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HENNING FEHR AND PHILIPP RUHR: TOURIST INFORMATION (POLYRHYTHM TECHNOIR)

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Olsen&Fischli: Your film **Production Line of Happiness** shows the class of Christopher Williams at Kunstakademie Düsseldorf poring over the fundamental questions posed by artistic production: What is counter culture? In what way are utopian concepts from the '60s still relevant to us today? What are the prerequisites for young people today to be producing art? One could read this discussion that's going on there amongst the group as a kind of meta-narrative inherent in all your films. Would you agree?

Fehr: You could probably put it that way, I guess.The thing is that the film does not really offer much to the viewer. It is telling a story and it is trying to make something visible. The film itself doesn't really give you much to hold on to, which makes it appear so fragmented. People usually have conversations about what went on at the time but those tend to be more recountings of what they already know because they are generally interested in this sort of topic.

Rühr: I would also consider this meta-narrative a form of oral history. Oral history, story telling, corporeality and the passing on of knowledge through these means have always been important in our films. Questions arise from what people in the films are talking about and, simultaneously, even answer themselves. Unless you are getting at those themes present in the **Production Line of Happiness**, like a revival of '60s and '70s and Marxist ideas?

O&F: Exactly, because it would be possible to use the audio track of **Production Line of Happiness** for all your other films too. You could even superimpose the conversations from it over your **Polyrhythm Technoir** trilogy. Those discussions seem like a blueprint manifesto for all your work to me. So would you say that these young guys from the **Polyrhythm Technoir** films are perhaps responding to Christopher Williams' year group?

R: It's been a long process but in the end I had to accept that me and and most of my fellow students in Christopher's class at the academy were part of the so called precarious bourgeoisie, and that we were at a somewhat prestigious, somewhat conservative academy with the privilege of studying there for years. There's the usual theory books going round and a typical western mind-set of immanence is prevalent. With the **Polyrhythm Technoir** trilogy we attempted to show the possibility of a different perspective, or at least wanted to show that we are interested in one. When you start studying at an art academy in a smallish city like Düsseldorf then that particular art-scene will inevitably become your enclosed world for quite some time to come. When I'm listening to the people featured in the final part of the trilogy, which looks into grassroots organising and the concept of the temporary autonomous zone, I feel like they are trying to move beyond our Western obsession with immanence. That's worth considering to me and so it was important for us to share the depicted experiences, encounters and conversations with our own scene – the art scene. Which is one reason why we consider the films as video art. They are films about one specific subculture and they are being presented to yet another specific subculture.

O&F: How do that analogy or that transfer work when you're trying to bring an independent and different Techno scene into the art scene? Should one view that as a comparison between two disparate worlds?

F: We made this trilogy together with a third artist, Danji Buck-Moore. He's a musician himself and seriously involved in Montreal's Techno scene. Ours is still an outsider's perspective but at the same time one of the authors is an active participant in this and that's what makes it interesting to us. It is also more of a discursive perspective onto this scene: not an exotic stare but rather a comparative view. So you get those two groups from those two scenes round the same table in a way, and one can listen to what the others have to say. I think in our western-euro-american culture we all have the same problems. At times certain problems aren't visible enough in one scene because the willingness to see and discuss is too low.

O&F: Does the Techno scene you are documenting in your **Polyrhythm Technoir** trilogy also offer a possible alternative vision to the art world portrayed in **Production Line of Happiness** because its references are less rigid and established? And because that scene is not made up of a hermetically segregated bourgeois middle class where everyone is reading the same books?

R: We in the art scene are oftentimes still clinging on to Marxist, deconstructivist, myth-busting concepts, which is really what I'm talking about when I'm mentioning that prevalent "immanence group-think". In my opinion those theories really tend to paralyse people a lot, especially amateurs and autodidacts. Yet the people from that Techno scene in the trilogy's third part are applying pretty radical concepts from the '90s – like the temporary autonomous zone.

O&F: You are directly addressing the awkwardness of the academic year group or the art world when you refer to their 1990s champions and focus on Andreas Gursky, or on Christopher Williams' mentor role. Are you not enforcing the same canonical referencing of established older generations by that, inevitably leading to the sort of 'immanence thinking' you mentioned earlier?

R: Yes, that is a relevant argument to be made. I think at times we are doing that, but also we are nearing the end of this sort of grief work; we've done our share of that.

O&F: How important is the form you present your work in? When you take these subjects-artists or books-that people are discussing and reference them in a documentary-style video work, you are applying strategies of the cinema of the avant-garde. You are using montage techniques as a re-enactment of a past era of cinema. How does that form relate to the content of your works?

R: I guess we are appropriating old avant-garde techniques. We both share this interest for cinema, and also for everything that may be referred to as "slow cinema". It's a small genre with with international filmmakers somehow involved in it. Most notably are maybe Lav Diaz from the Philippines – who is gaining broader attention through this year's Berlinale – and Béla Tarr from Hungary. It's a sort of deep-cinema that allows one to look at things differently. This way of slow seeing, paradoxically, is related to the technical possibilities of the digital: one can go on infinitely filming because there's no material costs involved anymore. Also, it is easy to store great amounts of data. This really allows for a subtractive editing process. The way we work, for example, is that we take great amounts of footage, and once we're done shooting, we spend days on end in the studio, just looking at the files one by one, experiencing the specifics of each individual situation, each individual shot. It's a very calm process, but in the end you have to kill your darlings.

O&F: How do you view that type of cinema in comparison to the German photographic tradition? Are slow cinema and the techniques of avant-garde montage in opposition to it, or do they rather form a new proposition or even a continuation of the history of German photography?

R: I think we should study the methods of conceptual and post-conceptual photography and then apply these methods. Fassbinder said about his time at a film school, that the only thing that would have been important to teach to students was respect for other human beings.

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O&F: Your films pick up on that genre of cinema while also being heavily invested in the history of German photography and the idea of the German in general. That's most apparent in your work **The Disinfecting Sun**, showing melancholic scenes of shop-fronts and passers-by in Cologne. Those images seem reminiscent of the German Pop Art and its Capitalist Realism offspring, as championed by Gerhard Richter or Sigmar Polke in the 1960s.

R: …in Düsseldorf! Let me get back to the question before: you take those pre-existent methods, techniques and strategies as if they were totally fresh, and make them your own. I don't see it as appropriation because appropriation always indicates its own quotation.

O&F: What role does Christopher Williams play in your work? His position in the history of photography is very much concerned with the "politics of looking". Are you continuing that research, or what other methods of his have you taken on board?

R: During our time in his class he once told us that he had reached a point when he realised that the times of wild-west-referentiality seemed to be over. He also said that a recipe to make art nowadays might be to achieve a synthesis of Allen Sekula's and Martin Kippenberger's practices. You could also think of a concept like authenticity being important, like in the third part of the **Polyrhythm Technoir** trilogy. I'm not really that interested looking for authenticity, but then suddenly it will pop up anyway. You look and listen to the people in the film and then involve yourself there. Christopher's and our work are mutually quite permeable and symbiotic in that approach.

O&F: The authenticity you mention is also visible in that year group discussion in **Production Line of Happiness**. The discussion feels awkward and embarrassing to watch and also somewhat naïve, but the charme of that authenticity ultimately is stronger.

R: Production Line of Happiness is a recapitulation of our studies in Düsseldorf that actually took quite a few years. We were part of Christopher's class for six years and amongst his first students when he started teaching there. That's also why that almost depressive, dub-like state can to take hold of a class. And that is not a situation anymore, but a status. You become a record that keeps spinning in groove-lock.

F: A lot of people think we make documentaries. And in a way that's how we work, because we let the camera film something that can't be recorded a second time, because its not a filmset, there aren't any paid actors and there is no script. We look at something while we record it. The duration of those scenes is often really long in terms of film-time. And sometimes things are just thrown together, like in that discussion in class. Everyone is participating somehow but no one's an expert, but you just get on with it together. And you still have a sense of where this is all going, because many people have felt this at some point in their lives. And because there are such long takes in the films and because nothing much happens, the viewer is free to superimpose their own layer of perception and to join in mentally a bit.

O&F: How would you describe the structure of your films: where are their starting and ending points? They all have something fractured and unframed to them. Do you give them a frame and context through the way you are presenting them, like by opting for an immersive installation?

R: We usually show our videos in an installation, even though I wouldn't necessarily call them immersive. When we show a video, we usually adjust its size to about flat screen TV dimensions, even if it's being projected. The way we edit and film the videos beforehand, has a lot in common with body rhythms and metabolisms. When we started making films someone told us that all we do really is make films about how the brain works. I always thought that was a strange idea, and it took me some time to understand what was meant. There are some logical, symmetrical, even structuralist dimensions in our work. But there is also this other dimension, where we try to transform formalism in a way that Raúl Ruiz described best in his short essay "For a Shamanic Cinema". Ruiz elaborates how certain formalist methods allow for new nexuses to evolve. Maybe he was going for a psychedelic formalism, but his essay is brief and seems without great influence today. Another dead branch is the Russian Cinema of the avant-garde. The Soviet Union tried to oppress the ancient occult forces that were still strong in the memory and consciousness of the people at the time. Cinema, and especially the Russian structuralist approach to cinema, would, avant la lettre, have been a fantastic breeding ground for theories like that of Raúl Ruiz. But instead, film makers like Dziga Vertov were accused of 'formalism' and banned from film making.

O&F: Why are you showing the videos at that comparatively small scale? Is it so they have no relation to the viewer's bodies looking at them? Or so they reference monitors?

F: There's different reason plus every film has its own set-up too. But there are simple reasons like it not being a bad thing necessarily when the person on the screen or monitor is about your size. At the same time we're considering what the seating arrangement inside the space is. There are completely different options compared to, say, a movie theatre where you sit in some futuristic arm chair and only got to have your eyes and ears switched on. So we may be considering leaving the light switched on in the space, and where it comes from so that people can also look at one another while watching the film.

R: Jeff Wall works like that; in his photographs people are slightly larger than life, so that from a distance it feels like they're actually life-size. I think that's a really interesting idea, and also another photography reference again.

O&F: Your photography took us by surprise: where is that series of studio photography coming from, and do you still keep working on it?

F: Theoretically speaking yes, but practically it is four years old so we're not working on it for the moment, but what I mean is that we still have some interest in photographs as artworks. The series is comprised of 14 photographs produced during the time we received grant money from an insurance company. This company has eight single office spaces and a huge one in their headquarters, and as part of the grant the artists put up an exhibition for a year until the next recipient gets the grant. Back in the day we could see their building on the horizon from our studio windows, and one idea for the photos was that as they are paying us we're going to show them us in our working environment. Another idea was to perform a kind of alphabet of actions, which we then kept narrowing down. And that's why in the works I'm always doing something with my hands whereas Philipp always keeps talking on the phone. Like one is busy within the situation one is working on. We briefly stopped what we were doing to take the pictures because we were making these photographs with a middle format camera on film, but what is shown is actual work we were doing at the time.

O&F: Is the self portrait still a leitmotif until today? Or portraiture in general, as perhaps in the portrait of the studying young person?

F: There's actually a small painting in a private collection here in New York that depicts an old teacher showing a book to a very young girl dressed all in white, and the scenario is illuminated only by a single candle: **The Education of the Virgin** is its title. So perhaps as a motif this is universal and will always remain relevant.
The three-part **Tourist Information (Polyrhythm Technoir)** of the Cologne-based artists Henning Fehr and Philipp Rühr was presented at the Swiss Institute Contemporary Art New York from Jan 16 – Feb 07 2016.