

Interview of Birgit Hein by Duncan White

Berlin, February 2009

DW: I usually start by asking people to give their definition of expanded cinema, or what expanded cinema might mean to them – to you.

BH: What I found most interesting about expanded cinema, is that expanded cinema 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 kind of gallery/museum structure that allowed MUMOK [Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien] in 2003 to make their show of expanded cinema: X-Screen Film Installations and Actions in the 1960s and 1970s. But this is a general statement, in that, expanded cinema extends film into the art scene. But then there are so many different forms of expanded cinema. I would say, from my point of view, expanded cinema is very much reflecting about cinema.

DW: OK.

BH: So, this is how our Performance works for example. 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.

DW: Yes.

BH: So, this is why we started the Performance in the exhibition space of the Kunstverein in Cologne because we needed the whole space, all around us.

DW: That's a gallery?

BH: A Kunstverein is a non-profit arts society that gets public funding.

DW: And you were saying earlier that you saw in the UK that expanded cinema tends to be "flat".

BH: It was, in my opinion, it was more because of the screen. Or a wall – a flat space to project onto. And this was how Wilhelm and I worked until Documenta 1977. Our work was also only about the screen and only visual. Maybe a visual pleasure – playing with space and illusion. It was not until afterwards that we started performing – performing and screening.

DW: And you were using multi-screen works.

BH: Yes, we were basically using three screens. In the beginning there were more but then it turned out – 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 changed also the format of the screens. Like smaller and bigger frames with zoom lenses. So, it was three projectors and the slide projector.

DW: OK. So, shall we talk about the Movie Show thing in more detail? Documenta was a kind of breaking point for you.

BH: And an end.

DW: What was it an end of?

BH: An end of basically concentrating on form. And although I had tried to write a text for Edinburgh [Avant Garde Forum '76] about form and content, it turned out that it was too special, and the questions became more and more special and nobody would understand. We ended up for example, 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]. So, it was very much like an angry art. And 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 like Vietnam and the trailer from *From Here to Eternity*.

DW: Where did you find the newsreel material and the trailer?

BH: We found the trailer in the projection booth of one of the cinemas we were running at that time.

DW: So, professional mainstream cinema?

BH: Not mainstream.– We would show more intellectual art films. In Germany these cinemas were called Programme Cinemas. Cinemas with an intent.

DW: Yes, I see.

BH: We loved this trailer *From Here to Eternity*, it's so perfect. It's really like the whole film in 10 minutes.

DW: a kind of compressed narrative.

BH: Yes. You have everything. You have the emotion. You understand the story. You don't need the whole film. So, 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. Wilhelm at that time worked in a job at the WDR – West 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 who was – who the other soldiers tried to carry out of a river where he was shot. And it was very close and very real, you know?

DW: Yes. What year was that then?

BH: Around 1968 . Wilhelm just took it. Later we included it in the performances.

- BH: The show developed and changed very, very much. I'll show you [picks up materials]. This is what we found when we were on tour in the United States. And these paper dolls, you could buy them in a souvenir shop. [Points to documentation of *Superman and Wonderwoman*] And then we would glue them on cardboard, so that they are strong and then we would move them like a jumping jack.
- DW: Yes. And it would be quite sexualised. So, was that a separate show *from From Here to Eternity? The Superman and Wonderwoman?*
- BH: It started as *From Here to Eternity* and at that time we called it Performance. And then we realised 'performance' is a very, very bad word because everybody thinks performance is boring.
- DW: Yes it's very freighted – loaded.
- BH: And then we started to call it Show. *Superman and Wonderwoman* would come in after – when we had found these. The show would be nearly never the same; always changing.
- DW: 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?
- BH: We did it.
- DW: So you were in front and behind the projector.
- BH: Yes, but we had one piece *The Frankensteins* 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 in the right moment. Our daughter, she was seven years old at the time, she did it best.
- DW: Seven years old?
- BH: Yes. She sometimes travelled with us and did it best. 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 when we were....
- DW: Scurrying up to the stage. And was there a film in it? Or was it just an empty projector?
- BH: 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 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. We were in this big square in front of this 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.
- DW: And what year was that? Can you remember?

- BH: Milan. We were there in '79. With the show already. 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, in a very important museum we realised 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. Wilhelm hated perfection and I suffered from imperfection. And it was a kind of a tension.
- DW: Did you think of it as theatre? Or did you think of it as something else?
- BH: Theatre? No, because we were always in the audience with the machines. For example, we needed to stand on chairs to run the machines. People would even take our chairs, when it was crowded. You would hear the sound of the machines and would see the illusion there on the stage in the same time. For example, we had this kiss number. That was very effective. We always did it until the people started shouting or coughing. So it was never the same length.
- DW: So you just wait for people to react.
- BH: Yes.
- DW: So you would literally just kiss each other?
- BH: 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 but we were there in person. And everybody would know that we were kissing and kissing and kissing.
- DW: So, in terms of the audience you were [by now] very keen to get out of the art world weren't you?
- BH: We would play in the weirdest places. Like for example – in a pub, where it was somehow difficult to have [a stage]. So we would take two tables. We preferred pubs which already had like a cabaret programme. That was very popular in the end of the 1970s. In America as well filmmakers would show their films in bars and it was very popular to have pubs where they have programmes – 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 like it. In this surrounding we learned very, very fast which pieces were really good and which pieces were [just an] intellectual construction. So in the end this influenced us of course very much.
- DW: You mean the how people responded to the work influenced its content?
- BH: The funny thing about the performance was that you – even if nobody would say a word, you could always know what people think, if they like or hate it. You could really feel it. And of course this was – yes I loved it. This tension.

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

BH: No we couldn't improvise, because the pieces were constructed. We would never address the audience. There were no such pieces.

DW: 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 kind of related?

BH: Yes. Definitely. Definitely so, because that was a very important point [we needed] to get a certain kind of content, real content into the show.

DW: What do you mean real content?

BH: As I already said the trailer was a kind of 'instant' Hollywood film but in the same time it was also a World War II drama, whose tragic was confronted with the actual war documentary of a dead soldier in Vietnam, which in turn is commented by the safe world of the home movie, but also by the white plastic pigeons as 'doves of peace' which flap with their wings over the heads of the audience and throw shadows on the screen.

The performance wanted to get 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. Illusion of perception and image and reality. So, us being there became important. In contrast to 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. Projection machines as a reality. And so the narrative of the content was also very much on the level of dealing with such questions. So, to 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 kind of construct their own interpretation. So, they were always asked to consider what they know, and to access their knowledge, so they can understand what we mean. For example, if somebody has never seen *Frankenstein* film, of course he will not understand the irony. Or *Superman and Wonderwoman*.

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

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

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

BH: Yes. With life. Yes. And it was amazing that we could survive. And then what we thought the high point was to be invited to the Festival of Fools in Amsterdam. The Festival of Fools was a professional festival of cabaret/theatre but also the avant-garde. So, we were invited there, but the conditions were impossible, we couldn't get a dark room. It was a huge space like an old railway station or something like that. And for us there was no possibility to have any other space. Then, the whole performance

period stopped when we got our PS1 grant and went to New York for more than a year.

DW: Was that '84?

BH: '81/82. We had intended to continue. But then we were confronted with a completely different scene of professionalism. Like that famous discotheque THE RITZ with a stage and so on where William Burroughs and Laurie Anderson would perform. We understood very, very quickly that we would not have the level to perform there.

DW: Really.

BH: Yes, which was good because it was the complete break in our work. And in the end it led to [the film] *Love Stinks*. And so for me, that was what I really always wanted. To work in that way, because it is also a narrative.

DW: Narrative. Is it also a kind of documentary style?

BH: Now it is seen as documentary. At the beginning, in the '80s, it was called experimental. But somehow it was a similar structure to the show. In *Love Stinks* – there was no continuing story but [a series of] situations, and so in the same way the viewer had to construct the content.

DW: OK, so you always see narrative as not this kind of ... There's a distinction a scholar called Robert Scholes has made between narration and narrativity, and it's similar to what you have said about Le Grice's *After Leonardo* in the X Screen catalogue, as being about a narrative, or a story, [about] the image; that the audience is given this material, and the audience itself has to make the connections and do the work in order to create [the narrative meaning of the piece]... That's what Scholes describes as narrativity. It's the activity of the audience.

BH: Yes, it's the combination of an activity of the audience and what you tell them...

DW: Put in front of them.

BH: Yes. What you propose to think about. And I think narrativity is Montage. In literature it was a very old practice, like Ulysses, James Joyce for example, or William Burroughs. They were also making this kind of collage.

DW: Yes, cut up.

BH: For example, the principle of collage, which is montage in cinema, is also a narrative in my opinion. The performance was a collage of very different image sequences who where all simultaneously connected to each other.

DW: Because you're having to make associations between things. So the narrative exists between the images rather than – or as well as – in the images. The space was also very important.

DW: In the performance work?

BH: Yes. Because whatever space you were in, also influenced the performance. For example, in the end we had a very beautiful piece, I really loved. We had big slides, the slides you used in the cinema for advertising in the early times. And they were like this. And if you projected them you could fill a huge screen.

DW: 70mm slides?

BH: Yes. So then for example, if you had a space like this. You could suddenly open the space with one image and then again the three smaller ones. So, the space was also important.

DW: So, were you trying to draw on the kind of cultural narratives of the space.

BH: Yes.

BH: But this is how I understood the narrative in performance, in expanded cinema. Performance I mean, it's very difficult, it's not very clearly separated. Or what would you say of the *Nine Evenings of Theatre and Engineering* [NY 1966??], what would it be? ..I only saw the videos. The screen was very important but the action was also very important. And in the '60s it's very clear that it comes from Fluxus. The Fluxus influence.

DW: Yes. But Expanded cinema?

BH: Yes, very much.

DW: I think it's different. There's an American version of expanded cinema. Isn't there? That comes out of that intermedia type of performance and Fluxus; but I mean America is interesting because there's also the Gene Youngblood idea of expanded cinema which is very techno...

BH: This is different. Completely different.

DW: Everyone I've spoken to says it's completely alternative to what they had in mind.

BH: Yes. Because in his book *Expanded Cinema*, 1970 – he sees the expansion of cinema mainly in the combination of film with new technologies like the videorecording or computer generated images. He is concerned with world wide communication through satellite television. Paik had a very interesting idea of interactivity. Already in the middle of the sixties he had a concept of going into the mass media. He only did it once in *his Global Groove* [1973]– he only had the chance once to perform on a big television show, which was a world wide show. His idea was "where do we reach the people?" Which medium is the one, which is all over the world? Where should our different kinds of content be presented? And I think that was very avant-garde.

DW: Stan Vanderbeek had a similar position, didn't he? He was trying to invent this kind of culture intercom, he called it. You invade the mass media. Or plant your work in that context.

- BH: Which is what...when we started going to the pubs we thought we could do..[Laughs]...
- DW: From the ground up. Was that important that kind of relationship to the media generally? The fact that you were using Hollywood trailers mixed with newsreel footage, mixed with your own private diaries. There's a kind of mixing of media there, isn't there? Or using popular consciousness in an interesting way. There's a mixture of public private and performance which seems kind of interesting
- BH: I mean there were many aspects to that because we were also always very much interested in the different aesthetics. There is a Hollywood aesthetic which is completely different, from the avant-garde aesthetic or the aesthetic of the TV documentary. And how you would understand it. If you would see a TV documentary you would automatically say "truth".
- DW: An 'authenticity'.
- BH: But you never would believe that *From Here to Eternity* was authentic just because the language. There you have another thing – narrativity and language.
- DW: Yes, this is what I mentioned briefly in an email. And I was interested when you said that all films shown in Germany would be dubbed.
- BH: Yes. Imagine, yes.
- DW: But it's interesting because you talk about different relationships to Hollywood. Because in the UK, Hollywood is the big demon. You have suggested that you weren't so threatened by Hollywood.
- BH: No, not at all.
- DW: You kind of – not enjoyed it – You saw it as something quite...
- BH: When we started filmmaking we didn't know Hollywood. So, this was really a completely different approach. The other XSCREEN members were film journalists. Through them we learned about cinema, and every night we would go to late night shows. There was Hollywood, and here WE were Fluxus, Dada, avant- garde art, abstract art; Mondrian.
- DW: So, film was just a tool to express those ideas that you already knew through art history.
- BH: Malcolm said something similar. We wanted to include film into art as a visual system. And this is why we started with destroying the image. Andy Warhol's aesthetic was for us the interesting aesthetic when he produced the, silk screens of the cheap black and white newspaper photographs, – the *Disasters* for example, or *Most Wanted Men*. He understood that there is a visual aesthetic that needs to be included into the art work. Richard Hamilton in the early '60s - he was maybe one of the earliest to consciously include the aesthetic of mass media. Theo Van Doesburg, wrote in the twenties 'the most important form of expression in each art lies in the use of its own means'. When

we started filmmaking – we said: "What are the basic means of film?" Structural film was basically reflecting the basic means of film. So that the basic definition of film is "projection of light in time".

DW: And that was your material.

BH: Yes and the real images are only one possibility of film. The structural filmmakers would agree on that. Hollywood is one possibility. But film is much, much more. At that time that was really new, because then only the movies were film. Today it is completely normal that film has hundreds of possibilities – how it can express, what it can be.

DW: So, Hollywood was kind of a shock to you.

BH: Yes. But we enjoyed it

DW: You mentioned language, but was it a question of language?

BH: I mean language not as spoken language. When I said language it was the images. In German we have the word 'Bildsprache', which means image language. The image language of the fiction film involves a certain language aesthetics. Language as an aesthetic expression. You know Metz?

DW: Yes.

BH: In the early '70s, I studied Metz and the structuralists and the language of film. They came completely from written language structure. In no way did Metz really talk about the image. And his [structural analysis] of film, to my opinion was no way to judge a good or bad film. With his system you could analyse every film and any film but you would never be able to get onto the question of quality, because what the images express, you can't get hold of that with the theory. That's why I always wanted that the artist historians should deal with film. But in Germany until now that's not really happened. Now it's media studies, which is too much sociology. Media studies is not really film studies – a little bit of film history of course.

DW: But there's not the analysis of the image.

BH: No.

DW: Who was doing that? Someone like Paul Sharits would be that kind of – his work seemed to be investigating..

BH: Yes, of course, I mean theoretical, his first two texts, 'words per page'. But all these efforts never went into the scientific system – into the system of scholarship. The Americans have a better understanding. Especially in Germany you don't find that people who do art sciences, also deal with films. If they do it they deal always only with these Hollywood adaptations like *24 Hour Psycho* [Douglas Gordon 1993] – they deal with this and they have no historical knowledge to judge, which is well, another story.

DW: I think I'd like to go back to that idea you mentioned in the X Screen catalogue about Malcolm's [Le Grice] work *After Leonardo* and this idea of taking the principles of structural film – you weren't necessarily throwing structural film away – it was that you were using those principles of structural film as a way trying to find a different form of narrative. I was wondering if you could say some more about that.

BH: *After Leonardo* for example is a very, very interesting narrative of the language of the image. Because you have this one black and white Mona Lisa, a photocopy. And then you have the variations of that image, which tell you a lot about the process of filming and the different qualities. It goes – I love that very much because in the same way Mona Lisa is popular culture, very much. Even in China you have the Mona Lisa smiling from the huge sky scraper's light boards.

DW: Well, it kind of blurs that distinction because it's high culture made popular or popular culture made high, it's those kind of relationships with culture.

BH: And Of course, you must know the Mona Lisa. That's also very important to the content of Malcolm's piece. But even if you didn't – there's a story that you can understand through the change of the images on the screen. And it does not tell a conventional story but it talks about image quality. Time for example. Time / space. Many of these structural pieces are about illusionary space. Creating a space on a flat...

DW: On a flat surface.

BH: Yes. On a flat surface, yes. And it makes it more interesting. We did for example, experiments with abstract images but this was very much the first performance and there was a more interesting quality with the image – the Mona Lisa for example.

DW: Because it was representational?

BH: Yes.

DW: So it can kind of draw on those cultural narratives that surround the image.

BH: On that. Also on the question of reproduction.

DW: So again it's about that distance between you and the original thing, in a way.

BH: Yes.

DW: And Malcolm seems to build that into the work, doesn't he? This distance the time and space element. Not just the room that you're in, but about your relationship with some sort of original material.

BH: And this idea is very much coming from illusion and reality which was very much the basis for structural filmmaking. And luckily it developed.

DW: Luckily? Do you think it was getting to an endpoint at that time?

- BH: Funny, clearly around '77/78 there was a very definite break. In the work of many filmmakers; Malcolm started like *Blackbird Descending*. [His 'narrative' feature length film]
- DW: Which comes out of things like *After Lumiere* [197?] and *After Manet* [19??]
- BH: Yes, yes and for example Heinz Emigholz who was very, very formal filmmaker started *Demon*, [1977] his first feature length film, and Wilhelm and I did the performance. In America they started the Super 8 movement and Punk.
- DW: In London, in the UK as well. What do you think caused it? That shift. Do you think?
- BH: In 1977 in Germany there were the 'new wild painters' who became very famous. Maybe the whole concept art had exhausted its need, because that was a very formal, intellectual art. It was the Zeitgeist; the Zeitgeist changed.
- DW: Yes.
- BH: We should also think about what was the political change, for example in '77 was the year when the Bader Meinhoff [group] died. I've never thought about that – it just came to me – that was very heavy in '77 for us, our generation, it was the end of [] a certain political climate
- DW: It's like the end of radical movements
- BH: Yes. And we're still suffering from no radical movements. [Laughs]
- DW: I think there was a new suspicion of radical symbolism, maybe...
- BH: For us when we started as artists – young artists – our belief was like Dada – was you had to attack society through art, to change...
- DW: Change art, you change society.
- BH: Yes and in the end of the '70s we realised, "no way".
- DW: And was it a time of increased commercialism in the artworld as well? Or was that something else?
- BH: Yes, these ten years, at least in Germany, Cologne, from '67 to '77 were the big golden years of the art market. Cologne was at that time the centre for art galleries. And the connection between New York and Cologne was a real power connection. Interestingly the Documenta 6 in 1977 is now called the Media Documenta, although in reality the film part was small – the video part only a bit bigger; Some weeks ago I said to Wulf Herzogenrath, who was the video curator "Wolf, we were only under the roof". "Yes, he said, but we were above all." In fact, the painting was much, much more important than film and video and photography. But the art market felt a real threat that the media artists might spoil the business. And in 1980 there was a big exhibition called West Kunst – West Art. A very big international exhibition in Cologne. And in this exhibition

there was no video. No video, no film, no installations, because the galleries wanted to stop that.

DW: Yes. So by then there was a kind of mixture then of – a mixed problem that there was an increasingly commercial art market and also your own frustrations with your own response to that commercial market which was anti-art or a later form of Dada.

BH: And you know the kind of – the people who would come to such events like our shows and galleries – they were not the people we wanted to address. That was this special connoisseur this special audience you know. We wanted to get onto a different level and *Love Stinks* was the first film we made that was really running in the cinema. And also not just one show – a week! In one cinema. And this is what we had wanted. What was much more interesting.

DW: So, you saw cinema as a different, not platform, but a way in to a different kind of space than into the art world.

BH: We did not think that in the beginning.

DW: Right.

BH: But it came out that way. And then the problem with museums, how do they deal with time? This is a very big problem and this is also the problem with expanded cinema in the museum context because time is involved and it is not suitable obviously to exhibitions.

DW: it's used in installation I suppose.

BH: Yes, but installations are mainly constructed – not always – that you could see them all in one glance. You could stay one minute or two and then you could leave. You know Marie - Jo Lafontaine's Installation *Les Larmes D'Acier* (1987?) That was in Documenta 8 I think. It became very popular. It was a whole wall of monitors seeming to show the same image of a bodybuilder. Much later I saw it again in an exhibition and I took my time to sit down and to watch the whole thing and suddenly I realised that there was a real story of about 15 minutes length. It had a beginning – a real beginning and an end and I tell you very, very few people will have seen that piece as such. They saw it as a beautiful wall.

DW: Yes and then walked out. So cinema has that time element built into it.

BH: Yes. And also the narrativity has time built in. Film, even if it is vertical, you have to watch from beginning to end to get in its full meaning. And therefore now the museums more and more have seats, which was a 'no' even in the beginning of the '90s. At the last Documenta they built some kind of cinemas. But people would walk in and out. For example, Ulrike Ottingers six hour long film was taken like an installation, and this is against the narrative.

DW: I guess there's a sense that time seems to be about a managed space or a controlled space. That it involves physically organising the spectator in terms of the screen or in terms of the time that they're going to be there.

- BH: Yes.
- DW: And that physical organisation maybe somehow becomes a part of the film itself.
- BH: Yes and especially if it's not an illusionary story where you forget the time. This kind of narrative always makes you aware of your time.
- DW: Of your time. That comes out of structural film, that awareness, making the audience aware of the time. The physical time of watching. .
- DW: And so now you use – would you call it an abstract narrative - that you are interested in? Not telling a story in the conventional sense but, as you said before, putting scenarios together or episodes together in a kind of collage.
- BH: With *Baby* I constructed a kind of – not a story – but it was not collage anymore. I mean it was collage out of images that I did shoot myself. OK. But there was a kind of continuation in the voiceover – I don't know if you know the film.
- DW: What do you think it was about the documentary genre that attracted you?
- BH: We didn't consider ourselves to be documentarists. If you don't work in fiction with sets, then what images can you take? In the beginning when Wilhelm and I worked together we never shot our own images we always used photographs or reproduced images and we would work with them. Over or only with *Love Stinks* we started to take pictures, and some of them – many of them are documentary - and some of them staged documentary. We staged in front of the camera. What other means do you have? The funny thing was with my film – *Baby I Will Make You Sweat*, that for the first time the critics would say "Oh this is a new style of documentary". I used old experimental film techniques because I shot that film in High 8 and I wanted to work over the images, so I transferred the High 8 on 16 and then I filmed it with an analytical projector. So, that I could freeze frames, which that at that time we didn't have the videotexture at the school. And I could enlarge pieces of the image. Then suddenly people said: "Wow. New documentary style." The television documentary style is something very much apart from that. *Love Stinks* in 1982 was seen as an experimental film. Only now it is also regarded at as a special kind of documentary. So, it was not that I changed to documentary. We started shooting our own images. That was the beginning.
- DW: So you were interested in integrating personal material or yourselves, real life into your work. Which you felt you couldn't do before. Or you weren't able to.
- BH: We just couldn't do it. It was during that year in New York step by step we started taking slides. Slides, slides, slides [laughs] and we had problems because when we first started filming we were attacked by two men who wanted to take away the camera. And so it took a long time to get the courage to start filming again. At that time it was violent. Everybody talked about being mugged in the East Village. That is why only very nearly at the end of our stay we started again filming. But there was no concept whatsoever just – what would be interesting for us we would shoot. The film was made after we were back. It was constructed from material which we had

shot. I worked in the same way with my later films like *Mysterious Woman* and *Baby*. I never had a script in which to follow. Collecting material and then constructing the film afterwards. And I hate shooting. Hmm. But why are you interested? What is your interest in the whole question of narrativity in expanded cinema?

DW: Well, I am interested in this new – to me expanded cinema seems to be involved in trying to find new forms of perception through film and video-making. To the extent that it even develops or expands on this experimental tradition. It draws on the experimental tradition and takes it into new areas of seeing and observing the world – through film.

BH: Hopefully.

DW: Hopefully. I don't know yet if that's true but we'll see. But it also seems a very under researched area.

BH: Yes. Basically the '60s, in my opinion, are the most important art period of time for the second half of the 20th century. And it's completely under represented in research. People only read those books that were published in the 60's and don't do original research, so MUMOK's X-Screen, that was really a first step. But now the interest is there. But for many, many years it was not. For example, Jack Smith's has a very high reputation only now; 40 years or 50 years after he worked and lived. You know, in the early '70s nobody would really know his work in the art market. *Flaming Creatures* was still underground. He was always a poor devil.

DW: So when did you become aware of that American scene?

BH: In the middle of the '60s. We got [the magazine] *Film Culture*, in a bookstore in Munich they had it. *Film Culture*. And there was also something like a zeitgeist suddenly, at the same time in London, at the same time Malcolm, whom we didn't know at that time made his first film; people in Italy. All in the middle of the '60s. Somehow with the rumour of the first Knokke [Experimental film Festival] in '64. In Cologne we were completely isolated there was nobody else who did this. Our influence was Bunuel. A Bunuel retrospective which we saw.

DW: Surrealism was quite important.

BH: Yes, but this retrospective did not include Chien Andalou. This retrospective was mainly his Mexican films. But they were so special, we both were deeply impressed. At that time nobody distributed avantgarde films. And then in 1966 we bought a used camera and just started some how. And the funny thing is that at Knocke '68 suddenly they were all there. David [Curtis] was there. In March 68 we started XSCREEN and we made the festival in Munich in '68 when Vali [Export] did her [*Tappe und Tast kino*]– and David was there. There was also the premiere of *Rohfilm* [1968]. And David [Curtis] said: "You must see Malcolm's films. He does the same thing." And then we went to London to the Arts Lab – and since then we were friends. We did not know each other before. It was so strange. I mean the American film culture was the main influence in London as well in Germany, in Italy and Austria. Before [that] we were painting... after starting with film we stopped the painting.

DW: A lot of people were painting. Malcolm [Le Grice] was painting before he was making films. It's that interest in abstraction isn't it that leads into – it's quite interesting... Did you meet at art school?

BH: No. We met at an art exhibition that I had organized when I was still at school. I studied later in Cologne art history and Wilhelm sociology.

DW: I was going to ask you about the political aspect of your work and what happened later on with the movie show. Have you ever seen your work as political or...

BH: Yes. Sure. But very early in '70s we understood that – if you really want to change something you have to go into politics. Art can never be a direct way. But then of course, at that time it was already obvious that if you join a political party you have to compromise so much that you can never have a radical statement or radical position, at least in a political situation as it was in Germany. Or you would follow the path of the terrorists, which was in our point of view a step too much. And we did not see a solution in so-called political art. A painting of a dying soldier, it doesn't influence society.

DW: What I thought was interesting was thinking about someone like Werner Nekes' work and how he, in the late '60s, suddenly realised that cinema was not something where you make political representations, like the picture of the dying soldier or something like that, but it's the way you use cinema: it was the way he was moving the projector around using the elements of cinema directly... And that seemed to have a political implication.

BH: Yes, but then it was not seen as such. Or not enough. In an retrospective in '88, twenty years after '68, some of our strongest opponent said that *ROHFILM* had been the only political film of that time.

DW: At the time there seemed to be a backlash against your work politically.

BH: There were the political filmmakers like Harun Farocki. They regarded us as the reactionary avant-garde. When *Film im Underground* [B Hein, 1971] was published, everybody was tearing me to pieces.

DW: *Film im Underground*? Has that been translated into English?

BH: Unfortunately not.

DW: That's a shame.

BH: Yes. Because it's still very popular among people in Germany who study film. Now it's happened several times that younger people tell me– "You know when I was at school I read your book.". In '68 there was this highly explosive climate in Germany, in France – also in England,

DW: It didn't seem as radical somehow.

BH: In Germany the Left students had romantic ideas.

- DW: That's interesting that one thing structural film is not is romantic. It kind of strips out anything romantic or any use of anything that might be affecting or emotionally involved somehow.
- BH: Concept art there has brought theoretical thinking to art. But it has never been a direct political influence. This is an illusion if you believe that. Peter Gidal believed that.
- DW: Well, it was stories of ideological work.
- BH: Peter, in my opinion, makes one big flaw, or impossibility, to say material and materialist is the same thing, which is absolutely nonsense. Material film has nothing to do with materialism, at least in the German understanding of materialism and material. Like structural and structuralism. Also structuralism is also something different from structural film. It's a philosophical school and materialism is a Marxist theory and material film...
- DW: Is not Marxist.
- BH: Not Marxist. Not directly. And Peter, we were for a long time not good friends because of the criticism – criticising each other. And now when we are old everybody loves each other – the survivors of the movement [Laughs].
- DW: You say somewhere that that type of work had become “bloodless”.
- BH: Yes.
- DW: And you were interested in entertainment, but not entertainment as in typical forms of entertainment, but putting some life back into the work.
- BH: Yes. Everybody agreed that the last generation took structural filmmaking as a recipe, kind of. Because when we started like we didn't know we were structural filmmakers. We didn't know that. Or Malcolm [Le Grice] when he made *Little Dog for Roger*, [1967] he didn't know that would be a structural film work. And so there was a lot of life in the beginning. It became more and more schematic
- DW: It became more and more regulated by rules and ideology.
- BH: Yes. And now I think “experimental” is even a historical category. I would never say that I do experimental film, nor would I say that I taught at the art school experimental film.
- DW: Because it just becomes another genre doesn't it?
- BH: And filmmaking has developed so many genres and facets.
- DW: That's another of your comments about narrative that I thought was interesting. You talk about non-linear narrative. And non-linear forms being so common now. In terms of visual culture and what we see on TV and in the cinema. That you had to take a

more complex approach to the work because it had become so common in popular culture.

BH: Yes and Malcolm wrote that too. In my paper for the X-SCREEN panel in Vienna 2004 I quoted Malcolm [Le Grice]. He said that in art history there are only a few examples which precede interactivity. But the non-linearity has a predecessor in early experimental cinema. The Polish theoretician Ryszard Kluszczyński says: "non-linearity and interactivity are now becoming the most important issues of our civilization and culture." Both non-linearity and interactivity. And the '60s somehow did very much prepare for that; also that's Paik's thinking.

DW: Which essay was that from – Malcolm's [Le Grice]?

BH: That was a conference at the Oberhausen short film festival in 1997.

DW: So the talk you gave at X Screen specifically talked about narrative.

BH: On narrativity.

DW: Was that in English or did you do it German?

BH: I did it in German. I quoted also from a German book called *The Theory of Happening* 1974, which has some very interesting parts "The happening breaks with the monopoly of the linearity". Space and Time become somehow an element of an art. Basic means. Space and Time. For example expanded cinema includes – it produces real space and real time. Weibel talks about non-linear narrative content of new forms of narrative content and image language. He believes in a new development through new material and new camera and projection techniques.

DW: I think the other thing I wanted to ask you, to come back to the Movie Show performances, was about whether your experiments with expanded cinema and narrativity were a way of dealing with issues of sexuality and gender in your work. that you hadn't been able to deal with, so much previously.

BH: With gender, nothing with gender. With the performance I did not include any real...

DW: Well, there's one thing I was interested in the *Frankenstein* piece where someone notes around it that you can't tell who's male and who's female.

BH: Yes, yes.

DW: Which seemed quite interesting to me because you only learn through gestures and ritual behaviour

BH: Only because I'm smaller.

DW: Oh right.

BH: But this was very emotional, it was not based on theory. At that time gender/queer gender theory didn't really matter to us. It was just – we are both monsters, two

Frankensteins. Only now that you ask me I start thinking about it. When we made *Superman and Wonderwoman* of course, it was a kind of joke about stereotypes, clichés about male and female. I was often asked for my development what part feminist theory had played a role. And it hadn't as I say because in the '60s that was not such an issue, an issue at least in Germany. And afterwards in the '70s I was already who I was.

DW: Then later on in *Mysterious Women* – your gender there becomes a subject.

BH: Yes, but then it becomes my subject. And what I wanted to say at that time that women are also perpetrators and not only victims. Because this victim theory was very much a theory of the feminist ideology, which I was really against. Because at the end of the '80s there was really this heavy movement, anti-pornography. In Germany Andrea Dworkin and Alice Schwarzer suddenly became the propagandists for this kind of behaviour and I thought which is completely what the patriarchal society demanded of women: They are not aggressive, they do not want to have sex. It's absolutely absurd that women tell me now how I have to behave. And in the same time all the women who in the 19th century went to jail for women's rights – you know the suffragettes, they were not weak and nothing. And in reality women have always been very, very strong.

DW: So, there's something about women and images isn't there? How...

BH: The film shows women with guns as soldiers, partisans, watchmen, criminals, as perpetrators and as child bearing, circumcised and dismembered victims. For more than 4 years I collected images of women from old and recent documentaries and from trivial feature films.

DW: Is there any way of seeing these films?

BH: I can send you DVD's.



Arts & Humanities
Research Council



British Artists' Film & Video Study Collection