pictures from that time. The

seemingly simple approach was a deeply political statement about the horror and suffering that war brings, and it has lost none of its poignancy today.

Birgit was a great host when she invited me to present EMAF tour programs at HBK Braunschweig, where she taught since the 90s. After the screenings we went to her studio at the academy to eat some finger food, drink some wine and chat about the festival, fellow colleagues and befriended filmmakers. After she left the HBK we lost a bit of contact and the very last time I

met her was at DOKfest Kassel where she delivered the laudatio (speech) for Bjørn Melhus's honorary award ceremony in 2018 which was also the year I left EMAF. Of course we had a few drinks and joked about our exciting retirement in the future.

With Birgit we lost an icon of women's sexual liberation in underground film, and with the passing of experimental filmmakers like M. Snow, D. Rimmer and D. Larcher a whole generation of important shapers of new cinematic visual and formal language.

Birgit Hein at European Media Arts Festival



Birgit Hein

Birgit

MALCOLM LEGRICE

Birgit was over many years one of my truly greatest friends.

She and Wilhelm played a deep part in my developing life as a film and video artist. When I made my earliest films *Castle 1* and *Little Dog for Roger* I found myself in Britain setting out on a crazy and isolated direction with little understanding or support. A fortunate and early contact with Birgit and Wilhelm Hein... and seeing in their work of the same period a surprising level of similarity... that both I and they had quite independently arrived at. I recognised an enormous sense of supportive political and artistic 'rightness' for the time that I believe they shared.

In 1968 Birgit organized a big film tour for me in Germany, Austria and Holland that included many hours of discussion with them over long nights and many litres of beer in their Köln apartment... passionate conversations on art, film and politics and the significant differences between the "underground" counter-culture in Europe and the USA.



Berlin Horse by Malcolm LeGrice



Partly because of her great command of English Birgit became an easier and somewhat closer friend... with links that persisted through many years... during her teaching years in Braunschweig, where she fostered and supported many emerging experimental artists and during her high level academic work in Berlin... and through her many hugely influential visits to London... collaborating on major exhibitions with another of my great friends David Curtis.

I also followed the development of her independent approach to film following her separation from Wilhelm. Much of this showed enormous courage... bravely taking on as in "Baby" issues of women's sexual politics. I feel deeply privileged to have remained close to Birgit through many years. I hold her in my heart with deep affection and respect.

I am also proud that I was able to maintain a link to Wilhelm as well as Birgit. Both have created a secure and substantial place in the history of radical art and cinema covering a major part of the period since the end of WW 2.

Birgit's was a hugely significant life leaving a wonderful residue in our culture and beautiful memories and we are fortunate to have been her friends.



Malcolm LeGrice, Birgit Hein in Birgit's film class in Fachhochschule Koln, 1975

Letter

ANGELA HAARDT

Dear Mike,

Sabine Niewalda forwarded me your letter. Yes, I was quite shocked when I heard that Birgit died. I did not meet her for a long time, was myself “out of order” for a long time after I broke an ankle. So sad. I do not even know what happened, that she died.

I knew Birgit for a long time. When I was running the municipal cinema in Duisburg as head of the cultural department at the Volkshochschule (Peoples’ University), I showed her films at the cinema. And for some time we were working together on a seminar about psychoanalysis as a method of understanding a film. Tarkovsky’s *The Mirror*, Buñuel and Dulac’s *La Coquille et le Clergyman*. I think she traveled with our work for some time.

Superman and Wonderwoman was shown and performed in our movie theater. She did not want me to make an extra advertisement when we showed *Love Stinks*, as her mother lived in Duisburg (where Birgit went to school) and she did not want her mother to see the film.

Later when she was professor in Braunschweig and I was at Oberhausen, it was she who gave back a film that one of the professors kept after a performance there (during the time when Karola Gramann was the director), an important film from the Oberhausen archive. I was quite grateful to her.

Before I met Birgit I had bought the wonderful book XSCREEN, that I lost later when someone borrowed it but never gave it back. That is about what my meetings with her were.

She was an important filmmaker for me, someone about whom I had to think. She was the one who not only travelled to the South to get sex, but made a film about it. I knew many women who did the same and I had problems accepting it, as I still think about this behaviour as exploitation and colonial behaviour. It might also be prostitution—but I am not sure what exactly to think of it. So in a sense, this is a question that accompanies me.

Well, Mike, it is wonderful to make a booklet on her. Thanks a lot.

All the best,

Angela Haardt

LICHTBURG



Steve Anker, Karaeva, Birgit Hein, Kawai Masayuki, Roeese Rosen, Oberhausen, 2012, photo by Kurzfilmtage/Daniel Gasenzer

Randall Halle's memorial speech on Birgit Hein

RANDALL HALLE

It is difficult for me to write this text, to write something worthy of Birgit. But perhaps it fits because Birgit often told me how difficult it was for her to write the texts for her films. She always wrote personal texts: very personal, self-reflective, self-critical, vital, important texts. I would like to write such a text now.

Many here have known Birgit much longer than I have. You all have memories and stories too. I met Birgit exactly 20 years ago for the first time. Reinhild Steingröver and I were working on a volume on experimental film and video in German-speaking countries. Some of you wrote contributions or were reviewed in the book. When I told Reinhild about Birgit's passing she immediately said: a great artist in life and work. That's right, I said.

The interview with Birgit became a key text in the book, and a key experience in my life. The first meeting with Birgit became many more, and the first interview also became many more. From the meeting grew a very deep friendship.



Birgit Hein at Randall's party



In the 60s, Birgit and Wilhelm began to explore the material possibilities of film. From this came structural film experiments that were fundamental for West Germany but also internationally recognized as important. With the founding of XSCREEN in Cologne, Birgit and Wilhelm created a place that crossed all crossroads for the international underground art scene. New American Cinema, Viennese Actionism, London Filmmakers Co-op, Underground, queer camp trash, and porn all played on the screen, and the filmmakers were guests of the Heins. Birgit, who had a good middle-class upbringing, drew even her mother into this lively, new, controversial, liberated world. And for this liberation we can all be grateful.

Birgit worked up the history of art and experimental film, wrote the standard works *Film in Underground* and *Film as Film*, which are still relevant today, and organized fundamental retrospectives and exhibitions. With Wulf Herzogenrath she undertook the exhibition “Film as Film” and then did further curatorial work and because of that, film and video received a new and well-deserved recognition in the art world.

The New York residency with Wilhelm and Nina was a big cut in the early 80s. Birgit always said how good the time was for Nina’s English but how bad it was for her marriage, but also how important the stay was for a new kind of filmmaking. *Love Stinks* was the last big

collaboration with Wilhelm. A new creative phase began, connected with her new position as professor at the Braunschweig Academy of Fine Arts.

A skepticism of all ideologies characterizes Birgit’s work and her life. I wrote at the time after the first encounter that this skepticism has presented her with certain challenges. She has never been a darling of any orthodoxy, whether moral, leftist, feminist, pedagogical, or other, and has been exposed repeatedly to attack. Yet her radical, skeptical individualism has prevented her from falling prey to the errors that others have committed and has lent her work an untimely quality.

The Uncanny Women, *Baby I will Make you Sweat* and *Poesia* are courageous, controversial, wonderful, untimely films. *Pictures of War* had its North American premiere at a conference I organized in Pittsburgh. I invited her there. Birgit came, presented, impressed, and argued often with film historian Thomas Elsaesser. She expressed to me, clearly but privately, her disdain for academic posturing. Birgit liked clarity.

We talked a lot about film and art and world and history, but there was no conversation where she did not speak about Nina and her grandchild, the wonderful Çiğdem. Calendars were marveled at, Çiğdem’s drawings were examined. A new retelling of *The Little Mermaid* and Amy Winehouse were discussed, how Nina was doing in academics and Çiğdem in school and life. How much

Randall Halle, Birgit Hein



Randall Halle

she admired and loved the two of them. It was a joy for me when I finally met them.

I was allowed to accompany the phase of her obsession with the Arab Spring, with war and war experiences. My husband Mohammed was in Egypt in 2010 and wrote a lot about the revolution and how everything turned into a counter-revolution and then civil war. Cell phone pictures from Egypt were uploaded to YouTube, Birgit could not stop looking at them. We often sat with Birgit at the table in her new (our old) apartment and discussed the state of the world, and what she did with the pictures, and emptied too many bottles of Prosecco. When I told Mohammed about Birgit's passing, he said,

"No, she's going to live forever." I said, "That's what I thought too."

The work on *Abstract Film* then turned into the work on the *War Children* project. That was very hard work for her. She often told me that she was old enough and had achieved enough, that she didn't need to make another film. "You don't have to, but you can, and the film will be good," I said. We didn't go to exhibitions so often anymore. She said "I'm at an age where I don't have to run from exhibition to exhibition." Before that, she always knew exactly who was doing what, what was important, and what was art business fuss.

The last exhibition we visited together was Bjørn Melhus in the Kindl Zentrum. She looked at everything in its entirety, discussed it with me and looked forward to talking with Bjørn. Every year the Forum reception at the Berlinale again, and then came the pandemic. A period of intense phone conversations followed with a few more visits between lockdowns with the balcony door open. We went to the Akademie der Künste one last time. Then I had to go back to the States and was looking forward to our reunion.

There's so much to tell. If I continue to tell, if I continue to record Birgit's life, if I describe how she could rant, smoke, and drink but was also over-punctual and well-mannered, polite, then I don't have to let her go. We don't, not yet. Indeed, I thought she was going to live forever. We are left to admire her for what she was, what she is, and for the pictures and films she left us.



Birgit Hein, Randall Halle

Promises

HEATHER FRISE





My Mother:

an interview with Nina Hein

NINA HEIN

MIKE: I saw you last night in *Shanghai Light Impressions* (2007). You're credited as doing some of the shooting as well as editing the movie.

NINA: Birgit asked if I wanted to come and I'd never been to China. It was a nice opportunity to make the trip to Shanghai together. I helped her a little with the filming and we also attended all of the meetings together. Birgit was responsible for the pictures and I cut the sound.

MIKE: Did Birgit know she was going to make a film before going?

NINA: Yes, the Goethe-Institut commissioned the film. It was a mixed trip. It was about making the movie, visiting the Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, networking, and possibly inviting Chinese students to come to Braunschweig in Germany.

MIKE: Much of the movie is shot at night near the Huanpu River, as people take pictures of each other and boats flow past. What was it about the site that was attractive?

NINA: Birgit was fascinated by the proliferation of screens, the media that was so present in the heart of the city. Even though it was commercial, it was like a public art installation. We shot at night because that's when the screens lit up. I was there for a week, Birgit stayed a few more days for meetings. It was quite a short trip.

MIKE: What did you do with the sound?

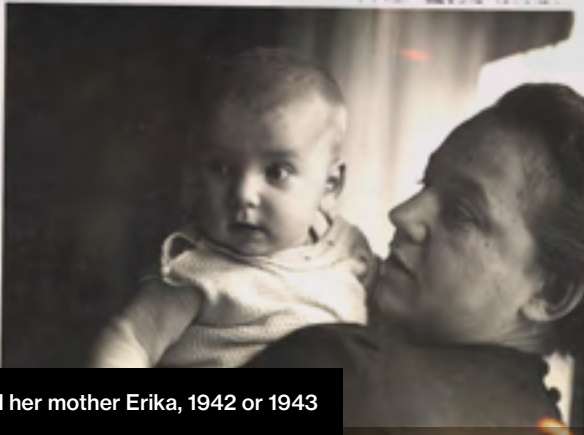
NINA: I worked with the sounds that were recorded there. I just made them a little smoother.

MIKE: I heard a rumour that you secretly went to school to learn video editing.

NINA: (laughs) No, I studied fashion design. Then I started to get interested in using photography but mostly video to capture the work we were doing in fashion presentations. This is not art, it is design. I learned how to edit video footage with Final Cut Pro but I never had the intention to become a video/film artist myself. That was no secret to my parents, especially not for Birgit.



Birgit Hein, Nina Hein, Çiğdem



Birgit and her mother Erika, 1942 or 1943



Anke, Karin, Birgit, Erika (mother), Christian



Birgit and her mother Erika, early 70s

MIKE: Your parents weren't only filmmakers, they were art world luminaries, writers and curators. They weren't just working in a field, they were creating the field. I can imagine this created special pressures for you, maybe there were possible futures you felt were too close to your parents.

NINA: Yes absolutely. There was no need to be an artist myself. Being a fashion designer is also very creative but it's a different area. The place was "taken" as you put it, they were already there and very prominently. I didn't want to interfere, absolutely not. If you see it from a psychological angle it was very important for my parents to be artists that were seen and recognized.

MIKE: You're credited with editing Birgit's *Kriegsbilder* (Pictures of War, 2006).

NINA: That's not really true, I only helped Birgit on the technical side. I also helped her with the sound because I had already done that for the *Shanghai* movie and she liked the way I did it. For me it felt like helping someone in your family, you know? It doesn't feel like I'm part of this piece of art, not at all. I was an assistant.

MIKE: Birgit's last film was the one she didn't finish. It was going to be about her mother, she had even copied out by hand some of her mother's diaries. What was their relation like?

NINA: They had a very close relationship. It wasn't as open as Birgit and I, but it was close. Birgit's mother, my grandmother, was a very charismatic personality.

MIKE: Like Birgit?

NINA: Like Birgit, they were similar in a way. She wasn't an artist but she was very charming and always had a lot of people around her.

Birgit was born during the Second World War, she was a *Kriegskinder* (child of war). Both my parents were absorbed by the war and the Nazi regime, these were topics that were important to them, and they kept talking and reading about it, looking at Holocaust pictures. It was a subject they kept returning to. Birgit liked to work very biographically, and wanted to make a movie about her mother but always in connection to a bigger picture. What was the involvement of my family, what is the trauma we're all carrying in us?

MIKE: Did your grandmother ever speak to you about the war, how things were socially or politically at that time?

NINA: Socially yes but politically no. She was like many other Germans. If you believe all the German people no one comes from a family that had any critical involvement. My grandmother was no different. She left diaries and letters that weren't political, but you could infer what was happening. She talked about the exciting things that happened to her during the war. She was a mother with four children, Birgit was

the youngest. She had to work and her husband wasn't there. My parents always waited for their parents to talk about their guilt and for something like an apology but that never happened.

MIKE: Was your grandfather a soldier in the army?

NINA: Wilhelm's father served in the army and was badly injured. Birgit's father was an engineer in a higher position. He spent some time in the former Soviet Union, but nobody really knows what he did there. Birgit comes from a very bourgeois background.

MIKE: Did it surprise you that she didn't finish the film?

NINA: She didn't find the form. She wasn't satisfied with the structure, hadn't finished with the text she had written and was a little tired. She hadn't got to the point, but I can only speculate. That's how it felt.

MIKE: Birgit seemed determined to speak the truth no matter what the cost, it didn't matter if it hurt anyone's feelings. Was that related to the silence of her parent's generation?

NINA: Yes. The idea of being outspoken and radical, talking about critical things, I'm very sure that is an effect of their childhood. Absolutely. Also of course that was the atmosphere when they were young, the movement of 1968. It was part of the zeitgeist. Birgit and Wilhelm weren't political activists, but they were

provocative and wanted to look behind things in their search for the truth.

MIKE: Many told me about after screening discussions that were very heated, even openly hostile. Did Birgit ever talk to you about that? How did she stand it?

NINA: I always had the feeling she really enjoyed it. (laughs) Of course I attended some of those screenings. For example I was at the premiere of *Baby I will Make you Sweat* at the Berlinale in 1994. There were heated discussions but she was on a mission to be truthful and not to step back. And the reactions weren't only negative.

She never stayed in the movie theatre when the film was shown, she always went outside and only came back when she knew it was over. She couldn't stand the tension. But talking about it was part of the intention, that something would happen. If there was a lot of reaction she had the feeling ok we're getting somewhere, we're getting something into movement here.

Here is an anecdote about *Die unheimlichen Frauen* (1991). Not so long ago she told me, "That is an awful movie. I don't know how people can stand it. But I had to make it."

MIKE: What did she mean by that?

NINA: It's too much for people. You can't put a group of people into a movie theatre and make them watch that. It's too irritating, it's a horrible experience. (laughs)





That's how she put it, but of course she never really doubted the movie.

MIKE: Do you have memories of New York?

NINA: We came to New York in 1981 when I was ten. I was very much looking forward to it because I'd never been in America. I'd just finished primary school and was going to change schools anyway. We lived in one room on Broadway between Prince and Spring Street. It was the loft of a German gallery owner and because he was away we could stay there. It was a very spacious apartment for one person but not for a small family. There was one big room and then a separate little chamber with no door where I lived. It was crazy to spend so much time in one room together.

I didn't speak English but learned very quickly. I went to the United Nations International School, the school for children of diplomats. It was very expensive. Poor Birgit and Wilhelm didn't have a lot of money, and spent most of it on my education there. Of course I noticed there was tension in the air but it didn't interest me much because I had to survive in a city which was very violent at that time. And unlike Köln where we came from, I couldn't do anything on my own, I always had to be accompanied. Everybody in New York was afraid of getting mugged. The atmosphere of Manhattan at that time was very violent and intense.

MIKE: Wilhelm was attacked in the subway.

NINA: Yes. They were filming in the subway with their Bolex camera and somebody wanted to steal it but Wilhelm held it tight in his arms and was hit on the head repeatedly. Birgit screamed and then the guys finally ran off. Our neighbour was also an artist and he was attacked at the front door, somebody cut his throat but he survived.

MIKE: Do you feel the beating changed the family dynamic?

NINA: No. Birgit and Wilhelm already came to New York with issues. I think it just became more obvious because of how we were living. It would have been better if they went without me, if there hadn't been this family situation. To bring these two lives together, the artist life and the normal daily life of a child going to school, it was too much.

MIKE: Birgit was very sociable, warm, an engaging talker. Did it surprise you that she never remarried?

NINA: No. Of course she was looking for love, if she weren't she wouldn't have gone to Jamaica and Cuba. For a woman like Birgit who was so self-confident and outspoken and interested in very specific stuff, was there a man of her age that she could have found in her surroundings? I didn't see anybody, she didn't see anybody. I couldn't imagine who that could have been.

MIKE: But if she had been a man, that would have been different, wouldn't it? Her age, the fact that she was outspoken or had specialized interests would have been attractors.

NINA: I would say yes but maybe. Everything would have been different. To live with someone again would have meant so many compromises, I don't know whether she would have liked that. She was very fulfilled with her work at the university in Braunschweig. She didn't feel that lonely. Though of course she was looking for love, that's what she found with her trips.

MIKE: Many told me how she changed their lives. Was it difficult sharing your mother with so many others?

NINA: No, because we had a very close relationship. The worst years came after the separation with Wilhelm. That was horrible. I was 18, 19, 20, 21. Then the job in Braunschweig became permanent and she had all these other children and she was much better and I had the opportunity to step back and live my own life. I was quite happy to be more out of focus, I could live my life knowing she wasn't lonely.

MIKE: She touched so many lives, and lived so many herself. Even Birgit must have got tired at some point.

NINA: The tiredness came only in the last year when she couldn't see so many people. But to be in public and speak and to be present, she loved that.



Nina Hein, Birgit Hein



Nina, Birgit, Çiğdem





My grandmother:

Çiğdem interview

ÇIĞDEM

MIKE: If someone had never met Birgit how would you describe her?

ÇIĞDEM: Very energetic, sure of what she wants and what she doesn't. She had an opinion about almost everything. Intelligent and intellectual, an artist of course, driven by passion and the fights of being an artist and a woman. Showing she's strong. No one can say anything against her or what she believed in.

MIKE: Birgit was a very radical art maker with radical views. But I think family has always been very important for her, in many ways it's been the centre of her life.

ÇIĞDEM: She had a big passion for artmaking and her work as a professor. But Nina (my mother) and I were the two most important people in her life.

MIKE: Did you see her often when you were growing up?

ÇIĞDEM: Until I was six years old we met only once or twice a year because she lived in Braunschweig. She moved to Berlin in 2008 and then I met her once or even twice a week after school. Even when I was older,

we had these meetings in the afternoon. We talked for three hours, drank a bit and just enjoyed being together. We talked about everything: politics, philosophy, art, what I'm doing at the moment, what she's thinking on that subject. We grew together.

MIKE: I never met any artists when I was younger, I think it would have made things easier for me, just to know that was a door I could walk through. I wonder if Birgit being an artist offered you a sense of freedom or possibilities?

ÇIĞDEM: I like to paint and am very interested in art. She'd say I'm good at it. (laughs) I always felt in her the question: have I expressed myself enough? Have I brought my point across in my art? When she talked about *Die unheimlichen Frauen* she told me that she had to tell this story. It's not that I want to, I have to.

MIKE: You made a calendar for her each year.

ÇIĞDEM: When I was six my mother had an idea that we could make something. It was always hard to give Birgit any kind of material gifts. She enjoyed them, but it was easier to give her something that was more



personal and connected to supporting me growing up in the world of art. Nina and I started a simple calendar where I drew some pages, we glued things and made collages. Each year we chose a topic. One was famous paintings, or the planets. My mother took photos of me in this room. (laughs) It was a lot of fun because I could reinvent myself, take on other roles, even if it was just me wanting to look beautiful or to be in costume. Every year Birgit got a new calendar for Christmas. Each month she could flip to the next page and show her friends, "Look I have this beautiful calendar!"

MIKE: Many talked about how much she liked to argue. It was as if you could only get at the truth if you could peel away a few layers by arguing. But they also said that they would never hold a grudge. Did you experience that?

ÇİĞDEM: Yes, I did a lot. But I would rather call them discussions. I always knew, even if I did something disrespectful or said something that would hurt her she would never hold a grudge. Although she was very opinionated and sometimes even aggressive she never judged me. If we were mad it would only last a few minutes. She was good at being mad at political structures and men and others she didn't like, but she was not good at being mad at me because it didn't come from a place of hate or fear. She said that we could talk shit and not judge each other. I think with Nina it was the same.

MIKE: Do you feel that Birgit helped with your gender transition?

ÇİĞDEM: Yes. One of the first memories I have is me wanting to be a girl but being trapped in this boy body. I told someone about this, but was uncertain if it was a dream. My parents didn't remember but that might be because they didn't know how to deal with it. The topic got bigger again when I was in my teens. Speaking with Birgit she confirmed the memory. I had told her I was a *frauenheld*, the literal English translation is lady boy, though that means something different. It was a true memory.

Two years ago, I told her I was thinking about changing my name, and by the next week she had already memorized and used it. I knew it was important for her and that she wanted to respect me, but I never knew she could do it so quickly. She was forgetting a lot of stuff, and during conversation it's easy to slip up and I would have been mad but it almost never occurred. She always reassured me when I talked about my feelings because only I can know.

In her last year she had a caregiver who came three times a week. She told her about the surgery I had planned. She said: you have to cross your fingers for Çiğdem when she's having her surgery. It was important to her.

MIKE: Did she ever talk about her mother with you?

ÇİĞDEM: Quite a lot. When I was younger, family was a big topic because once a year we had a family gathering in May or June. She had a large album of family photos and her mother's letters. Birgit had made a book that collected texts my great-grandmother (Birgit's mother) wrote. She was a person who was always present to me

though I've never met her. Birgit talked about what a vibrant woman my great-grandmother was, she worked for an organization that helped people who came to Germany from India, Africa and the Middle East. She was progressive but also kind of a square. Birgit told me how much she loved her mother, and how hard it was watching her mother die slowly for the last two years of her life. Birgit has her powerful side from her.

MIKE: Some people at the gathering said that Birgit was central to the family, and that her ashes would go to the family gathering place in Hessen.

ÇİĞDEM: Every year the family meets in a small village. There's a chapel that was sponsored by Birgit's grandfather. On both sides there are places for urns. She will be placed next to her two sisters. Diagonally above her will be her mother. She will be with her family which is what she always wanted, not just because she loved her family but because she gets the place that was meant for her and nobody steals it from her because she's Birgit.

MIKE: I was surprised to learn that she was the youngest in her family.

ÇİĞDEM: Her character was shaped because she was the youngest and always had to prove herself. Each of her older siblings had a role. The oldest sister left Germany and went to America. The second one cared for all the others. Her brother was the only son. From

a young age she knew she would have to be different, she would have to be important, and being important meant being seen by people. She would reach that goal by showing that she was special.

MIKE: Did it surprise you that she never remarried?

ÇİĞDEM: No. Maybe because I didn't know it any other way. Of course she had a lot of passionate loves when it came to men that she desired. But I think it's fitting that she never did. It adds to this drama that the relationship with Wilhelm had. And her grieving process.

MIKE: Do you have a relationship with Wilhelm?

ÇİĞDEM: No. I'm glad that Birgit is my only grandparent.

MIKE: Did you feel you had to share her with others?

ÇİĞDEM: Not really. I knew my place. I knew I was important and she told me. I liked the thought that she had a lot of children.

MIKE: It must have been difficult for you to see Birgit declining physically.

ÇİĞDEM: I visited her in January and she was hunched over and couldn't really look me in the eye. I asked: what happened to your back? She said: I have so much pain. I was very alarmed. I went home and called my mother and cried. I was shocked because from one day to the next this powerful woman had become a fragile being, a normal person.

The doctor found something broken in her spine. She was treated but after that she changed. She was still Birgit, but she was becoming someone you have to care for, instead of someone who cared for you. Of course that hurt but it was very important for me to see her from a different perspective. She had delicate feelings that I had never seen. There was a new tint to her feelings, it wasn't just bright red, it was becoming slightly pink. She was soft.

She wasn't embarrassed to get older, though it was a struggle at first because she was a control freak. She needed control and now she had to learn there were things she couldn't do and had to learn to accept that and I was very surprised. It was very beautiful to see this acceptance that made her so... soft.

There was nothing unspoken, unthought or un-felt between us. That's why I didn't have the feeling of:

I should have hugged her one more time. She knew I loved her. I knew that she knew that I knew that she loved me. It's complicated.

I was there after she died. She died in a peaceful way knowing that we were there, that she was with the most important people in her life. She was not just in the place where she lived, but also at home. I could see her and I could touch her. I could give her one last kiss and hug her and didn't see her as a corpse. My grandmother was sleeping, it was very beautiful. She always told us about a song she wanted to hear at her funeral. I played it for her so she could listen to it, not just for people when she had already been buried, but while she was still next to me. Brandenburg Concerto no. 4 by Bach.

MIKE: I spoke with a number of people who attended the ceremony who said that you were a figure of consolation and hope. The fact that Birgit was close to you offered some sense of peace. You made quite an impression.

ÇİĞDEM: It's nice to hear. I cried a lot at the ceremony and that that made me very happy because I needed this kind of very expressive outlet of grief (you see I got my dramatic side from Birgit) for me to feel peace and relief. I feel her pride in every step I make.



Birgit Hein, Çiğdem



Birgit Hein Filmography

(all work before 1988 made with Wilhelm Hein)



1967

S&W (10 minutes); Und Sie? (And They?) (11 minutes);
Olé (3 minutes)

1968

Rohfilm (Raw film) (20 minutes); Grün (Green)
(24 minutes); Werbefilm nr. 1 - Bamberg (15 minutes);
Reproductions (28 minutes)

1969

625 (34 minutes); Square Dance (12 minutes); Work in
Progress, Teil A (Part A) (37 minutes)

1970

Work in Progress, Teil B (Part B) (8 minutes); Auszüge
aus einer Biographie (Excerpt from a Biography)
(6 minutes); Madison/Wis (10 minutes); Replay (22 minutes);
Foto-Film (10 minutes); Reproduktionsimmanente
Ästhetik (installation)

1970-72

Portraits: Charles Manson, Ronald Biggs, Wilhelm Hein,
Nina (50 minutes)

1971

Work in Progress, Teil C (Part C) (23 minutes); Work in
Progress, Teil D (Part D) (20 minutes); Doppelprojektion
I-V (50 minutes); Zoom lange Fassung (Zoom long
Frame) (21 minutes); Zoom kurze Fassung (Zoom short
Frame) (9 minutes); Videotape 1 (60 minutes)

1972

Portraits: Kurt Schwitters 1/2/3 (8 minutes); Liebesgrüsse
(Love greeting) (8 minutes); Yes to Europe (15 minutes);
Aufblenden/Abblenden (Fade in/Fade out) (24 minutes);
Doppelprojektion Vi + Vii (25 minutes); Scharf/Unschärf
(Sharp/Unsharp) (6 minutes); Dokumentation
(25 minutes); Fussball (Football) (60 minutes)

1973

Ausdatiertes Material (Outdated Material) (50 minutes);
God Bless America (3 minutes); Stills (75 minutes);
London (30 minutes); Zu Lucifer Rising von Kenneth
Anger (for TV program "Kino 73" on WDR) (10 minutes)

1974

Strukturelle Studien (Structural Studies) (37 minutes);
Jack Smith (for TV program "Kino 74" on WDR)
(10 minutes); Künstlerfilme 1 (for TV program on WDR)
(45 minutes); Künstlerfilme 2 (for TV program on WDR)
(45 minutes)

1975

Doppelprojektion Viii-Xiii (25 minutes); Portraits II
(24 minutes)

1976

Materialfilme I (45 minutes 1-3 screens); Materialfilme II
(35 minutes 35 mm)

1971-77

Home Movies I-XXVI (30 minutes)

1977

Weiss Film (White Film) (5 minutes); Portraits III
(38 minutes)

1978-79

Performance/Verdammt in Alle Ewigkeit (Damned
for All Eternity) (film performance) (60 minutes); Das
Konzert (The Concert) (50 minutes); Kurt Kren. Portrat
eines experimentellen Filmmachers (zus. mit Hans Peter
Kochenrath for TV program SR) (45 minutes)

1978-82 Movie Show/Superman and Wonderwoman
(film performance) (70 minutes)

1981

Die Medien und das Bild. Andy Warhol's Kunst (Film 6
in TV series on WDR) (45 minutes)

1982

Love Stinks (82 minutes), American Graffiti (film
performance at DIA) (60 minutes)

1986

Verbotene Bilder (Forbidden Pictures) (90 minutes)

1988

Kali-Filme (70 minutes)

1991

Die unheimlichen Frauen (The uncanny Women)
(63 minutes)

1994

Baby I will Make you Sweat (63 minutes)

1997

Eintagsfliegen (Mayflies) (25 minutes)

2000

La moderna poesia (Modern Poetry) (67 minutes)

2006

Kriegsbilder (Pictures of War) (10 minutes)

2007

Shanghai Light Impressions (10 minutes)

2013

Abstrakter Film (9 minutes)





Birgit Hein funeral, March 28, 2023

